

# THE SNAKE

by

Ernest Langford

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## **BATTLE STREET BOOKS**

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### **People in the Play:**

Peter . . . . . a bank teller

Susan . . . . . his wife

Miss Whye . . . . . an elderly spinster

Mr. Drumderry . . . . . bank manager

Felicity . . . . . his wife

Mildred Pentup . . . . . bank clerk

Brenda Fishstock . . . . . bank clerk

A physician

Two police officers

Two prison guards

Two lawyers

A judge

Prison warden

Warders in the prison and two executioners

Customers and workers in the bank

**Setting:**

A Canadian town. Sometime in the 1950's.

\*The music used throughout is Handel's Trumpet and Organ Voluntary, played on a piccolo and a harmonium.

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(A road that is neither town or country, but an unsatisfactory combination of both. Along this road wanders a young man. Lean of body, dark of hair and skin, with a face that is pleasing and by its sharp moulding suggestive of intelligence and a ranging imagination; but when his eyes are examined closely they are seen as a barrier beyond which none is invited to walk and behind which he moves freely, peeping out at and summing up the outer world and in general mistrusting what he sees. He wears an old suede windbreaker and a pair of corduroy pants. No hat. He wanders along, peering into every bush, up every tree, at every cloud and every bird that calls or flies across the road before him. Suddenly he runs forward and picks something off the road which he cups in his hands, while smiling and whispering to it.)

PETER: Hello, hello. You shouldn't cross roads like that, or you're likely to be killed by brutal cars and heavy feet. Where have you been . . . where have you wandered? Tell me, tell me. My name is Peter . . . married to a desperate girl named Susan. Oh, she is very lovely and charming, but she hates being a bank teller's wife. She wants to be something important in the world. She hates being a speck among other specks. She wants to be a lump of something that is seen and admired. Oh, she is desperate, and I am becoming desperate too. Each time I enter my teller box it is as though I am going into my coffin. (A look of complete astonishment covers his face as he stares at what he holds in his hands.) Did you speak to me? (He listens.) You will! You will! All that for me! For me! Tell me your name. Do tell me. (He listens.) Thank you, thank you.

You understand, it's not for me, it's for my Susan. She is so desperate. Oh, so desperate . . . .

(The home of Peter and Susan. The living room, dining area, and kitchen are a large space divided by bits of glass and wood. Of the three areas, the kitchen is the smallest. The furniture is bright, new, modern, and repellent. The total effect is of a doll's house. Susan is setting the colonial dining table for dinner. Her plump shapeliness and pretty face hide a vast determination. She does her best to be and look the modern wife as suggested and reported by the best magazines on the subject. Just now she is having a fight with a tall candle that refuses to stand upright in an Italian wine bottle, preferring instead to lie in the salad bowl.)

SUSAN: Damn you, stand up! (She tries again.) If you don't stand up, I'll . . . . I'll . . . . I don't know what I'll do to you. Stand up! Stand up! (She now holds the candle with both hands and gives a tremendous jab at the bottle, like a man hitting at an obstinate piece of concrete with a crowbar. The terrified candle stands.) Now, why didn't you do that in the first place? Why are you so uncooperative? (Peter comes in from the outside. She turns and smiles at him as the modern wife should, possessively and questioning.) Hello, my handsomer-than-all-the-film-stars-put-together-husband! Where did you get to this Saturday afternoon?

PETER: Get to? I went for a little walk.

SUSAN: Why didn't you tell me you were going! I thought you'd eloped with our beautiful neighbour.

PETER: Neighbour? Oh no, I haven't seen her today.

SUSAN: She's so good-looking, isn't she? Very glamorous.

PETER: Oh, is she? Yes, I suppose she is, I suppose she is.

SUSAN: Am I nice looking? (After a pause when Peter does not respond.) Sometimes I wonder how you noticed me long enough to propose and marry me. (She goes on with her dinner preparations.) Where did you go walking?

PETER: (He remains in the same position.) Oh, around some roads.

SUSAN: Which roads? Describe them.

PETER: They were like most roads in this country . . . perfectly straight.

SUSAN: I can see you'd never make an author or a political commentator. They have to observe life . . . and things.

PETER: I do observe.

SUSAN: But you can't even tell me what the roads you walked along were like.

PETER: I could if I wanted to. Listen, Susie . . . .

SUSAN: Don't call me Susie, it makes me sound like a . . . a servant girl.

PETER: Guess what I've found! It's something of vast importance.

SUSAN: A diamond worth a million dollars? A gold nugget bigger than this room? A uranium mine?

PETER: None of those, Susie. Something much better.

SUSAN: Those are the only things I'm interested in finding. Give me a match, Peter.

PETER: (He absent-mindedly hands her a match box.) So if you went for a walk, those are the only things you'd look for?

SUSAN: I'd keep my eyes open. Shall we have a million dollars one day, Peter? There're no matches in this . . . as usual!

PETER: (Handing her another box.) I suppose we will. (He looks around the room.)

SUSAN: Why didn't you give me this box in the first place! Listen, Peter. You mustn't suppose. Your certainty must be absolute. All millionaires know what their fate is.

PETER: Do you mean their deaths?

SUSAN: (Lighting the candle.) Silly, no. I mean their accumulation of wealth. And that, Peter dear, is what *you* have to know. Now, do you? (Candle goes out.) Why won't this candle stay lit?

PETER: Everyday at the bank I feel wealth slipping through my fingers.

SUSAN: Do you? (To the candle.) Stay lit!

PETER: (Taking the box from her.) Let me do it, Susie. (He lights the candle and it remains alight.) It's a sad fact, Susie. Money slides through a bank teller's fingers.

SUSAN: Don't joke about it. You mustn't joke about money.

PETER: But it's no joke. With these candles you have to get the wax well heated, then they'll

burn all right.

SUSAN: That's just like you, to know something that's perfectly useless. Now listen. Soon you must stop being just a bank teller, Peter.

PETER: What being shall I be?

SUSAN: How am I to know! But something that will result in a million dollars.

PETER: All I can think of being is a bank robber.

SUSAN: You would. (She goes into the kitchen. He straggles behind her.) I do hope you're not too hungry, because we're not having a big dinner. (She comes back into the dining area.) The fact that you can only think of being a bank robber implies a lack of imagination.

PETER: You've always said I had tons of imagination...that it was my greatest asset. Especially when I make love to you.

SUSAN: I've changed my mind. You do have some imagination, but it's the wrong kind. It's un --

PETER: Non-financial?

SUSAN: Given the right twist, all imagination can be made financial.

PETER: I agree with that.

SUSAN: It's a matter of application.

PETER: I agree with that.

SUSAN: Your imagination is negative. What you lack is an imaginative imagination.

PETER: I agree with that.

SUSAN: Imagination is nothing in itself. Everybody has it. (Peter opens his mouth to speak.) Don't interrupt me. Just as everybody has arms and legs . . . and other things.

PETER: What other things?

SUSAN: That being so, why can't everybody do marvellous things? Why can't all people be millionaires?

PETER: There's not enough money to go round. To supply every person in this country with a million dollars would require twenty-six million million dollars, and where's it to come from?

SUSAN: I don't know. Where does the other money come from? The government makes it, doesn't it? Well then, they can make some more. There's nothing to stop them. There's no shortage of paper.

PETER: I agree with that.

