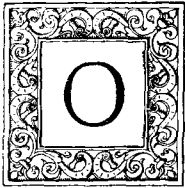


# A Flight From the Fireside

BY ARTHUR JOHNSON



ON leaving the office, Peter Somers had another twinge of regret that they weren't to dine out after all. He missed the prospect of some definite variety ahead. But by the time he reached No. 60, he swung through the large door and the high hall with a joyous sense of home-coming. The elevator was ready, waiting. A minute later he stepped out briskly and rang his bell. Esther, very trim-looking, he noted gratefully, let him in.

"Has Mrs. Somers come yet?"

He still registered a thrill when he had to use his name for her like that.

"I think Mrs. Somers is in the drawing-room, sir."

Esther disappeared without distracting him from his sigh of satisfaction, and he made for the drawing-room with the inward expression of one who is about to say something pleasant. But the room was empty. How attractive it looked, though! He could never have married a woman who had no esthetic appreciation. His eyes roved from object to object. He switched off the lights and switched them on again to experience the mellow effect in its entirety afresh. Then he turned and went moodily to their chamber.

Molly, who was sitting at the dressing-table, doing her hair, smiled with a pin in her mouth and made a whimsical inarticulate sound appropriate to the occasion. She looked very young and playful, prinking there in her bare neck and shoulders, and Peter shut the door, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and stared at her, smiling and drawing his forehead sensitively up from his dark, thick brows and glowing brown eyes. His eyes strayed to a casual piece of clothing on the floor and back to her more intensely, at which she shook her head and lowered her arms and waved

her hands at him from the wrists, as if to say, "No fair."

"You!" he cried. "You!" and flung himself on his back across the bed, his hands clasped under his head.

She ran around the bed to the side where his head was, and leaned over, her eyes drooping down to his, his eyes strained up to hers. Then she leaned still nearer and kissed him slowly, withdrew, inspected him, kissed him again, more slowly, and returned to the dressing-table, scrutinizing herself in the glass and varying her expressions as she did so before she sat down.

"Does it seem to you we've been married a year and a half, Molly?"

"What?" she asked, changing her reflection in the mirror more to her taste.

"Does it seem to you a whole year and a half since we were married?"

"A whole year and a half?" she repeated, dreamily, still weighing her appearance. "Well, I can't remember ever having been *not* married, Petey. Can you? But it doesn't seem that long—no."

In silence for a space he watched her, something in the quality of his snugness making him feel like a small boy—a cozy feeling that he had forgotten all about until he found himself back in it now so confusedly. Girls didn't have as much imagination as men, he reasoned; they took to new environment less impressionably, absorbing and discarding as they shifted. But how he detested men who underestimated them, who had none of what relationship with women gave to their points of view—to their manners, even.

"You're making quite a snappy toilet in honor of my company to-night," he remarked, sociably.

She arrested her preparations an instant as if listening, then went on as though she had been perfectly inattentive. A considerable interval melted tranquilly away.



SHE LOOKED VERY YOUNG AND PLAYFUL, PRINKING THERE

"And you'd better be making one for me, Petey dear. It's getting late."

"What?"

He bounded to the edge of the bed, smoothing down his hair. "Darling girl!" He sprang up and caught her in his arms.

"I'm so glad you're not tired to-night, are you?"

He shook his head. So she gave him a final caress to make sure, and looked at him in that devoted way which was the inevitable prelude to his releasing her, and he let her go on dressing. That something snug, something cozy which he had but now been dimly aware of was over and displaced by something more vital, even more unintelligibly real, as he took off his coat and vest and slid open his wardrobe door.

"I'll wear my velvet smoking, I guess."

"Oh no, Petey. A short evening coat—*please!*"

"Why?—when we're not going to the Sewalls'?"

"Just for me. It'll be so nice and festive."

He hesitated, watching her concernedly, but at a loss, respectful in his peace-loving state of the incomprehensibilities of womankind.

"All right, dear."

"How do you think I look to-night, Peter? Too much powder?"

She submitted her face overtly for his approval, mistaking his bewilderment for criticism. He kissed her cheek.

"Perfect. Never *saw* you look better."

"I'll put your studs in—you jam the cuffs so."

How could he have wanted any prospect of more definite variety than

this?—as he took his bath and got into his clothes.

But at dinner they proceeded rather at cross purposes.

Peter had acquired in bachelor days a taste for dining out, due, he would have said, to his great interest in people and the impressions they made upon him; but it wasn't so much that that stimulated him really as it was the opportunity they gave him to shine. With what was considered his originality and sophistication and well-dressed handsomeness he could count on making at least one fanatical convert wherever he went, which kindled his resourcefulness.

