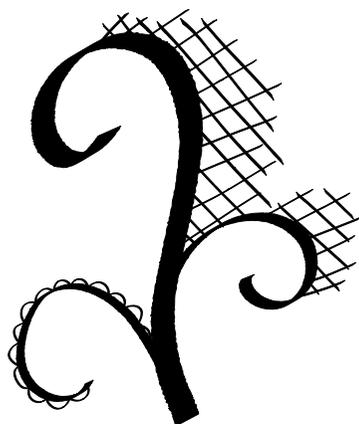


THE MAN
WHO
MISSED THE 'BUS

By

STELLA BENSON



1928 | 2020

PREFACE

stella benson's works carry in them a recurrent theme of isolation and distance. she is forever writing characters who have somehow come unstuck from their moorings and have drifted to a somewhere that no one can ever follow. in this particular story, the subject is a man who, through combination of less-than-ideal appearance and a lack of social competence, is left behind in terms of human interaction, and so watches from the sidelines the relationships and freedoms others seem to have.

i'll leave exposition at that, as this story is well short enough to speak for itself. it does seem worth noting, though, that when her floating-people are men, they have a tendency to maintain a denial and to be "kings of domains inside their heads". here robinson is clearly so; in *tchotl*¹, nielsen is an analogue in treatment of his minor conlang; mr. chew² rejects his lingual isolation, piling words on further words when no one understands him; and doctor bligh, *hairy carey's son*³, walks dreamily, rejecting destinations/consequences till they are upon him.

what this may say about her views of men i'll set aside, as it's a topic people tend to form opinions on before they start

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¹christmas formula, 1932, story 1

²tobit transplanted, 1931

³hope against hope, 1931, story 3

discussion. instead, i'll leave with one last observation, that the images of Dog and Caterpillar, present here, are since repeated in a later book, and might be worth your looking out for, should you choose to read her body through.

that's all for now! and please enjoy, because this story really has a lot to say, and very eloquently, that can speak to modern readers well as much as readers-from-before.

— ageha, 2020年1月1日

THE MAN WHO MISSED THE 'BUS

Mr. Robinson's temper was quite sore by the time he reached St. Pierre. The two irritations that most surely found the weak places in his nervous defences were noise and light in his eyes. And, as he told Monsieur Dupont, the proprietor of Les Trois Moineaux at St. Pierre, "If there is one thing, monsieur, that is offensive—essentially offensive—that is to say, a danger in itself—I mean to say noise doesn't have a meaning . . . What I mean is, monsieur, that noise—" "Numero trente," said Monsieur Dupont to the chasseur. Mr. Robinson always had to explain things very thoroughly in order to make people really appreciate the force of what he had to say—and even then it was a hard task to get them to acknowledge receipt, so to speak, of his message. But he was a humble man, and he accounted for the atmosphere of unanswered and unfinished remarks in which he lived by admitting that his words were unfortunately always inadequate to convey to a fellow-mortal the intense interest to be found in the curiosities of behaviour and sensation. His mind was overstocked with bye-products of the business of life. He felt that every moment disclosed a new things worth thinking of among the phenomena that his senses presented to him. Other people, he saw, let these phenomenal moments slip by unanalysed, but if he had had

the words and the courage, he felt, he could have awakened those of his fellow-creatures whom he met from their trance of shallow living. As it was, the relation of his explorations and wonderings sounded, even to his own ears, flat as the telling at breakfast of an ecstatic dream. What he had meant to say about noise, for instance, had been that noise was *in itself* terrifying and horrible—not as a warning of danger, but as a physical assault. Vulgar people treat noise only as a language that *means* something, he would have said, but really noise could not be translated, any more than rape could be translated. There was no such thing as an ugly harmless noise. The noise of an express train approaching and shrieking through a quiet station—the noise of heavy rain sweeping towards one through a forest—the noise of loud, concerted laughter at an unheard joke—all benevolent noises if translated into concrete terms, were *in themselves* calamities. All this Mr. Robinson would have thought worth saying to Monsieur Dupont—worth continuing to say until Monsieur Dupont should have confessed to an understanding of his meaning—but, as usual, the words collapsed as soon as they left Mr. Robinson's lips.

Monsieur Dupont stood in the doorway of Les Trois Moineaux with his back to the light. Mr. Robinson could see the shape of his head set on stooping shoulders, with a little frail fluff of hair beaming round a baldness. He could see the rather crumpled ears with outleaning lobes bulging sharply

against the light. But between ear and ear, between bald brow and breast, he could see nothing but a black blank against the glare. Mr. Robinson had extremely acute sight—perhaps too acute, as he often wanted to tell people, since this was perhaps why the light in his eyes affected him so painfully. “If my sight were less acute,” he would have said, “I should not mind a glare so much—I mean to say, my eyes are so extremely receptive that they receive too much, or, in other words, the same cause that makes my eyes so very sensitive is . . .” But nobody ever leaned forward and said, “I understand you perfectly, Mr. Robinson, and what you say is most interesting. Your sight includes so much that it cannot exclude excessive light, and this very naturally irritates your nerves, though the same peculiarity accounts for your intense powers of observation.” Nobody ever said anything like that, but then, people are so self-engrossed. Mr. Robinson was not self-engrossed—he was simply extravagantly interested in *things*, not people. For instance, he looked round now—as the chasseur sought in the shadows for his suitcase—and saw the terrace striped by long beams of light— broad flat beams that were strung like yellow sheets from every window and door in the hotel to the trees, tall urns and tables of the terrace. A murmur of voices enlivened the air, but there were no human creatures in any beam—only blocked dark figures in the shadows—and, in every patch of light, a sleeping dog or cat or two. Dogs and cats lay extended or curled comfortably on the warm, uneven