SUSAN: Anyhow, that has nothing to do with you. What I've said is a generalization. But it doesn't alter my point.

PETER: Nothing could.

SUSAN: (Suspiciously) And just what does that mean?

PETER: I mean that your point is as much a point as anybody else's point. I agree, it's a valid point. A point is valid when it can be identified with an individual. And without a doubt you and your point are absolutely inseparable.

SUSAN: (Dubiously eyeing him.) Hm! Hm . . . well . . . I'm glad you realize something. Do you agree with me that imagination is worth nothing?

PETER: I do.

SUSAN: And that what a person needs is imaginative imagination, which is, imagination brought in line with the necessities of modern living. Do you agree with that?

PETER: I do.

SUSAN: And that imaginative imagination is what you lack?

PETER: I do.

SUSAN: Well . . . you can now tell me what you are going to do about it. (She angrily turns away to the kitchen.)

PETER: Do you want to see what I've found, Susie? (He follows into the kitchen area. It's something very beautiful.)

SUSAN: Everything *you* find is beautiful and useless.

PETER: I found you.

SUSAN: You did not find me!

PETER: Women are always fascinated by the things I have found.

SUSAN: I found you!

PETER: Don't you want to see it?

SUSAN: No.

PETER: Is there a spare box around?

SUSAN: There're more empty boxes in this house than anything else.

PETER: Oh, good. Would you please get me one. I need a box to put my prize in.

SUSAN: Prize!

PETER: Hm-hm.

SUSAN: I don't believe you'll ever get any prize, Peter. You're not like me. I won lots of prizes at school.

PETER: Shall I show my prize to you?

SUSAN: I may as well see it.

PETER: (Taking something from his pocket and holding it in his cupped hands.) See? Isn't it beautiful?

SUSAN: (Backing away.) Take it outside!

PETER: (He holds a snake up by its tail. It is a nut-brown colour flecked with red and is about seven inches long.) It likes me. I saw it wriggling across the road in front of me, quite alone. So I picked it up, and it curled up in my hands and went to sleep. The snake likes me, Susie.

SUSAN: Take it out! Take it out at once!

PETER: Just think, Susie. It's been alone all the winter and last fall. No affection or maternal or paternal advice to help it along. It had nothing but itself. Don't you think that's amazing?

SUSAN: No, no, no. I think it's horrible.

PETER: But Susan, just think of all the things you want and need. Think of what I need. You know something, Susie? I believe I understand now why the serpent persuaded Eve to eat the fruit in the garden of Eden. It had nothing to do with good or evil, but simply that the serpent wanted Eve to understand the difference between her dependence on a god's approval and it's self-sufficiency. But the serpent failed to convince Eve, and people today are just as dependent upon their superiors' approval as they were when the serpent spoke to Eve in the garden of Eden. Now I want that spare box, please.

SUSAN: I won't have that thing in my home.

PETER: (Hopefully) I'll keep it in the spare room, with my Geiger counter and geologist's outfit.

SUSAN: Nor *anywhere* in my house. And why don't you get rid of all that other useless stuff?

PETER: But you made me buy them, Susie. (Slyly) Suppose my friend here showed me how to be rich. Would you welcome him then, Susie?

SUSAN: It can't. And you never used the Geiger counter in the right places.

PETER: Remember how you just said I needed an absolute and irrevocable certainty? Well, I have it now.

SUSAN: Determination has nothing to do with mangy snakes.

PETER: You can't be mangy unless you have hair, Susie. As I picked it up I heard a voice say "I'll help you. Give me food and warmth, and I'll help you. Good for good." So I must help it, mustn't I? Besides the good will be mainly for you. I am sensitive about my bank clerk position more keenly every day because of your disappointment. The pain cuts me deeply whenever I stand at the counter passing out thousands of dollars to people like me who lack imaginative imagination. How did *they* come by so much money? They couldn't have acquired it of their own volition since this is impossible in the modern world without imaginative imagination.

SUSAN: There're more ways than one to skin a cat, Peter.

PETER: That's what I've concluded. And that's why I've made a pact with Snake.

SUSAN: (Hesitantly) I think you're teasing me.

PETER: Teasing! Are you teasing me when you judge my horrible failings and decide my fate? (She shakes her head.) Then why should I tease you over so significant a happening in my

life as my benefactor's arrival? (Shouts) I'm not teasing you!

SUSAN: Don't shout at me, Peter.

PETER: I'm not!

SUSAN: You are. At the top of your voice. No reptile can make a fortune.

PETER: How do you know that?

SUSAN: Nobody but a fool would ever dream a snake could talk.

PETER: Have I said he does?

SUSAN: You told me you heard the snake speak.

PETER: I said I heard a voice speaking, which is not quite the same thing as saying the snake spoke to me.

SUSAN: I don't see the difference. Anyway, just tell me how the snake can supply you with wealth.

PETER: I don't know. Time will tell. Besides, he won't supply me, it's you he'll supply with money. You are the one who wants it so badly. I just want to be left alone.

SUSAN: I suppose such a marvellous creature has a name?

PETER: Just "Snake." Why should it want to be called anything else? I'm sure it takes pride in its snakiness.

SUSAN: It must, if it can string you along.

PETER: You must coset Snake like the goose that laid the Golden Egg. You must feed him cream and snails.

SUSAN: I've no objection to giving it milk.

PETER: Cream, Susie. Cream.

SUSAN: All right, cream, But I won't feed it snails. Ugh!

PETER: You merely have to put them in Snake's box and it'll do the rest. Perhaps a mouse or two now and then. Or a frog. He enjoys these, I'm sure, and they are easily procurable. I could

feed Snake, but I think you should do it because you are the one who Snake is going to supply with riches. And I know it'd appreciate a showing of humility by you. But Snake doesn't want the exotic meats of eastern lands, do you, Snake? Just good, plain Canadian sustenance and adequate warmth. That's not much to ask in return for wealth, is it? Just think what has been surrendered in the past and given in the present for a mere pittance.

SUSAN: If Snake gave us what I want, I'd . . . I'd feed it fresh chicks every day.

PETER: Extremes offend Snake. Just do as I've suggested. You'll find it'll eat every two or three days. Do you want to hold Snake?

SUSAN: Not yet. (She backs away as Peter holds out the snake.) Maybe later on I will. Later on, Peter.

PETER: He's so smooth, so soft. Now, find a box and a comfortable bed for him. Are you hungry, Snake? Tell me. You are? You'd like some cream? Susie, he asks for a little cream.

SUSAN: Did it speak to you?

PETER: Yes, I heard a voice.

SUSAN: Why didn't I hear it then?

PETER: Because you don't believe in Snake. Now, get the box and the cream. (Susan goes into the kitchen. Peter whispers passionately, urgently.) Give to her, Snake. Please, please. She wants so badly, like a little girl wanting a fine doll. Do you know how desperately I've looked for you since I married Susie?

SUSAN: (Coming in with a cardboard carton. Jeering.) Will this satisfy his Lordship?

PETER: (Examining it.) Will this do, Snake? Say if it displeases you. Once it carried tins of soup, but I'm sure there is no offensive smell left.

SUSAN: (Impatiently as Peter holds the snake above the box.) Of course it's good enough. Don't play the fool, Peter.

PETER: (Holding Snake up to his face, listening.) Ah ha! Yes. He says you must wipe it out, and sprinkle it with lavender water, and place a soft pillow in the bottom, then Snake will accept it as a residence for the time being.