Molly had been a belle in brainless circles, and got sick of them, and given it all up for Peter. But the dregs of her belledom remained, and she grew restless now and then from lack of what she had had, without realizing it.

So that while Peter, whose range was for the time being at least reduced to his business and his wife, talked shop to her with a resourcefulness somewhat impaired, she appreciated more and more how justified she was in any plan which coincided with taking his mind off his work.

After dinner and coffee and cigarettes, he picked up the paper and unintentionally lost himself in it, and she knitted and looked at the clock.

"Leonora Sales telephoned me just before you came home," she said, finally.

He read on.

"The Bentleys are dining with them, and she suggested we come over about nine or so."

"What did you say about the Bentleys, Molly?" he asked, crackling his paper comfortably.

"They thought we might all like to go to Waldron's and dance."

He caught the drift now of what he must have subconsciously heard before. "What did you tell them—that we had an engagement?"

He relaxed into reading again.

"I said I'd see how you felt."

"But you didn't want to go out to-night, Molly!"

"This wouldn't be *going out*, Peter. It was just a question of meeting them somewhere and having supper and dancing a little, perhaps."

"Oh."

"Shall we, Peter?"

"We might just as well have gone to the Sewalls' then, after all."

"I don't see what it has to do with going to the *Sewalls*'. I couldn't have stood the Sewalls to-night, possibly. Besides—I saw Bessie this afternoon."

"I didn't," he thought of retorting, but swallowed it. "Was Bessie *here*?" he only asked, rather wistfully.

"No. At the Greens'. I lunched there, and Bessie and I went to see a picture afterward. Stupid was no name for it."

"So you've exhausted the Sewalls, my dear."

"I don't like those people; they bore me and tire me."

"They might me if I ever saw them," he couldn't repress at this stage. "How about the *Saleses*?"

"Entirely different; you know they are. They've got at least a semblance of life and gaiety about them."

"Well—I'll go to the Saleses—if you want to very much."

"Be perfectly frank, Peter. Do you want to or not? . . . If *you* really want to, let's go."

He pretended to read.

"All right. I'll telephone Leonora."

It was the last concession he'd expected to his feigned consent, and as she left the room he left his chair and walked up and down the floor in incipient exasperation. He couldn't stand the idea of the Saleses and their crew, any more than she could stand the Sewalls and theirs. Why—at the Sewalls' you could at least meet civilized people and carry on some sort of entertaining conversation. Lillian Strong might have been there, too, for Bessie Sewall had hinted to him the last time they met that Lillian wanted to see him again "terribly." And just then he caught sight of his immaculate evening attire in the tall looking-glass he had been passing and repassing. Had Molly deliberately cheated him out of—

"You see, Petey dear," she explained, rushing back into the room and up to him, "I haven't got over the wild freedom of having you to do things with on the spur of the moment, like this. Starting out with you at this hour of the

night is like an adventure. Does he really mind going so very badly?"

"He" gazed at her in admiration and wonder—at her jolly wrap, at the glowing beauty of her face, her veil drawn so becomingly over her hair—he always got a tender sort of amusement from her hair, it bothered her so—and tied in a piquant knot under her chin.

"Nope. Not a bit, darling," he answered, sincerely, with a sense, too, of how complicated life was. "I'll go tell Esther to order a taxi, and get my coat. I won't be a minute."

Seated at Waldron's an hour later, however, stranded between Mrs. Sales and Mrs. Bentley, he reflected in gloom what his share in such an "adventure" was doomed to be. Sales was cavorting about somewhere with Molly, Bentley was nobody knew or cared where, cavorting with somebody else. No, they were not his kind, unfortunately. Dick Sales had no fineness. Joe Bentley was worse. They were satisfied to excel in cheap horseplayish antics which sapped every bit of his vitality to have to behold, and which, after he lived through them, smiling and embarrassed, he had

to hear extolled by Molly when she came home elated and happy from their deleterious effect upon her. Invariably it made him feel hard and cynical and malicious to hear her go on about those two men—particularly about "Mr. Sales," as she always referred to him, as though tactful to conceal any intimacy that there might be. Oh, it made him almost contemptuous of her to think that she could get so much pleasure out of a buffoon like that. And they had the kind of wives such men always had—meek, anemic women whom they'd subjected to a state of chronic audiencedom—who gratefully accepted the lot of having married men "so much cleverer and more gifted" than themselves. And between these two women he had to sit, getting paler and stiffer and more frozen.

