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*Asleep in the afternoon*

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contents page (p. 5)

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## CONTENTS

I	ON THE FLOOR	11
II	FAMILY LIVES	23
III	MISS TWENTY-TWO	39
IV	HUGO'S EAR-TRUMPET	51
V	AGATHA FINDS OUT	67
VI	DELAY IN AN ATTIC	81
VII	AGATHA, AWAKE!	93
VIII	CULTURE AT HOME	107
IX	ON THE PIER	123
X	BEHIND THE SCENES	135
XI	THE LOTUS FLOWER	149
XII	QUESTION TIME	169
XIII	TEA FOR THREE	183
XIV	COMING EVENTS . . .	197
XV	THE APPARITIONS	211
XVI	DOWN THE RIVER	229
XVII	AND AFTERWARDS . . .	249
XVIII	WHAT NEXT?	267
XIX	SPRUCE HILL	281
XX	TACT AND TACTICS	299
XXI	SOMETHING DONE	315
XXII	THROUGH A MACHINE	327
XXIII	17 GOLDEN TERRACE	339
XXIV	SNAKES AND LADDERS	355
XXV	THE LAST THROW	375
XXVI	THE AWAITED DAY	389
XXVII	WHO CAN TELL?	401

## ON THE FLOOR

'I SHAN'T be gone long,' said Mary, 'and I don't suppose Michael will wake up, but just go to him if he should cry.' She went out with her shopping bag.

Charles Pry did not look up, and he said nothing. Mary always did say that: in two months he had heard it fifty times. It was ten o'clock in the morning; for three hours he would 'work', as he called it, and in the afternoon — well, he knew he would slink out again and go to the pictures. He looked at the clock, lit another cigarette, and began to prowls restlessly about the room. He had made book-shelves to fill up all one wall, and arranged their accumulation of books on them in classes. He looked idly at the books and moved one of them into a different class, gazed at it in its new position for a few moments, and then put it back again. He went out, through the french windows, into the place that had once been a little vinery or conservatory in the Victorian era. He had replaced the crumbling woodwork and glazed the roof; he had put in a sink and a bench, and fitted it out as a simple laboratory. All that had employed him through February and well on into March. Now there were no further preparations he could persuade himself were necessary. There was nothing for it but to settle down to work.

## ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON

But when he tried to plan this work his thoughts wandered, for there was no real gleam of enthusiasm within him to prompt a flow of ideas. He wrote down one thing after another, and then scratched it out, sticking at it, but really hoping that Michael *would* cry, or that the clock would stop and want winding, or that some hawk or vacuum-cleaner salesman *would* come to the door.

When Mary came back from her shopping, Pry was lying on the floor. She seemed to bring an atmosphere of assertive but pointless bustle into the room with her.

'You're down there again,' she said, 'you mustn't stay down there again all day. It's wicked. Do pull yourself together.'

'There's no need,' said Pry.

'It's pitiful to see you — only wanting to waste time. It's beautiful out . . .'

'The only consequence of my going out would be that later I should have to come in. The same result is obtained by remaining where I am. Life extends everywhere in a completely vacant waste of time. To waste time is to identify myself with life: that is sophistry, but it is better than going for little dog's-walks round East Bullock. Leave me alone.'

'In your idleness you don't stop talking.'

'No,' said Pry, 'that's true.'

Charles Pry was not exactly 'unemployed'. He had once been the manager of the queer-looking chemical

## ON THE FLOOR

factory that now stood derelict over by the power station, across the marshes. It had closed down, at the end of January, and it was true that he had then lost his job. But out of that job, thanks to one or two inventions, he had been able to make, or save, nearly seven hundred pounds. It was enough to live on for two years. He was extraordinarily fortunate, and now he was not really looking for another job. It had been his ambition for twenty years to buy himself out of industry for just such a spell.

And now he did not know what to do with his time. What kind of holiday could he carve out for himself with two years or seven hundred pounds? He could go round the world, but when he took a pencil and a piece of paper, and began to figure *that* out, it was mate in about six moves. There was Mary, and Michael, and the new baby coming: the seven hundred pounds was not such a very large sum after all. They could certainly go and live in the country, but for him, a man of thirty-five, there was no romance in living amongst the scenes of an agricultural or pastoral life in which he had no part. In a fortnight he would be bored. A holiday, such as Pry desired, meant doing something he had never done before, free from any petty tyrant to dictate the how or why, something that would occupy his hands and exercise, perhaps delight, his mind. Ideally, it should be some sort of glamorous escapade. The best thing he could think of was a piece of chemical research, for he had found much contentment in that, in the past. He prescribed it for himself

## ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON

— something to do with 'polypeptides' and the chemistry of food.