SUSAN: And what will it want in the future?

PETER: It's not said.

SUSAN: I hate showing myself up for a fool.

PETER: You will be a fool if you don't do as Snake asks.

SUSAN: Why don't you help?

PETER: If you'll hold him, I'll make his bed.

SUSAN: No, I'll do it. (She carries the box back into the kitchen.) I don't have any lavender water, so I can't obey that part of the order.

PETER: Oh! What do you have?

SUSAN: Only tabu eau de cologne.

PETER: She has only eau de cologne, Snake. (He listens, then calls to Susan.) Snake says cologne will do for now, but tomorrow you must get lavender water. He prefers the natural flowery scent that reminds him of warm flower beds where sweet beetles and caterpillars multiply and fatten for his delight. So do as it commands.

SUSAN: (Irritably.) I will, don't you worry. I'll pour a whole bottle of lavender water over its pillow and prove myself a bigger fool than you are.

PETER: Please treat your benefactor with due politeness and consideration. Snake is here for your benefit, not for his own. His assistance is quite disinterested. He is not motivated by greed or by any human vice. And you will do well to remember this. (Susan returns with the box.) Place it on the couch, and I will offer Snake his chamber. Please accept our humble hospitality, Snake. And forgive us, if in our ignorance, we transgress or fail in those duties proper to a host.

SUSAN: I'm not ignorant! I've read all the right books on etiquette and entertaining at home.

PETER: (He places the snake in the box.) Now, let us go and prepare the bowl of cream . . . if you please! (Susan goes into the kitchen, followed by Peter, processionally carrying the box and trumpeting Handel's Trumpet and Organ Voluntary. He marches around the rooms. An instrumental performance joins in and takes over.)

### •A Short Blackout•

(A bank. In the long room some customers are carefully counting money before putting it into wallets and purses. Peter is in a teller's box, examining and writing in a bank book. On the public

side is an elderly woman who is unusually ugly and eccentrically dressed. Drumderry, the bank manager, trots from his office, looks around, sees the woman, hurries over to her, deeply bows to her when she totally ignores him, he trots back into his office.)

PETER: But I'm sure the summer sun would help you, Miss Whye. Oh, undoubtedly it would.

MISS WHYE: You are a healthy young man, but I am an ugly old woman, long past the beneficence of the summer sun.

PETER: No one is ever past the sun, Miss Whye.

MISS WHYE: You say that because you are young and love to run about in it.

PETER: Not I, Miss Whye, not I.

MISS WHYE: Oh, I'm sure you and that little wife of yours must enjoy being out in the sunshine, don't you?

PETER: The young sport in the sun, Miss Whye, because they wish to be seen and envied. They like to cause in the old and the sick who see their beautiful limbs and bodies and envy them. But I refuse to do that. No, Miss Whye, the young don't want the sun, nor does the sun want them and why should they hunt for reservoirs of strength when they spend most of their time trying to rid themselves of an over-abundance? It is when strength fails that we must go to the fountainhead.

MISS WHYE: You sound like a very sensible young man. Perhaps I'll buy myself a sun dress and try your remedy in my garden. Tell me, how is that little wife of yours?

PETER: She desperately needs a million dollars.

MISS WHYE: Yes. It seems all young wives need that. (Peter hands her the bank book.) Does she have a baby yet?

PETER: It takes time to satisfy her every need. A baby isn't the most important of her requirements.

MISS WHYE: (Smiling at him.) Well, perhaps you'll eventually provide her with all your wife asks for. Perhaps you will. You have the look of a young man who could easily end up with a fortune.

PETER: Miss Whye, since two days ago, I am absolutely and irrevocably sure that I will succeed in making a fortune.

MISS WHYE: (Patting his hand which lies on the counter.) And that is a very good way to feel.

PETER: Do you have an imaginative imagination, Miss Whye?

MISS WHYE: I think I do have some imagination.

PETER: Oh, everybody has that. But is yours imaginative?

MISS WHYE: It seems to me you are begging the question.

PETER: No, no. There's nothing of the beggar in me, Miss Whye, not even of questions. I have keenly felt my lowly position here at the bank on account of Susan's need for a million dollars.

MISS WHYE: Hm. You mustn't let what she says bother you too much, young man. I know how these girls carry on. They want the world, without caring a hoot for what is lost in the getting of it. Don't pamper her.

PETER: Miss Whye, for a long time I hesitated and dithered, until I'd almost come to the point of believing Susan's judgment -- which was that I lacked the imaginative imagination that is necessary to make a success of modern living. Then I found my talisman . . . or rather he came to me. Now he's directing my life, and I'm sure that in the near future Susan's legitimate needs will be satisfied.

MISS WHYE: What an unusual young man you are! Tell me, what is this object that will work miracles for you? A magic horseshoe?

PETER: (Conspiratorially glancing around the bank.) Would you like to see it?

MISS WHYE: A magic horseshoe? Of course I would. Don't you know I'm a believer in magic? (While Peter takes Snake from his pocket and holds him in cupped hands for Miss Whye to see, she leans over the counter.)

PETER: Look, Miss Whye, isn't he majestic? (She bends over and looks, then staggers back and gives a loud, frightened scream before falling to the floor. There is an uproar in the bank. Peter quickly returns Snake to his pocket and jumps over the counter. Mr. Drumderry and several clerks dash up.) She fainted.

DRUMDERRY: (He is plump, bald, and now quite beside himself.) Get water. No, not water. Yes, water . . . and a towel. No, no, not water as such . . . but water soaked in a towel. No, no, a towel soaked in water.

MILDRED: Cold water, Mr. Drumderry?

DRUMDERRY: Not too cold, Miss Pentup, but cold enough to provide a stimulant. Get a coat. Feel her heart. Lift her up. No, don't lift her up. Get a doctor. Telephone. No, don't telephone. Run and fetch a doctor. Unfasten her dress, her corset. No, no, that mustn't be done in public with elderly ladies.

PETER: (Feeling Miss Whye's pulse, then the rest of her, even her feet.) She doesn't seem to have a heart anywhere.

DRUMDERRY: How strange.

BRENDA: Perhaps it's stopped.

DRUMDERRY: (Tapping her head.) Silly girl. The hearts of important ladies don't stop. It is probably in some safe, inaccessible spot like gold reserves are stored away in the vaults of banks.

MILDRED: (Coming with a towel that drips water.) Here's the towel, Mr. Drumderry.

DRUMDERRY: Apply it to her forehead and gently wipe her face. Miss Pentup, run for the doctor. (Miss Pentup runs out.) We mustn't lose Miss Whye's deposits. She is a very influential customer. One word from her and our deposits could fall by the hundreds. Miss Fishstock!

BRENDA: Yes, Mr. Drumderry.

DRUMDERRY: See if Miss Whye is wearing a corset. And should she be, try to unfasten it without attracting undue attention.

BRENDA: (Touching Miss Whye.) Yes, Mr. Drumderry, she is wearing a full-length corset.

DRUMDERRY: We will look the other way while you relieve the tension. Peter, turn away. Modesty of deportment is necessary in the face of such a valuable deposit. (They turn away. Miss Pentup runs back in.)

MILDRED: Here's the doctor, Mr. Drumderry.