Molly, meanwhile, was sitting out in the café with Dick Sales, telling him how much she liked his wife and how "intrigued" she was by his wife's point of view, glad to be reassured by the way his face lighted up as he listened. There was a romantic aloofness about being alone with him in the sparsely patronized



"WHAT DID YOU TELL THEM—THAT WE HAD AN ENGAGEMENT?"

restaurant, where so many waiters stood about so idly, and the rush of one here or there bearing his heavy tray had a mysterious significance.

"Men don't take to her often," explained Mr. Sales. "You see, she loves me so much and I love her so much that they think she's no fun."

"The world is vile," Molly said, thrilled by the sound of a breaking goblet. "To think that a girl isn't interesting just because she's happily married!"

"Or that she isn't happily married just because she's interested."

Molly sat back, aware of couples departing from the next table, and of the satisfaction it would be to repeat this conversation to Peter. "Really, you know, Dick Sales is much more of a person than you give him credit for," she could say. She had never seen this serious side of his nature to recount before.

"Listen!" he whispered, putting his hand over hers, as the music soared and then swung into a fox-trot.

She lowered her eyes and tried to glance shamelessly and carelessly at his hand, liking it there, now that she was sure he cared so for his wife, and determined, therefore, in spite of Peter, to enjoy the rightful fillips life offered.

"I should like to go with you," he murmured, "to some marvelous place—"

Her eyes grew big.

"—where there was music softer, more exquisite than this, and moonlight, and cypress-trees, and —don't you sometimes, when the band plays, long for perfection?"

She nodded for lack of words that she could use to him, reveling in his being even better than she thought, and in having thought all along that he was, whatever Peter said, so worthy. Yet Peter simply couldn't believe even in this if she told him, she argued, her body swaying to the rhythm.

"Shall we?" asked Mr. Sales.

"Dance, you mean?" she said, careful to show by her expression that she understood.

"But wait—please wait first. I *must* look at you as you are now—there—one moment longer!"

She had arisen, and she stood still "there" because he asked it. What was the harm in a man like *him* saying such a charming thing to a woman like *her*? It was worth while to spend an evening with a man of his quality. There were only too few of them. Peter would get on with him swimmingly if he could just get over his unwarranted jealousy.

Together they whirled and tangoed and fox-trotted around the room, so inspiringly that as they tangoed and fox-trotted and whirled past the table where Peter sat wedged between Mrs. Sales and Mrs. Bentley, he could find nothing to say to Mrs. Sales's groveling applause or to Mrs. Bentley's ecstatic abasement. He but grew fainter and stiffer and paler.

As he turned his eyes away, they chanced upon Lillian Strong, sitting across the room with a gay, laughing group of fellows and one other girl. She signaled almost immediately for him to come over, but he shook his head at her gravely; then got up and made apologies to his two remonstrating companions in an uncertain voice, and went.

"How are you, Peter? You know every one, don't you? I didn't see you, as a matter of fact, until they pointed you out. How's your wife?"

He recalled, as from far away, that she was near-sighted. Perhaps that was what gave to her dark eyes and her red, weary mouth and her small, rather pinched, pretty face what counted for a mystical canniness.

"Want to dance, Lillian?"

"I certainly do. I should like nothing better."

But once away from the others, she suggested it was too crowded, and that they go into the restaurant, where it was cool, and have a drink, to which Peter alertly agreed, conscious of his burning cheeks, but trying to conceal his nervousness. Why in the world shouldn't he, if he wanted to, go out into that restaurant with Lillian Strong?

Lillian Strong was an older friend of his, older in both senses of the word than Molly, whom Molly didn't like and who lived alone in a "stud o" and painted poor pictures. Nevertheless, she had a certain depraved intellectuality about her which he didn't mistake for brains,

but which he found a good-enough working substitute now and then. He used to feel and be less restrained with her than with most girls he knew, which puzzled him and flattered him inexplicably, so that he would undergo a little flutter of expectation when he met her—and would still, if it weren't for

sightedness at times. He straightened himself and pulled down his waistcoat in front and felt of his necktie.

"Yes. But I've missed seeing you so, Pete, old boy. You don't go out any more."

"I've been working hard lately. I really haven't had the energy when night



SHE SIGNALLED FOR HIM TO COME OVER, BUT HE SHOOK HIS HEAD

Molly. But Molly's prejudice against her interfered with any flutter that might be forthcoming just now, and the fact that Molly wasn't missing him only quickly resolved itself into an argument against Dick Sales; with the result that he longed, during the first minutes he sat there with Lillian Strong, to get up and leave her without a word, and never under any circumstances see her again.

"Well, Peter, how do you like being a husband?" she asked, sipping her "Tom Collins" and crossing her knees casually. "It's becoming to you."

"You think so?"