In the afternoon, Charles Pry was again lying on the floor. On the bare boards behind the piano. The hard pressure, on his pelvis, shoulder-blades and head, was good. It hurt a little, and by lying there for three or four hours at a stretch, he found that boredom was destroyed by a grim process of catharsis. To do nothing, exactly and literally nothing, when there was nothing he really wanted to do, was logical, and intellectually satisfactory. It would perhaps have been better to have gone to sleep; but he could not do that at will, he never could sleep in the afternoon. No! by lying thus on the floor he was at least being honest with himself: he was neither pretending to be active nor pretending to be asleep. He just remained alive, in a condition of pure continuation: the pressure of the floor, and the stuffy smell of dust which hung about on the floor, were, like his body, perfectly static. He disciplined himself to think, as far as possible, of nothing. But he could not help reflecting that lying on the floor was not a form of anaesthesia, nor was it narcotic, and it did not cost money. It could not be said to be in any sense *misleading*, for it did not lead anywhere. In these, as in many other respects, the practice was greatly to be preferred to reading newspapers, going to the pictures, smoking cigarettes, listening to the wireless, or taking to drink. Except for a slight crick in the neck and a bruised feeling in certain areas, it

## ON THE FLOOR

left the body and the mind no worse afterwards than before, and it even engendered a certain eagerness to begin living quite actively again when the external world or the internal soul *did* suggest anything desirable to do.

At four o'clock Mary brought him a cup of tea. She put it beside his papers on the table.

'Put it down here,' he said, without ceasing to gaze at the ceiling, 'where I can reach it.'

'You're sure that won't be too much trouble for you?'

'Oh, no,' said Pry.

That evening Pry felt much refreshed. He couldn't say he was keyed-up to tackle the polypeptides immediately, they could be put off until the morrow, but he had thought of something mildly pleasurable to do. He told Mary about it while they were having their evening meal. He would make another book-case to stand over the mantelpiece. He thought they ought to have a classification for books intermediate between EPHEMERA (Ancient & Modern) and LITERATURE. He would reserve the new shelves for books of FAIR TESTIMONY, and then he would be able to do some more sorting.

'I think you'd better go on lying on the floor,' said Mary.

'By "fair testimony" I mean the low-down on life . . .'

'I am still of the same opinion,' said Mary.

Pry began measuring up the space for the shelves.

'Why don't you run a PURGATORY, then you wouldn't

## ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON

have to make anything. Just put all the Ephemera Ancient & Modern in a big heap down by the coal-bucket, and chuck them into the fire, or into your other precious classifications when you've made up your mind. That would keep you occupied for a week or two.'

He made a neat working sketch of the shelves while Mary sat by the fire, sewing baby garments. When he showed her the sketch she said:

'You seem very preoccupied with books lately — why don't you write one, instead of shuffling other people's about?'

'Me?' said Pry.

'You heard me. If that's what's at the back of your mind, why don't you start?'

'I suppose I have thought about it, off and on.'

'Off and on! What else have you been dreaming about all these years? What were you doing in the oast-house the last time you were unemployed? What have you filled up all those notebooks for? What did you make a hobby of going to all those theosophical and sexological meetings for, before you met me? The first time I ever saw you, you were sitting on the deck of a cross-channel steamer with a notebook on your knee, writing descriptions of seagulls, and other people being sick. . . .'

'That was only my pastime.'

'And this business of lying on the floor is just pastime too? Lying on the floor deliberately examining your sensations, listening like a cat to everything that



## ON THE FLOOR

goes on in the house, and thinking up biting things to write in your notebooks about me!

'My thoughts range, my dear Mary, my thoughts range. . . .'

'When are you going to start writing that book?'

There was something almost brutal in Mary's directness. Pry cupped his chin in his hands and sat watching appearances in the fire. Presently he said:

'I'm not quite sure yet what ought to happen in the last chapter. When something happens that changes society it only changes one kind of confusion and suffering into another kind of confusion and suffering. The public wouldn't stand for that. It's the final compromise I can't get over.'

'Oh! So everything up to the last chapter is quite clear in your mind: plot, characters, incidents, story, everything — right up to the last chapter! You and your polypeptides!'

'Why, yes,' said Pry, 'of course it is.' And then more thoughtfully he added, 'but that's an illusion, you know, I don't suppose there's really enough of it already in my mind to fill up a dozen pages.'

Mary smiled. 'What are you going to call it?'

'*Asleep in the Afternoon*, I think. That sounds like a novel, and it's a *double entendre*. The title of a novel is its only line of poetry, and the essence of poetry is ambiguity — the meaning spreads like a fan between the two directions of the ambiguity.'

'I call it alliteration.'

'Yes, that's deliberate, it adds a slight flavouring of

mockery, two or three readers in a thousand would taste it, and it would warm the cockles of their capulous hearts. All the rest might think it wholly sweet and delightful: it might even touch their recollections of lying on the Downs on their summer holidays.'