PHYSICIAN: (He is of middle height and thick-set. He marches instead of walks. He treats the living, the dying, and the dead with a humorous, somewhat inhuman indifference. He has a short barking laugh, which he scatters between abrupt sentences.) Where is she? Get away, the lot of you. (Bending over Miss Whye, feeling her hand, face, pulse, breast.) She's dead.

DRUMDERRY: No, no. She can't be dead. No, no. That's impossible.

PHYSICIAN: Don't be a silly fellow. Death is the one possibility that never fails us.

DRUMDERRY: I feel so unhappy.

PHYSICIAN: What happened? Who saw it?

PETER: She was talking with me.

MILDRED: She screamed.

PHYSICIAN: Why shouldn't she? Are screams rationed?

BRENDA: It sounded like . . . it was a scream of terror.

PHYSICIAN: Terror? Ha-ha-ha! What were you talking about? Love?

PETER: Sun bathing . . . and how it cures aches and pains.

PHYSICIAN: She's found the cure-all now for every ache and pain.

DRUMDERRY: Oh dear! She was my chief depositor. Gone . . . gone!

PHYSICIAN: Why not bury her with her deposits? Ha-ha-ha. I'll call the ambulance and undertakers. (He marches into the manager's office.)

DRUMDERRY: Oh dear, oh dear. Miss Whye's deposits, like veins of gold, will soon be ripped from my safe-keeping. Ah! I can envisage how the raped earth must feel.

CLERKS: Oh yes, Mr. Drumderry, we can too.

DRUMDERRY: You are generous, appreciative girls . . . so understanding. Oh Peter, what a calamity! Death in our bank. I hope this won't affect your advancement. Has this sort of thing ever happened before?

PETER: Not that I know of.

DRUMDERRY: A teller who causes heart cessations simply won't do! Rather a teller must inspire a resurrection of that delicate organ . . . he must gladden it, causing it to sing and dance with joy. And should there, by chance, be unfavourable news to impart, he must sing of it heroically, and in such a way as to implant in the depositor a belief that the situation is not beyond recovery. The contrary. He must imply that by one epic effort all can be rectified, thus allowing the victorious depositor to march towards a golden future, confident in the knowledge that behind him stand regiments of savings deposits ready to march out should that need ever

arise. Oh, what glorious, wonderful things are deposits. "A mighty fortress" is my deposit.

PETER: Yes, sir.

DRUMDERRY: "A never-failing strength . . . ."

PETER: Yes, sir.

DRUMDERRY: "It helps me over awkward moments . . . and makes other men say . . . (Peter joins in.) . . . he must have wealth." Never forget this, my boy. In time, if you should ever attain a deposit as large as Miss Whye's, people will honour you as they honoured her. Wouldn't you like that?

PETER: Yes, sir.

DRUMDERRY: (Sighing) But of course, it's not possible. Some are destined to have large deposits, some small ones, and some, no deposits at all.

PETER: I agree with that. (The doctor marches from the office.)

PHYSICIAN: (Smacking Drumderry's back.) Ha-ha-ha! See what money brings! Ha ha ha. The moral is, if you have money you die; if you don't have it, you die. Ha-ha-ha. So, which are you going to be young man?

PETER: (Piously) Since one dies in either case, it seems to me I may as well have it.

PHYSICIAN: Ha-ha-ha. Never met a man yet who didn't say exactly what was expected of him. Ha-ha-ha.

DRUMDERRY: Pardon me, Doctor. Where's the ambulance? Why hasn't it come?

PHYSICIAN: All things are coming. Time kindly allows them to. So don't worry. In any case, she'll be all right for a few days. Just sweep the dust under her. (He marches out.)

DRUMDERRY: (Watching him go.) He is quite influential, though not so much as Miss Whye. Still, he's renowned for his intelligence and his amazing diagnostic ability. Hm! He seemed to take to you, Peter. Oh, you'd be surprised how a word here and a word there helps. Oh, yes, it helps. I wonder where Miss Whye's money will go, Peter? She has neither cats nor dogs, nor starving relatives. Perhaps I, as the immediate protector of her wealth, will receive a small legacy. We have the Will here. (Pause) In a safe deposit box. (Pause) Of course, I would not dream of looking at it. It has been known to happen, but I'd never dream of doing such a thing.

PETER: I would. In fact, I frequently dream of doing such things. Wills and bills of all

denominations shower down on me in my dreams.

DRUMDERRY: (Deeply moved.) My boy, my dear Peter. I have never had a teller in my bank whom I have thought so highly of as you. I may say my feelings are almost paternal. So, I deeply feel what you have just said . . . deeply. (Wiping his eyes.) I urge you my dear boy. Banish such erotic dreams. Fight them. Cast them out. They are most dangerous. The dream of touching what does not, cannot, belong to you! Oh, what could be worse? Anarchistic, Peter! Anarchistic!

PETER: I touch what I dream of all day, every day without once possessing it.

DRUMDERRY: That is different. Here, you are closely supervised for eight hours. But a rampant dream . . . where might it end? The thought horrifies me. (Two men enter, carrying a stretcher. They dump Miss Whye onto it and depart, the trumpet voluntary heard in the distance.) Ah! I would have kept Miss Whye immortal. Wealthy people should not be allowed to die. It is not fair to those they support. Now Peter, let us, with humility and modesty of deportment, get her safe deposit box and carry it into my office, there to prepare for its opening by those privileged to do so. (They go into a vault. The manager indicates a strong box which Peter lifts, and together they slowly and solemnly march the length of the bank into Drumderry's office, while the rest of the staff and customers stand, heads bent, reverencing the majesty passing before them.)

#### •A Short Blackout•

(Peter's home. The table is laid for two, food is on it, and a candle is leaning and dripping wax onto the salad. Susan is sitting in the living room, sullenly staring at a magazine. Peter enters, blithely singing "The Man Who Broke The Bank at Monte Carlo." Susan ignores him.)

PETER: (Shouting) Here I am, Susie! Her I am! (She holds the magazine up, hiding her face.) I am here, Susie. And something else besides me is here too. Don't you want to know what Snake and I've brought home?

SUSAN: (Throwing the magazine down onto the floor.) And do you know what I've done! I cooked a beautiful dinner, and now it's all wasted . . . wasted. Why should I care about what you and that loathsome snake bring home! (She bursts into tears.)

PETER: Ah, you'd be feeling pretty pleased if you knew what we have. You wouldn't cry a single tear or care about wasting a bit of food.

SUSAN: (In a fury.) Do you imagine I care for the food! It's the slaving I put into it that I care about! That's what I am -- a slave -- to a bank teller's wage. And that's what I'll always be as long as I'm married to you. (She returns to crying.)

PETER: You'll forget all your suffering once you know what Snake and I have brought home

for you. You'll forget I'm three hours late. You'll want to go out and buy Snake a diamond-encrusted box to sleep in. Ask me what it is I have for you. (Shouting) Ask me! Ask me!

SUSAN: (Sneering) Why have you been detained, dear? Did you misplace two cents?

PETER: (Shouting) I have inherited two dollars --

SUSAN: -- I need some new stockings badly.

PETER: -- multiplied by one million. (Susan stares at him, her mouth slowly opening.) All . . . all Snake's doing. Snake gave it to me. (He takes the snake from his pocket.) You are my brother, my friend, my king, my emperor, my divinity.

SUSAN: I don't think that kind of joke is funny, Peter.