He had a habit of forgetting her near-

came," he hastened to say. "What have you been doing, Lillian?"

"Still life, mostly—the doctor ordered it for my nerves."

She never did have any ambition, that was the trouble with her, he thought, his spirits picking up a bit.

"It's a pity, now we've both broken loose, there isn't some way to celebrate it," she suggested, after another few minutes.

"Yes. There never is just the right wonderful thing to do in this country of ours," he echoed, playing up unwittingly to her tone and tenets.

"How about a *Revue*? You always



promised, Pete, to take me to a mid-night *Revue*!"

"Sorry. We'll have to be going presently."

"Oh, is *Molly* here? Whom's she with?"

It struck him dumb.

"Do get her to bring her beau and come along."

"I'll go with you, Lillian, for an hour," he said, scarce knowing what he was saying.

"Good for you, Peter. I'll find my coat while you pay the bill."

He sat down again, tremblingly waiting there for his change after she had gone. It would be sheer madness to abandon Molly without even telling her. But how could he tell her? He ought to have been brave and firm with Lillian Strong. He would go out and explain to Lillian that he couldn't go with her to her *Revue* after all; he could say Molly had sent for him to go home. . . . But Molly *wouldn't* go home. She was so wrapped up in that Sales fool, that she wouldn't care a hang even if told she was going to be left at Waldron's alone with him.

The ignominy of it! . . . Dick Sales was a rotter. Lillian meant all right.

No sooner had he rejoined her in the hall than the weight of his responsibilities lifted and vanished. It was so long since he'd done anything so opportunistically, that the mere process of taking a taxi and embarking in it with Lillian Strong sustained him to the exclusion of aught else; he didn't stop to think even of *her*. She laughed and rattled on in her pseudo-subtle way, and he was suddenly in very good form for the first time since arriving at the Saleses'.

But the glare of the footlights paled, and the glare from the stage palled, and Lillian Strong's pseudo-subtlety petered out, and he yearned to be at home. *Home*? Heat suffused him, and then dampness, followed by an influx of terror, do what he might to check it. Between him and *home* was the hideous prospect of calling at Waldron's to get Molly—d ar Molly!—who would be waiting there for him, worrying her heart out, perhaps. It made his eyes grow moist and dim. He tried surreptitiously to look at his watch. Lillian



"OH, THAT'S WONDERFUL! I DON'T LIKE IT TOO FLAMEY. DO YOU?"

Strong tried to *égayer* him. He tried to respond. And so the last gasp went by and the curtain was rung down.

"Now is the time," Lillian said in his ear, vivaciously and avidly, as she clutched his arm among the crowd on their slow egress up the aisle, "when I feel most wide awake and keen for excitement."

"So do I," he answered, automatically, searching anxiously for a space ahead that he could guide her through faster. "If only I didn't have to work."

"American men are such slaves to their business."

"Where do you live, Lillian?"

"That from you!" she laughed, holding closer.

A cab, if he only could grab one, would hurry matters, he was thinking.

"You're the same old pal, underneath, Pete—aren't you?" she exclaimed, jerkily, to him on the curb.

It decided him to walk.

But the fresh evening air only stimulated her further. She confided to him in a dreamy tone how it affected her to see all those couples along the way vanishing romantically into limousines, and how she loved the click of the doors being shut to, and the clear, hollow sound of wheels gliding over the pavements, and the solitary emptiness of the streets as their journey drew to an end. She took a few keys tied together with a ribbon from her velvet bag, fumbling to see which was the right one.

Damn her near-sightedness!

"Let me do it for you, Lillian."

She stepped in ahead of him, into the meager hall where only a gas-jet was burning low, he following, but holding the door open, mindful of the form their old intimacy had taken at times, but which, until she had resuscitated it so persistently to-night, the happiness of the last year had for all practical purposes obliterated from memory.

"It's been great fun, Lillian," he declared, with forced intensity. "Can you see your way up all right?"

"But do come up for a cigarette? This is the witching hour—*l'heure exquise!*"

"I'd like to—you know how I would. But I've got to get up early—and I must go back first and take Molly."

"Molly? Where? Waldron's closes at two."

And it was nearly *three!* He half shut the door in his consternation as he put his watch back, hanging to the knob. Where *was* Molly? He must think collectedly. *Home?* Lillian Strong was staring at him insidiously. *Alone?* She'd have brought that whole crew back with her, now that he'd given her this loophole! "Mr. Sales" and Joe Bentley and their anemic wives sitting around his house, gloating over footless jokes. Thank heaven for Lillian Strong's near-sightedness! He shut the door fast, and took off his hat and coat with a determined sigh.