'If you write the book in that mood people won't like it.'

'But who says it would be written in that mood? I reckon it would take me a year to write, and in a year I should pass through a rich variety of moods — so would the book — in that at least it would have some verisimilitude to life.'

'That won't do. You might be mixing up satire with comedy, and tragedy with farce.'

'Why not? Life mixes them up all the time.'

'"Life" doesn't write novels.'

'Doesn't it?' said Pry.

Never having written a novel, Pry could not really say whether it did or not, but judging from some specimens he had read, it had certainly done some prompting from the wings. When he read novels he was always mentally sorting out the contributions made by 'Life' from the pallid stuff the author had made up. But Mary was quite right — he would like to write a novel. His desire to do so was a truant desire and a romantic one; something to dream about, not to do. His job was chemical engineering; a little pure chemistry was as far aside from his last as he could afford to go. But to write a book would be as sweet as an illicit love affair, and his thoughts turned constantly towards it.

For him to write a book might well be ridiculous; what reason had he to think he had a native gift for it, hidden away within him? He was pretty good at writing reports for boards of Directors, that was true, and he could write advertising 'copy' for proprietary cattle-foods, in competition with anybody. But in his notebooks he had never done more than talk candidly to an imaginary confidant. The few good books he had read, the miracles of language in the Bible, or in the works of De Quincey and Sir Thomas Browne — they did not encourage him in any serious belief that he could write a book. No. Better not start on such an escapade. And, anyway, who would publish his book, if he did get it written? He would only be courting disappointment, and he did not want his precious two years of liberty marred by that. He would be permitting hope to enter his soul, and hope exposed a man to more unhappiness than anything else in life. He had had all the disappointment that was good for him, in the previous few years. The abandoned works on the marshes was a monument to it. No. A week or two more of moping about and lying on the floor would exorcise this damned she-temptress: the good sisterly polypeptides would prevail over the wanton novel. He would turn away from sin.

The next morning, Charles Pry took a clean piece of quarto paper from the rack, and began to write over it, in level lines, close together. A little *jeu d'esprit*. Of no consequence whatever. It was only the 'blurb' to go on the dust cover of his novel. Nothing serious, like beginning the novel itself. Only the 'blurb'.

## ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON

At half-past eleven, when Mary took in his cup of tea, she noticed that he had taken off his tie, opened the neck of his shirt, and scratched his hair into a mop. All the modern novels they had were piled round him, open at the 'blurbs' on the dust covers. He wrote a word or two, laid his pen down, looked constrainedly into space, chuckled at some private hilarity, and then wrote a few more words.

Mary stood beside him, reading what he had written.

'I am so glad,' she said, ruffling his hair affectionately.

'Glad? What is there to be glad about?'

'It's *got* you. You really have begun.'

'If I were going to write a novel, that's how I should start. Funny, isn't it? But sensible. Get a lot of modern novels, examine them for what they are, and then go one worse. Beginning with the "blurb". It must be frightfully important, the "blurb". I should think there are quite a number of people who don't read any farther than that.'

'You'll do!' said Mary.

'What do you mean — "I'll do"?''

She left him to it.

At lunch time he took his piece of composition into the kitchen and read it to her, following her about as she took the things out of the gas oven.

'"*Asleep in the Afternoon*. A novel, by Charles Richard Pry." Do you think it ought to be "Charles Richard" or just "C. R."?''

'"C. R.", of course.'

## ON THE FLOOR

'But mightn't people think the book was written by a woman?'

'No,' said Mary, 'never in this life.'

"... by C. R. Pry. The appellation 'genius' has been so hard worked that it is perhaps inadequate to claim mere genius for Mr. C. R. Pry. But if ever a first novel deserved our Reader's involuntary, excited cry of 'Eureka!', surely it is this. A theme of such arresting and startling importance; a story of such epic and devastating power; a style tender but firm as the muscles of a young athlete emerging from the bath; a sense of humanity that sweeps society in its flight, but lights ever and again on the innermost secrets of the individual; a satiric instrument that cuts clean to the roots of evil; the passion of a Casanova and the chivalry of a Don Quixote whose oyster is the modern world. This is the story of a great woman, a woman unlimited by love, fighting the indifference of her mathematician-husband, and all the octopus-like tentacles of reaction in a man-made society, to bring, to the born and the unborn, the greatest benison of science ever yet mothered by necessity. This is a story of the burning present, yes — but also it is a story for the future. It will be read even after *Thunder in Aspic* is forgotten. Powerful, stark, sensational, and continuously exciting, this masterpiece has yet that sense of charmed and sunlit peace, that tranquil beauty extending to the golden portals of beatitude, from which it takes its most happy title — *Asleep in the Afternoon*. (Continued on back cover) 7s. 6d. net."