PETER: (The impression he gives is of being in a state of drunken ecstasy.) Who will dare tell me now that I lack imaginative imagination! Come, strip off your clothes and bathe yourself. Pat sweet-scented powder on the hills and valleys of your body. Dress yourself in fresh, fragrant silk. Then come with me, me, me, me and parade . . . parade with the wealthiest man in this town, this province, this country, this world. (He waves the snake above his head and dances like a dervish around Susan.) Who will tell me now I am nothing! Who will tell me now I have nothing! Who will dare tell me anything except that I am a King!

SUSAN: Peter! You are drunk!

PETER: Two million dollars, two million dollars. (Holding out snake.) Thank Snake, Susan. Kiss him. Worship him as your lord, your divinity.

SUSAN: I won't be teased, Peter, you hear! (Angrily) I won't kiss a snake or play the fool for nothing.

PETER: Nothing! Listen to this! Behold, said I, I have found a talisman, a bringer of fortune and prosperity. Show me, she said, show me this curiosity. And I did. I took Snake from my pocket, and as she bent down to look, he turned his golden head, and she died. Died at the showing of his great and majestic ordination! Then came the will-makers to announce that I, I, I was the chosen one. Me, me, me. Chosen so they said, because I had talked to Miss Whye and made her feel I had no objection to sharing the earth with her. But I know better. It was his doing. His ordination!

SUSAN: Two million dollars? Two million dollars?

PETER: Kiss him, kiss him. Worship the god who brought you good fortune. (Shouting as he thrusts the snake at her.) Go on! Go on! I'll burn it all. I swear I will.

SUSAN: (She takes the snake and forces herself to bring it to her lips.) Thank you, Snake.

PETER: Acknowledge him as your divinity.

SUSAN: You are my divinity. I will feed you on . . . on . . . .

PETER: Tender young lives.

SUSAN: Tender young things.

PETER: (Shouting) Lives! Lives! Divinity can't exist without the taking of lives.

SUSAN: If it's really true, then I shall have all the things I've always wanted. Peter, is it true? You make up so many things I don't know whether to believe you or not. Peter, I'm asking you! I'll never forgive you if you're teasing me. (A knock on the door.)

PETER: See who it is, Susie. (He seems suddenly deflated and tired.) There's someone at the door. (Before Susan can reach the door, it opens and in bounces the bank manager, followed by Felicity, his wife, an elongated, dyspeptic looking woman and Misses Fishstock and Pentup. Drumderry chases Peter around the room trying to embrace him, while Peter tries to avoid him by getting behind the furniture.)

DRUMDERRY: My dear Peter. My dear boy, my almost-a-son. I simply had to come and congratulate you.

PETER: (Dashing for a chair.) Get away, get away.

FELICITY: (Generally) Yes, we felt we had to come.

BRENDA &

MILDRED: Yes, we felt we had to.

SUSAN: (Giving an hysterical laugh.) I can't quite believe it yet. It's so incredible.

PETER: (Hissing at her from behind the couch.) Then wait until you do believe before you dare speak of sacred matters!

DRUMDERRY: (Edging behind the couch.) Fortune has favoured you, Peter. In one stroke, you have been set apart from the common lot of humankind. Now you may go anywhere, at any time, and with whom you please.

PETER: Indeed. (He dashes from the couch to a chair, Drumderry hard on his heels.)

FELICITY: (To Miss Fishstock and Miss Pentup.) Years ago Mr. Drumderry was a passionate relay runner.

DRUMDERRY: I know you won't object to my little homilies, Peter my boy. I've prepared them entirely for your edification.

PETER: (Warding off the manager with a potted tuberous begonia.) That's where you're wrong. I do object to them and I don't want to be edified.

SUSAN: Peter, please don't be rude. (To wife.) Aren't tuberous begonias lovely! Peter, show that begonia to Mrs. Drumderry. The pot is an antique.

PETER: I object to everything you say. (Peter hands over the begonia to Drumderry and runs.)

SUSAN: Peter! Peter, please behave yourself.

DRUMDERRY: (To Peter who is now behind a chair.) Young princes of old expected elevating homilies from their advisors.

PETER: If their advisors were anything like you, it's no wonder history's such a mess.

SUSAN: (To wife.) I'm sorry he's behaving like this. He's over-excited.

PETER: (Desperately holding off Drumderry with a collapsible table.) I am not. I am not over-excited. While I continue to live in this town I shall continue to have some small deposits with you, but be warned. Even having those depends on your behaviour. (The table collapses. Peter is left without any defense.) Leave me alone.

DRUMDERRY: (Stopping in his tracks and becoming excessively humble.) Please forgive me, sir. I will try to do as you wish, sir. Always.

PETER: (Gaping at Drumderry, then becoming remote and dignified.) I should hope you would. Think. If you lost my deposits, you might also lose your position; which is, to say the least, most precarious at the best of times. So, be warned.

SUSAN: Peter, you've no right to behave like this to people who've been kind to you.

PETER: A kindness that listed his perfection and my hopelessness at least ten times a day. (Forgetting to be remote. Shouting.) Never call me "your boy" again. Never speak to me unless I first grant you permission. Now, you may go. Go on. Shoo! Shoo!

SUSAN: Peter, I am ashamed of you.

PETER: Then I'll settle ten thousand a year on you, provided I never have to see your face again.

SUSAN: Me! Never see me again!

PETER: Public shame and ideal matrimony don't mix well. (Shouting at the Misses Pentup and Fishstock.) You two! Will you surrender yourselves to me without feeling shame, for a hundred thousand a piece? Eh? Come on, come on. Answer me. What are you waiting for?

SUSAN: (Her arms about Peter.) I didn't mean it. I just meant that --

PETER: I don't care what you meant. Didn't you say you were ashamed of me?

SUSAN: What I meant was --

PETER: -- Answer me!

SUSAN: -- that you oughtn't to speak --

PETER: Answer me, or I'm finished with you.

SUSAN: (Kissing and caressing him.) No, I'm not ashamed of you, darling. Why should I be?

PETER: Then what are you?

SUSAN: I'm proud of you. (Wheedling) But promise me you won't speak so rudely to Mr. Drumderry. Please, darling Peter. It makes you seem less a nice person than you really are.

PETER: Mr. Drumderry is a detestable man. Aren't you?

DRUMDERRY: If you say so, sir, then I certainly am.

PETER: Don't be so cheerful about it. And I am a great man, aren't I?

DRUMDERRY: One of the world's greatest.

PETER: (To Susan.) See? I am only telling the truth. (To Drumderry.) You . . . Listen up! I have been cut to the quick by your efforts at corrective surgery. Now I must slash out to ease my pain. I have decided to withdraw all my deposits from your bank.

DRUMDERRY: (After a stricken pause.) No, no. Please, please. A few hundred thousand dollars, what do they mean to you? Nothing, nothing. But they are my life's blood. (To his wife.)

Plead, plead, Felicity. Throw yourself on his mercy.

FELICITY: They are his life's blood.

DRUMDERRY: (He falls to his knees and wriggling up to Peter, grasps his legs.) Do what you please with me. Kick me, beat me, anything . . . . (He squeezes Peter's legs, and Peter falls over. Drumderry leans over him, his nose about half an inch from Peter's, where he proceeds to leer at him.) Do what you please with Felicity. (Calling to his wife.) On your knees, my dear. (The wife falls to her knees.) But don't withdraw your deposits. (Wife joins in.) Don't withdraw your deposits.