"I'll stay only a minute," he vouchsafed, sadly, and they stole up the creaking stairs.

Lillian lighted a few candles and showed him a lapis lazuli figurine and a piece of embroidery of the Ming—or the Ching—dynasty, and a photograph of some new Russian dancer, and asked him if he minded just touching a match to the fire.

"We don't need a *fire*, Lillian."

"But I can't stand a room without a fire, no matter how warm it is. Can *you?*"

Here was another delay! How could he endure it disconcertedly? He had to bend over the fireplace, foundering among cigarette stubs and half-burnt logs. No paper or kindling.

"I'll get some in a jiffy," she chirruped.

One thing after another like this was stretching his nerves to the breaking-point. The kindling Lillian brought was too big, and the only paper she'd found was a copy of *Vanity Fair*; and his clothes grew tighter and his temples throbbed as he poked and stirred the debris into a feeble blaze.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Pete! I don't like it too flamey. Do you? Now sit down here and rest on the sofa."

But he stood by the mantelpiece, an elbow before it, gazing doggedly at the mirthless hearth, until, too conscious of his bitterness and rudeness, he did as she directed. He even decided to try one of her cigarettes—noting which she took one herself and began to talk about a new French play she had been reading.



Either Lillian was getting quite interesting, or else a fortuitous lapse of his disorganizing fears made him appear to think so; for he began to nod his head and smile and wax positively sociable. She brushed some ash from his shoulder, and let her hand rest there, stroking his coat. To leaven this a little he flung

with only an equivocal frown. But she stood up, too—as if glad to do that much for him. Hang it, he simply had to get away from her now without any more of this backing and filling, whatever the price. It was but a step to her. Other means having failed him, he bade her an old-time-like good-by as niggardly as he could manage and ran, rushing down the stairs and snatching his coat and hat and slamming the door to behind him with a bang.

Molly had driven him to this; it was Molly's own fault, he protested, hotly, as he plunged headlong homeward. She had brought it on herself. She was responsible, and she only, for their not having had a respectable, wholesome evening together at the Sewalls'. Together! But what could he tell her? How *could* he explain? Would anybody in the world but her have expected him to sit there like a blighted idiot between



SHUTTING THE DOOR BEHIND THEM BY BACKING  
HIS STRONG BODY AGAINST IT

his arm along the back of the sofa, and found, to his dismay, when she moved nearer, that it was only decent to let his arm stay where it was. And finally—

No, no, no! It couldn't, shouldn't be. He leaped to his feet.

"I simply must get some sleep," he said, in a tone to imply that it was but of sleep he had been thinking all along. "I shall funk everything to-morrow if I don't."

And, pretending politely to conceal a yawn, he clasped his hands behind him, standing very upright and stalwart before her, answering the mystical expression on her rather pinched, pretty face

Mrs. Sales and Mrs. Bentley, and watch her go on like that with "Mr. Sales"?

No. And by all that was holy he'd have that point out with her and make it very plain that if in future she insisted—

His breast was a seething chamber of dread when, breathlessly, he turned the key in No. 60 and heard his footsteps echo lonely through the marble hall and up the stairs to his door, which he unlocked slyly and smothered to on tip-toe, despite the great wrong she had done him.

A light was going in the hall, just as Esther usually left it for them. "Them!"

A lump rose in his throat, half from thought of her, half from pity of himself, as he sought their chamber. The door was open. It was dark. He listened the best he could, but heard nothing but the thumping of his own heart-beats. He groped for the switch, in terror, along the cold smooth wall, and twisted it savagely when he found it. Empty! The bed was turned down, his wife's pink dressing-gown and mules on the side, his pajamas and dressing-gown and slippers flagrantly near; but not a trace of her having come back.

Bravely, trying to keep hopeful, he went on from room to room of their little domain, wondering if he would ever have the heart to revel in its charmfulness again, until the whole place was a wilderness of light. Esther and the cook slept in a different part of the building. They would know nothing. Whom could he turn to? Where?

Waldron's must be open still—that was the whole meaning of it! Lillian Strong had deceived him to keep him longer. He clapped his hands to his face and pressed it hard. Good God! how he had messed things! He hurried tremblingly out into the hall. But no sooner had he put on his coat and hat than the dire possibility that he might miss Molly—*Molly and Sales returning*—transfixed him.

The only thing was to *telephone* Waldron's.

He begged Central to try and try, again and again and again; but no answer came. He would call up Saleses' house, then! He veered to it, now he was started to action, like a bloodhound on a new scent. And his point of view veered, too. He would show the whole damn lot of them the sort of man he was. He could hardly see to read the number.

"Is that you, Sales? This is Peter Somers."