PETER: (He has managed to get clear of Drumderry and his wife. He scrambles to his feet and points with horror at Felicity.) Just what do you mean when you suggest I may do "anything" with that collection of skin and bones? (He backs off to avoid Drumderry's grasping arms.) Get up! Get away from me!

DRUMDERRY: Dear sir, such offers are but a matter of form. But if you really feel inclined -- Ah ha! Got you! (He grabs at Peter's legs. Peter skips clear.)

PETER: Get up, damn you! (Shouting) Get up, or I'll . . . . I'll --

DRUMDERRY: (Eagerly) What? Leave your deposits! (The snake, aroused by the noise and warmth, has poked his head out of Peter's pocket. Now it proceeds to wriggle out and falls to the floor close to the wife who sees it.)

FELICITY: Albert! Albert! Save me, save me! (Drumderry jumps up, sees the snake, and in a moment has crushed its head with his foot. Then he goes on to soothe his wife.)

DRUMDERRY: There, there, my dear Felicity. Don't be afraid. I've killed it. Be calm. (On hearing the words "I've killed it," Peter slowly turns. Drumderry points to the snake and gabbles merrily on.) Now isn't that peculiar? How could a snake suddenly appear in here? Oh, don't be afraid, sir. It's dead. Fortunately snakes aren't dangerous, merely repulsive. My dear Felicity has a horror of snakes . . . a definite phobia. That apparently is why she is so thin . . . the doctors says phobias are fat-devouring. (Peter bends over and picks up Snake. He turns Snake over and caresses him as though to re-instill life.) The doctor're quite sure that if Felicity could accommodate her phobia, she'd swell up and become a positive balloon. (He gives a giggle.) What a delightful nocturnal change that would be for me.

PETER: He's dead.

DRUMDERRY: Oh yes, sir. I'm a very efficient executioner. One stamp of my heel, and they're dead. I may say without exaggeration that I've executed thousands of repulsive creatures. (Standing by Peter and patting his back.) Now, you won't withdraw your deposits, will you?

PETER: But he's dead, he's dead. Snake is dead. (His voice is full of shock and disbelief.)

DRUMDERRY: (Trying to take the snake from Peter.) Allow me to throw it out for you. You ought not to touch such a vile animal. Allow me, sir.

PETER: Snake is dead, Snake is dead.

DRUMDERRY: I've never understood why so much of the life on earth is useless and horrible to behold. (Trying to relieve Peter of the snake.) Let me show you how well I can handle matters, sir. And you won't withdraw your deposits, will you? Hm?

PETER: Do you realize what you have done?

DRUMDERRY: (Laughing) Of all men, a bank manager must know what he's doing. No chance thrust and cut for him. (Coily) Now, you will let your deposits remain, won't you?

PETER: (His voice rising.) My friend, my companion, my benefactor . . . murdered . . . by you! You, of all people!

DRUMDERRY: Oh, hardly murder! Say executioner. You know, pointless people and things have to be kept down. Now, promise me you leave your --

PETER: -- I'll promise to kill you! (He advances on Drumderry. Susan grabs his arm.)

SUSAN: Peter, dear. You must calm down. (He throws her off.)

PETER: Give back Snake's life to me. Do you know you have destroyed a divinity! Ah . . . but how could *you* destroy him? You, a safe deposit box! It's all wrong.

DRUMDERRY: (Backing away.) If I'd known the creature was a pet of yours and that you thought so much of it, naturally I'd have let it live. However, there are thousands, millions, billions more snakes in the world exactly like this one. Rest assured, sir, that I will bring you another snake.

PETER: You've brought too much to me already. (He grabs a futuristic ironwork lamp stand and swings it at Drumderry who nimbly skips out of the way while Peter, yelling from frustration, charges after him. They gallop round the room watched by the women and cheered by the Misses Pentup and Fishstock, much as people cheer athletes and race horses.)

FELICITY: In his young days Albert always ran twice round the block before coming to bed. (Drumderry whizzes by.) And you used to practice your style before the mirror on wet nights, didn't you, dear?

MILDRED: Oh, hasn't Mr. Drumderry got a beautiful motion! This is just like the Olympic Games. (Drumderry gallops up with Peter hard behind him swinging the lamp. He dodges behind his wife, and the iron base of the lamp lands on her head. She grunts her surprise and sinks to the floor. The manager now runs for the door, while Peter skips over the wife and goes after him. The Misses Pentup and Fishstock, hysterically cheering, follow behind. Susan kneels by Felicity.)

SUSAN: Mrs. Drumderry! (Feeling her.) Oh dear, I think you are dead, Mrs. Drumderry . . . though I really don't think you ought to die here, Mrs. Drumderry. (Peter returns, wild-eyed and raging.)

PETER: I lost him in the dark, but I'll find him eventually. And I still intend to withdraw my deposits. He'll find I'm a man of my word . . . two million words. (He takes Snake from his pocket.) Snake moulded chance for me, and it can't be taken away. Can it, Snake?

SUSAN: Peter, you've killed Mrs. Drumderry! (He ignores her.) Peter, you must realize what you've done. (Very faintly the sound of a siren.) Peter, what will you say?

PETER: But Snake is dead. So perhaps his gift will melt away like snow under the spring sun.

SUSAN: (Shouting) Peter, listen to me! You must think of something to say!

PETER: Divinity isn't stamped off the earth's face by a pair of bank manager's shoes. (The siren sound increases.)

SUSAN: (Beating at him with her fists.) Think of something, think, think, think of something, Peter!

PETER: . . . but supposing it is so, then what does it mean to me and to those who wait for chance to become divine? (The sound of the siren is overwhelming. Susan's mouth opens and closes, and she waves her arms in Peter's face, but he responds to nothing she says or does. Then the siren stops and there is complete silence.)

PETER: No. I must not conceive of such a horror. I refuse to think of it. (The door is thrown open. Peter, very erect and square-shouldered, faces the open door.)

P. OFFICERS: (Outside) We're coming inside.

DRUMDERRY: (Outside) Be careful, Officer. He's a dangerous killer. (Two husky police officers rush into the room, waving revolvers. Susan screams. Drumderry follows the officers in, hides behind one of them and peeps out at Peter. The officers stand on either side of Peter, pointing their guns at him.)

P. OFFICER: (Indicating Felicity.) Young man, did you do that?

PETER: I did.

SUSAN: Officer, Mr. Drumderry told Peter that he could do as he pleased with Mrs. Drumderry.

P. OFFICER: Did you say that?

DRUMDERRY: Of course. Everyone knows such a phrase means nothing beyond its face value.

SUSAN: (Obsequiously) But, sir, Peter doesn't understand face values. He thinks all things said and done go deeper and deeper. Peter, tell them . . . explain to the officers.

PETER: (Holding Snake across both hands.) He destroyed Snake. (Shouting at Drumderry.) I still withdraw my deposits.

P. OFFICER: (Touching Peter's arm.) Come with me.

PETER: Don't touch me. I have two million words I can fire off. (The officer grabs Peter's arm and nods to his companion. Peter yells.) Touch me not! I am on Snake's business!

P. OFFICER: And I am on justice's. (Peter swings at him, but the other officer catches his arm, rips the snake from him and throws it away. Together they frog-march him to the door.)