He found himself talking more temperately and listening less hopefully than he had figured on. But was Sales's voice husky from *sleep* or from *sitting up*?

"Has my wife started home yet?"

"Started *home*?"

"I thought I—I might *stop* for her if she's still there?"

"Gracious no!" came over the wire, followed by a pause. "Why, she left us

at Waldron's. She wouldn't even let me take her."

Peter longed to cry out to him for help, but said, instead: "All right, old chap. Sorry to bother you. Good night. Pleasant dreams," and sank down on a chair.

It was the last way he had expected to talk to Dick Sales, but having talked thus had the effect of his momentarily living up to the line he had taken. And what difference did it make? If Sales had lied it only meant that Molly had betrayed him—whereas otherwise *he* had betrayed Molly. Who *was* there she could have gone to at that hour? She must have gone deliberately to a hotel. What *one*? He was alternately overcome with helplessness and rage, with utter blankness and utter despair. The idea of summoning the police hovered vaguely in his mind, and it occurred to him to wonder if Molly had any money.

He arrived finally at a window and raised the shade. A milk-wagon slewed round the corner below; another, farther away, rattled insolently out of ear-shot. The rest was still—stiller than things can be except before the hour of dawn. Inconsequently he was mocked by the thought of how it all would have seemed had Molly been abed and asleep and he just stolen up to peek out. The irony of it! Already the stars were scarcer, and a livid grayness, more like the intolerant north than the east, pervaded the houses slowly, inexorably, while the occupants still slumbered. One light across the way was burning. Was it for sickness—or death? Sickness and death might be worse, but Peter Somers could not, even to comfort himself, imagine that they might be worse.

He put up other shades and put out other lights; and from room to room he went, putting up the other shades and putting out the other lights. Through the hard, steely grayness he wandered, back and forth, and back and forth.

The most that he asked, the most that he dreamed of wanting now, was that things should be as good, or almost as good, as they were before this happened. Could he but be back in them once more as he had been, the future would have no terrors in store. Let come what might then, he would know how to cope with it.

But, instead, he had only ruins to cope with. He had made a failure of his marriage, who had bragged, if *he* ever married, to make it a success.

How they used to discuss it and try to be perfectly sure—and she sound him to see if he would always love her even though she grew old and ugly, and he fear lest she loved him only because she wanted to love some one. How they had vowed to face every issue squarely and openly, confess the least grievance, and defy all the pitfalls. Yet he had carped just because she wanted to stay home so as to go to Waldron's when he had set his heart on going to the Sewalls'—she who, alone of all the people in the world, was able to feel and think in relation with him and whom he could think and feel in relation with.

He wished Lillian Strong was dead. Think of his having actually given that woman a chance to believe he would, if he only could, prefer her to— He wished Dick Sales was dead also. What if, while he was suffering like this, Molly was, notwithstanding what Sales said, sitting jovially up with him, without thought of where he, her lawful husband, was? The memory of that pause after Sales's "Gracious, no!" suddenly overwhelmed him. Such a solution would be true to life—just like the psychology of things. The thought floated before him there like a ghastly far-fetched nightmare, but in another moment he had seized it as though it were a life-preserver, and regained all his stubbornness and courage. Why had he hung back so long? He had been a coward! He would go out now and get his wife, and if that *was* the truth, nothing would keep him—

There was a noise at the outer door—a key clicking in the lock. Oh, Molly! It was Molly coming back! What else mattered now? What were truth, theories, love, or anything, so long as it was Molly coming! But he fled to a chair in the corner and sat down. *Was it?* Very realizations of the way she would look if it were only she, of the way she sounded, of the way she was to him when she was to him—made him long to fly out and welcome her wildly, and yet held him there rebelliously thinking of Sales, pressing his lips together, focusing

frantically on that "truth" he had just seized at, until the improbability of her having been with Sales all this time grew to a certainty, into which frenzied pattern all his hopes and fears and regrets were absorbed kaleidoscopically; and the haunting stab of how glad she would be now to see him if she hadn't been with Sales made him hate her for not being glad to see him.

No. He would wait right where he was for her to come. But she was going in the other direction! It seemed to him hours that he waited. Then he heard her coming back—coming toward the drawing-room—almost saw her at the door, and could not keep from standing up any longer.

She had the same jolly wrap on—no hat, no veil; her hair in disarray. She started on seeing him. Was it because she wanted to appear surprised? Or because she had to show something and surprise was all she would let herself show?

"Oh—are you here?"

She said it in a hard, casual tone and smiled a hard, upward smile, and looked away and lowered her eyes and picked up a book and went out again, as if she was always like that.

"Molly! Molly!"