PETER: (Shouting and struggling.) Let me have him! Let me have him! Please, please. Don't take Snake from me. Please, please. (The Officers thrust Peter through the door. Susan runs towards it, but Drumderry gets there first and closes it.)

DRUMDERRY: (Bowing, smiling.) How strange. At one moment there is a vast concourse of people; at the next all are gone. You find it confusing, and so do I. (He sidles towards her, smiling and moving his hands to emphasize what he is saying.) Now, contrast this uneasy state of affairs with deposits.

SUSAN: Mr. Drumderry . . . . Your wife . . . .

DRUMDERRY: There stability reigns.

SUSAN: (She is backed against a wall and there she stays.) Mr. Drumderry, oughtn't you to cover your wife's body?

DRUMDERRY: Deposits never fail; so unlike men, who accumulate failure from the moment of

birth.

SUSAN: Mr. Drumderry, your wife will get dusty if you don't cover her.

DRUMDERRY: Promise me you'll leave your deposits, eh? Promise? (He moves closer to her. Quite terrified, Susan tries to push through the wall.) Promise. Just a little promise.

SUSAN: Yes, I promise, I promise. Don't touch me, don't touch me. (He kneels in homage before her. The Trumpet and Organ Voluntary is heard as the curtain falls.)

**•A Short Blackout•**

(A cell. Peter, dully dressed, lies on a hard narrow cot. His eyes are open, and in general he is very restless. In his hands he holds and caresses a bit of ragged cloth as he formerly caressed the snake. Outside the cell door, Guard 1 patrols. Occasionally he stops to look in at Peter. While doing this, he accidentally pushes his hand between the bars, then finds he cannot withdraw it. An expression of comical anguish spreads over his heavy, middle-aged face.)

GUARD 1: Oh Jesus! (Peter slowly looks round.)

PETER: Hello. Still nighttime? (He wanders over to the door.) What's the matter?

GUARD 1: My hand's stuck. I've always had trouble with my hands. They're extra big. But if I say anything to the authorities, they just tell me my hands ought to be smaller.

PETER: You'll have to take the door off . . . or your hand. Which do you think the authorities will recommend?

GUARD 1: They aren't interested in solving my problems. I can't get gloves to fit. I rip all my shirt sleeves. Oh, Jesus! Kerm out, damn you! (He gives a violent jerk. His hand flies through, and he sprawls away. He can be heard groaning and cursing his affliction.)

PETER: (Solicitous) Hurt yourself?

GUARD 1: (Return to the door.) Y'see what I mean! I tell you, when a man's outsize, he suffers for it.

PETER: (Apprehensively) Outsize neck?

GUARD 1: Don't let that worry you. Size makes no difference there.

PETER: Oh, thanks for telling me.

GUARD 1: Me and my mate always do what we can to help.

PETER: That's very thoughtful of you.

GUARD 1: A man has to do something if he believes in humanity. Now, you try get a bit of sleep.

PETER: (Up against the bars.) But aren't you at the tail end of humanity?

GUARD 1: Where a man is at shouldn't influence his concept of duty. (He starts to move on.)

PETER: If I try to sleep, people come from the walls and shout at me until I forget everything except that I'm to die in the morning.

GUARD 1: They're all in the mind. Refuse to think them. Thoughts can't control you unless you allow them to. I took a course in mind control, and you'd be surprised what it does for a man.

PETER: I can see it has blanketed quite a lot in you. (He returns to the bed, lies on it, and resolutely closes his eyes.)

GUARD 1: Refuse to think. Concentrate. (After watching for a moment, he continues his patrol.)

PETER: (Whispering.) Oh, Snake, I beg you. Raise me up from this misery . . . grant me peace. (Shadowy figures emerge from the wall. Their voices are clamorous, their shoutings overlap, their gestures are exaggerated. Two of the shadows vaguely resemble lawyers in their court gowns, one a judge on his bench, another Drumderry, the manager, and another Susan.)

LAWYER 1: This man is insane. Of that there is . . .

LAWYER 2: . . . doubt . . .

LAWYER 1: . . . no doubt. A man does not blossom from a pallid teller into a raving killer.

LAWYER 2: This one has set a precedent. I shall now prove the . . .

SUSAN: . . . money is mine . . . ours, I mean. The Will . . .

LAWYER 2: . . . to kill is always there. I shall prove . . .

DRUMDERRY: . . . he had erotic dreams every day. He would not listen . . . (He disappears.)

SUSAN: . . . to me, Peter. Haven't I done everything as recommended by the best books? Very

well then, you have no right to condemn me just because I put that snake in the garbage can. Garbage and snakes are perfectly suited to each other, and the sooner you realize that . . . .

JUDGE: . . . each man shall contribute to the common cause and gain of the society into which he is born. In return he will receive recompense in proportion to his effort, and be given a justification of his existence. Above all, in order to insure an orderly purging of those impulses that every day affairs do not appease, he will be licensed to commit violences, though their nature and time of performance must be determined and regulated by society. Thus, such acts as yours, committed without sanction . . .

PETER: (Shouting) . . . I had Snake's sanction!

JUDGE: . . . sets you beyond the pale. Therefore, you will be taken . . . .

PETER: Snake, I beg you! Answer me! Has faith no recompense? (Guard 1 peers in, nods with satisfaction to see Peter's eyes are closed and goes on.)

JUDGE: . . . where you shall be . . .

PETER: (Opening his eyes, screaming.) I beg of you, I beg you, Snake!

JUDGE: . . . until you are . . .

PETER: Give me a reason for this!

JUDGE: . . . have mercy on your soul . . . .

PETER: (Whispering) There is no soul nor any mercy to haven it. There is only a little faith that vanishes with the shadow it has embraced when night falls. (The cell door opens. The figures back into the wall and disappear. Guards 1 and 2 enter. Guard 2 is carrying a tray. Peter, on hearing the guards enter, stiffens and then forces himself to look around. They proffer encouraging smiles.)

GUARD 2: (He is the same age as Guard 1.) Breakfast, sir? (Peter shakes his head.) Not even coffee? (His disappointment is apparent.)

PETER: Oh, all right. I'll have coffee.

GUARD 2: Good. Your usual sugar and milk? (He pours the coffee while humming to himself.)

PETER: (Sitting up. To Guard 1.) What is the time?

GUARD 1: (He takes out his watch, stares at it, shakes it, and appears flabbergasted and outraged.) It's stopped! I've had this watch fifteen years, and it's never let me down before. (He stares indignantly at it.)

PETER: (Guard 2 hands him a mug.) Never? You're lucky. I've had my life twenty-three years, and it's never shown any consideration for my pride. (To Guard 2.) Does your watch let you down?

GUARD 2: Never. (He takes it out.) The time is -- Well, I'm jiggered! It's stopped! (Peter laughs, becoming quite hysterical and spilling coffee from the mug.) More coffee?

PETER: What's behind all this coffee? Who profits from my last cup? (He empties the coffee on the floor.) Which share receives its dividend from this? (He throws the mug, knocking over the coffee pot. Then he lies face down on the bed.) I wish I'd asked Snake to abolish time. I would've lived in a world where everything remained in bud. (The guards solemnly wink and nod at each other, then clear their throats.)

GUARD 2: Well, I guess a man can't go through life without having an occasional wish.

GUARD 1: I wish I had an education, then I wouldn't be sitting here. I wish all men had education, then the world'd change.

GUARD 2: Oh sure! It'll change. The time'll come when whore houses have poetry circles. But what'll it signify? Today everybody has what only the rich had fifty years ago, but who's still cleaning up the world's messes? Why, you, me . . . and the rest of the dumb Joes.

GUARD 1: I say that when men get education --

GUARD 2: -- Okay! Let 'em get it. In fifty year's time --

GUARD 1: (Infuriated) -- Don't shake your finger at me!

GUARD 2: Okay, okay, I won't, but in fifty year's time everybody'll have what only the film stars has today . . . but who'll there be to clean up --

GUARD 1: (Shouting) -- There won't be no messes! When men gets an education --

GUARD 2: -- Oh, brother! That's the one thing you can bet your sweet fat fanny there'll always be around. Garbage and all, garbage and all!

GUARD 1: I say that when men --

GUARD 2: Ah, you're hopeless! (To Peter who has raised his head.) You think the world'll

change, sir?

PETER: (Sitting up.) Which world do you mean? (He laughs at their surprised faces.) Because it wouldn't surprise me if there weren't lots of worlds. You might even say I inhabit one world, and you, another.

GUARD 1: (Sentimentally) Sure, every man has his own little world. His home . . . his wife . . . his family.

GUARD 2: He doesn't mean that kind of world, do you, sir?

PETER: No. I was thinking of worlds of knowing and awareness. Worlds where coincidence becomes so mixed up with longing that a man comes to believe some divinity is directing his affairs and acts accordingly.

GUARD 2: Now that's most interesting. (Peter laughs.)

GUARD 1: Well, I still say each man's world is his own home and family.

GUARD 2: But supposing he ain't got those valuable things?

GUARD 1: He drifts around 'til he finds 'em.

GUARD 2: You mean, drifts like a dandelion seed on the wind?

GUARD 1: (Angrily) No, I don't mean like no blasted dandelion seed.

GUARD 2: (Genially patting Guard 1's back.) Well, just explain what you do mean, my friend.

GUARD 1: (Waving a fist under Guard 2's nose.) If you don't stop insulting me, I'll --

PETER: (Hopefully) -- kill him? (The guards look at each other, then laugh.)

GUARD 2: Don't let our little tiffs bother you. We do it to help pass the time. It doesn't mean a thing.

PETER: Do you mean that all that passionate belief, all that strident faith, is nothing . . . means nothing!

GUARD 1: (Genially slapping Guard 2's back.) The trouble is, my friend here won't stick to the facts. I tell him facts are what get you to important places fast. Like main highways.

GUARD 2: And I tell you, they're too easy to come by. You glide from one fact to another, but

nothing ever happens. No; to live you must pick your objective, then fight your way to it through virgin forests and over mountain ranges.

PETER: You are both wrong. To find out who you are and which world you inhabit, all you have to do is to get lost for a few moments.

GUARD 2: (Politely) You don't say! Well, I guess that's easy enough.

PETER: The trouble is, we are never lost when we desire to be, but always at the moment when we believe we have triumphed. (They are silent. Peter stares down at the rag in his hands. Guard 2 clears his throat.)

GUARD 2: Ah . . . would you care to tidy up, sir?

PETER (He looks up. Both warders make brushing motions on their sleeves and shaving motions on their faces.) Oh. No thanks.

GUARD 1: Personal neatness raises the level of all a man does and causes others to value him more.

GUARD 2: Untidiness seems to be a primary cause of indignity and humiliation.

PETER: Your eyes are at the wrong end of the glass. (As Peter says this, the cell door opens and three men enter, the prison warden and two nondescript men dressed in blue suits. They look like unemployed men who have dressed in their best suits to apply for a job. They advance on Peter who gives his hysterical laugh and springs up to meet them.)

WARDEN: (The only movement on his face is a continuous blinking.) Will you come --

PETER: (Confidentially) -- Ah, Warden. So pleased you called by. I've been meaning to ask whether you could see your way to letting me stay on here for a while. I've nothing better to do at the moment.

WARDEN: Will you come with me, Please?

PETER: (Laughing even more. He stares at the group around him and especially at the blue-suited men.) I wouldn't ask to keep this room if that didn't suit you. Any old cubby hole would be just fine.

WARDEN: Will you come with me, please?

PETER: Yes yes, of course. I'd be willing to pay a large bonus on top of the rent. I'm quite a wealthy man.

WARDEN: Will you --

PETER: (Gabbling and laughing.) I appreciate that the expanding population overcrowds every building as soon as it is built. (The warden looks at the two men, who in turn, look at each other. Peter gabbles on.) Any old apple or orange box would do me. I know how to rough it. I took a course in camping and forestry. I wasn't actually a scout, but the next best thing, so you see . . . . (The two men move so that they are close to him. Peter's eyes flicker from face to face.) So you see, Warden, until a room becomes vacant . . . any old box . . . any old box . . . any old box . . . .

WARDEN: (Pause) Actually we do have a box of sorts for you.

PETER: (After a pause, by now quite demented.) Oh ah . . . oh ah . . . of course . . . I'd forgotten. You are going to present me with a little room. He appears to calm down and to be quite sane and serious.) Tell me, has it a name like Mon Repose or Cosy Nook painted on the door? (He laughs, bows, shakes the warden's hand and behaves like a public servant responding to the presentation of an official retirement clock.) Thank you, thank you, gentlemen. I wonder whether you can appreciate how inspiring it is to receive a gift that will remain with you for as long as you need it. (Laughing.) A gift that you know can never be stolen away. And your presentation is especially touching when you have reached the point . . . as I had . . . of believing that you had lost everything. Once again, I thank you. Now, shall we go? I am anxious to spend a night in my new quarters. (He takes the warden's arm and urge him from the cell. They leave at a trot, and the others are compelled to run in order to keep up with them. The music quickens in tempo and becomes quite erratic. Guards 1 and 2 are left in the cell where they wander around, filling in time: moving things, straightening and folding the blankets. Much of what they do is unnecessary. One moves a chair to a new position, the other moves it back to its original location.)

GUARD 2: (Yawning) This is exhausting work. We spend a lot of energy making those last hours pass quickly.

GUARD 1: (Solemnly) Men who believe in humanity will always behave with compassion, even if it exhausts them.

GUARD 2: (Absent-mindedly picking up Peter's bit of rag.) Give me the number of men who believe in a principle and actually act on it . . . . (Shakes his head.) There's not many of 'em around. That's a fact. Not like us.

GUARD 1: (Sorrowfully wagging his head.) There, when you come right down to it, is the root of a man's trouble. He lacks the strength to believe and the faith to act. (The music now goes completely crazy. The piccolo rushes through arpeggios to vanish in unattainable heights. The harmonium attempts to transform itself into a cathedral organ and bursts its bellows. Only a

wheezing and gasping is left. Guard 1 stands in the middle of the cell, luxuriantly yawning. Guard 2 examines the bit of rag.)

GUARD 2: Funny how he held onto this bit of cloth for so long.

GUARD 1: Something for his hands to do.

GUARD 2: I guess a man always has to be doing something. (He absently tears the rag into shreds and drops them on the floor. Guard 1 takes out his watch.)

GUARD 1: (Pause) A minute past the hour.

GUARD 2: All over. Another dream flown. (Picking up the breakfast tray.) Well, I guess we can go. (Together they leave the cell.)

**THE END**