No answer.

This must not go on, this must stop *now*, he proclaimed to himself, longing again passionately, painfully, to follow her, to throw himself at her feet, if necessary, and beg forgiveness; but he stopped short of the threshold, gnashing his teeth; turned and forced himself back to the chair, where began another terrible period of his waiting—perhaps an easy prelude to what was ahead. But no; he wouldn't endure it! Nevertheless, he began to go over all he had to say to her, muttering it over half out loud to himself, and thinking his brain would burst if she kept him waiting another minute to say it to her.

She had taken off her wrap. He did not notice it at first when she came back, but only after she had seated herself sidewise at the desk, across the room, away from him, as if he weren't there. But she'd come back because he *was* there! He rejoiced gratefully, and then gloated over it. And it was only to make

him believe she had come back quite independently of him that she deliberately reached for that small package, whatever it was, lying on the desk before her, from which she began trying to untie the string, working over it zealously, stopping now and then to hold it up closer to her eyes, and then trying some more.

"What do you mean by this, Molly?"

He prayed she would answer him affectionately, so that he could rush to her side; but she didn't.

"It's hard enough—your having gone to a man's own house and stayed there with him until near six o'clock" (he looked at his watch)—"Say nothing of making me telephone to ask the scoundrel where my own wife was. And yet you sat there and heard him lie to me! How could you, no matter if you—you detest me, let yourself, after all we've been to each other, sit there and hear it?"

He said a lot else besides. He didn't want to say it, but the words had formed themselves while he had waited, and once she came the words came, and there was nothing but to go on.

She wound the string which she had at last untied around a finger, and unwrapped the paper from the small package before her, and folded it very carefully, very meticulously, into a square, and opened the box it had covered, and took out the bottle of perfume therein, and began trying to untie the tiny knot of ribbon that fastened the white kid drawn over the stopper. For a brief moment she paused, tilting her chin to listen, which seemed to him to give her away. But no sooner did he congratulate himself on his shrewdness, than he discounted it, panic-stricken lest it prove beyond repair the truth that he had so unintentionally evolved but never believed in.

"There is no answer!" he pursued, wanting to come to her rescue, to confess, to yield up his last atom of pride—if that would suffice. "Won't you say something? Can't you see what you've done to our lives? You don't care!"

She stood up, and picked up the box and the bottle of perfume and the paper and the string, to take away with her.

"No," he cried. "We've got to settle it! If you go I go with you."

She sank back in her chair, and set the articles down on the desk; not in obedience, but because she couldn't bear to go, and his command offered sufficient excuse for staying.

"What do you propose to do?" he asked, emptily. "It's reached a point where—"

She had untied the ribbon, and removed it from the neck of the bottle, and wound it about a finger, and cast it aside; she had picked the white kid from the stopper, and taken out the stopper, and was holding the opening to her nose, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. Church-bells were ringing everywhere, whistles blowing. The room was full of the clang and clamor of bells and whistles. Perhaps there were not so many of them, and perhaps they did not last so long, but it seemed to him that there were millions and that they went on forever while she sat bending over that little desk, weeping and smelling of that bottle of perfume.

"I have to speak out like this, Molly. I can't sentimentalize what I've suffered. But I will be fair—you need have no fear of that."

She smiled that upward smile again, arranging the kid back on to the stopper and winding the ribbon over it, the bells and whistles, or the echoes of bells and whistles, and her tears making him hold to his defense more softly.

"I'm willing to start from the very beginning, Molly. You must admit I was pretty decent to give up the Sewalls' dinner without a word, and even after that I went with you to the Saleses'. You must have known that I went only to please you, yet you left me and stayed with him and performed with him and flaunted your admiration of all that I loathed in him right under my nose."

"He loves his wife, anyhow."

Her speaking at all encouraged him so much, as he thought it over, that he could afford to indulge in the irritation which what she said started, almost the same as if they were on terms of perfect understanding.

"What reasons have you for saying that?" he bickered.

"He told me."

"And you think that's what men do

who *love*—go round bragging of it to other men's wives?"

She hesitated, looking up from the bottle into space, caught, caught in her own trap! he detected, with another sense of his shrewdness.

"I suppose you think they generally desert their wives and go off until two with another woman."

Two? That was much better than he expected! He could take the offensive again safely now.

"Even if I did, does that justify you in going home with Sales until daybreak?"

But her tears gushed down afresh, and she began to untie the ribbon once more and remove the kid from the stopper, which relapse was more than he could endure.

"Molly, Molly! You *know* how awful it was for me! It wasn't only *him* I had to see with *you*! I had to put up with that wife whom he just dumps down anywhere in his wake, and who hasn't the brains to do anything but applaud him for it."

"No doubt you like what Lillian Strong does better."

"She at least does something," though he had to think hard what it was. "She paints and supports herself!"

At that her tears rolled down so copiously that he strode to where she sat, but stopped when he saw her cringe, and backed away, having to watch her put the kid back on the stopper and try to tie it with her poor, trembling fingers.

"I couldn't get out of taking Lillian Strong home, after—I made use of her to kill time while I waited for you," he pleaded, hardly aware in his extremity of any discrepancies.

She suspended her weeping, but held tight to the bow she had tied in the tiny ribbon, while so still was it that a pin, had one fallen, would have sounded.

"What were you doing when I went?" he tried to sneer.

She smiled that upward smile again.

"I wish I had stayed—I wish I was there with her now!" he ranted.

"Why did you come back?" she asked.

"You'll break my heart if you talk that way, Molly!"

Another upward smile and a quick shake of her head, and he dropped into the chair behind him, covering his face

with his hands, and weeping aloud like a child—but sincerely, not the least bit knowing he was only adopting the very most approved method of strategy.

Without looking at him, she removed her right hand and pointed her forefinger toward the ceiling, trusting that he would see. But he did not see.

"Petey!" She pointed again.

"What? What you mean, Molly?" he asked through his fingers.

She shook her head. But a certain mad meaning she *might* conceivably have flashed upon him.

"You mean—Molly? You're pointing to the roof?"

She shook her head violently.

"Where we went that day?"

She continued to shake her head.

"Have you been on the roof all this time, Molly?" he demanded, sternly.

When he started toward her she signified again that he was wrong, but when he stopped she pointed again. And he ran to her and held her fast in his arms.

"*When* did you go to the roof, darling? How could you *get* there, Molly?"

The idea of his having driven her to hide from him on the roof, of her having dared to find her way there all alone in the dark—the pathos and flattery it entailed—gave him a mixture of feelings that compensated for everything if it was true.

"Tell me, my sweetheart? You *did*! You *have*! Answer me!"

"Put me down! I don't love you!" she retorted, angrily, clinging to his neck, keeping her face away from him.

"No matter what you do to me, I hate everybody—the whole world—everything in it, except you!"

"You said you wished you'd stayed—stayed with—with—"

"*When* did you go to the roof, Molly?"

"I won't tell."

"Four o'clock? Three? Two? Honestly? As soon as I—I . . . Won't you forgive me, my beloved?"

"Did you—did you—did you—"

"No!"

Any qualms that he may have had were transcended by his own impending question and her answer.

"Molly! Look at me! Did *you*—"

"Pete! How could you believe such a thing of *me*—ever?"



His relief was just beginning to give him strength and courage to test her further, when, fortunately, at that moment, came the unmistakable sound of Esther or the cook drowsily fitting a key into the outer lock. So Peter Somers, with his wife in his arms, made hastily for their chamber, shutting the door behind them by backing his strong body against it, and laid her tenderly on the bed. . . .

"I'll go now and tell Esther we want breakfast in here by the fire?" he said, interrogatively, putting his feet into slippers and slipping on his dressing-gown.

"No, no. Tuck me in, Pete."

"But you don't want to sleep right away? . . . Don't even want a little coffee?"

He folded the covers over her.

Later, when he emerged from his bath and while he was dressing, she opened an eye now and then to be sure he was still there, but by the time he was ready to go she was sleeping blissfully. So he tiptoed out very proudly, and shut the door surreptitiously after him.

He drew his chair up to the breakfast-table, sitting particularly erect in it, and unfolded his napkin with unction. The morning paper soon absorbed him. The walk to the Subway would be a bracer on a beautiful morning like this. There was a man coming to see him at ten. He mustn't dally. He did hope, in the midst of his preoccupations, that Molly would get some rest. But that was the sum-total of the after-effects. He never felt better in his life.

"Mrs. Somers doesn't wish you to wake her, Esther." He registered a thrill as he said it.

## The Bird-Call

BY ROBERT NICHOLS

WITHIN the sunny, naked copse  
     Some bird begins to sing:  
 A blackbird whistles thrice, but stops  
     And takes to sudden wing,  
 Ere startles he again the hush with  
     Welcome to the spring.

Once in this wood there walked a boy  
     Who in the early year  
 Loved most to roam and feel the joy  
     Yet hidden but astir  
 And with a penny call to mock the  
     Springtide's harbinger.

But now the blackbird sings alone,  
     Since hard by Vlaminghem  
 The caller lies beneath a stone,  
     And though leaf burst from stem,  
 Though all spring birds sing all day long  
     He will not answer them.