pavingstones, and Mr. Robinson's perfect sight absorbed the shape of every brown, tortoiseshell or black marking on their bodies, as a geographer might accept the continents on a new unheard-of globe. "It's just like geography—the markings on animals," Mr. Robinson had once said to an American who couldn't get away. "What I mean to say is that the markings on a dog or rabbit have just as much sense as the markings on this world of ours—or, in other words, the archipelagoes of spots on this pointer puppy are just as importantly isolated from one another as they could be in any Adriatic sea—" But the American had only replied, "Why, no, Mr. Robinson, not half so important; I am taking my wife—with the aid of the American Express Co.—to visit the Greek islands this summer, and we shall be sick on the sea and robbed on the land; whereas nobody but a flea ever visits the spots on that puppy, and the flea don't know and don't care a damn what colour he bites into." Showing that nobody except Mr. Robinson ever really studied things impersonally.

Mr. Robinson, a very ingenious-minded and sensitive man with plenty of money, was always seeking new places to go to, where he might be a success—or rather, where his unaccountable failures elsewhere might not be known. St. Pierre, he thought, was an excellent venture, although the approach to it had been so trying. As soon as he had heard of it—through reading a short, thoughtless sketch by a popular novelist in the *Daily Call*—he had felt hopeful about it. A little

provençal walled town on a hill, looking out over vineyards to the blue Mediterranean—a perfect little hotel, clean and with a wonderful cook—frequented by an interesting few. . . .

“By the time I get downstairs,” thought Mr. Robinson, as he carefully laid his trousers under the mattress in his room and donned another pair, “the lights will be lit on the terrace, and I shall be able to see my future friends. I must tell someone about that curious broken reflection in the river Rhone. . . .” He went downstairs and out on to the terrace where the tinkle of glasses and plates made him feel hungry. He could hear, as he stood in the doorway looking out, one man’s voice making a series of jokes in quick succession, each excited pause in his voice being filled by a gust and scrape of general laughter—like waves breaking on a beach with a clatter and then recoiling with a thin, hopeful, lonely sound. “Probably all his jokes are personalities,” thought Mr. Robinson, “and therefore not essentially funny. No doubt they are slightly pornographic, at that. When will people learn how interesting and exciting *things* are. . . .”

A waiter behind him drew out a chair from a table in one of the squares of light thrown from a window. Mr. Robinson, after sitting down abstractedly, was just going to call the waiter back to tell him that his eyes were ultra-sensitive to light, and that he could see nothing in that glare, when a large dog, with the bleached, patched, innocent face of a circus-clown, came and laid its head on his knee. Mr. Robinson could never

bear to disappoint an animal. He attributed to animals all the hot and cold variations of feeling that he himself habitually experienced, identifying the complacent fur of the brute with his own thin human skin. So that when the waiter, coming quietly behind him, put the wine list into his hand, Mr. Robinson merely said, "Thank you, garçon, but I never touch alcohol in any form—or, for the matter of that, tobacco either. In my opinion—"—and did not call the rapidly escaping waiter back to ask him to move his table. The dog's chin was now so comfortably pressed against his knee, and the dog's paw hooked in a pathetically prehensile way about his ankle.

Mr. Robinson made the best of his position in the dazzle and tried to look about him. The Trois Moineaux was built just outside the encircling wall of the tightly corseted little town of St. Pierre, and, since St. Pierre clung to the apex of a conical hill, it followed that the inn terrace jutted boldly out over a steep, stepped fall of vineyards overhanging the plain. The plain was very dim now, overlaid by starlit darkness, yet at the edge of the terrace there was a sense of *view*, and all the occupied tables stood in a row against the low wall, diluting the food and drink they bore with starlight and space. The men and women sitting at these tables all had their faces to the world and their backs to Mr. Robinson. He could not see a single human face. He had come down too late to secure one of the outlooking tables, and his place was imprisoned in a web of light under an olive tree. in the middle of the

table peaches and green grapes were heaped on a one-legged dish. And on the edge of the dish a caterpillar waved five-sixths of its length drearily in the air, unable to believe that its world could really end at this abrupt slippery rim. Mr. Robinson, shading his eyes from the light, could see every detail of the caterpillar's figure, and it seemed to him worth many minutes of absorbed attention. Its colour was a pale greenish fawn, and it had two dark bumps on its brow by way of eyes. "How unbearably difficult and lonely its life would seem to us," thought Mr. Robinson, leaning intensely over it. "How frightful if by mistake the merest spark of self-consciousness should get into an insect's body—(an accidental short-circuit in the life current, perhaps)—and it should know itself absolutely alone—appallingly free—" He put his finger in the range of its persistent wavings, and watched it crawl with a looping haste down his fingernail, accepting without question a quite fortuitous salvation from its dilemma. He laid his finger against a leaf, and the caterpillar disembarked briskly after its journey across alien elements. When it was gone, Mr. Robinson looked about him, dazed. "My goodness," he thought, "that caterpillar's face was the only one I have seen to-night."

The noise of chatter and laughter went up like a kind of smoke from the flickering creatures at the tables near the edge of the terrace. At each table the heads and shoulders of men and women leaned together—were sucked together like flames

in a common upward draught. “My dear, she looked like a Oh well, if you want to he’s the kind of man who *No*, my dear, not in my *bedroom* A rattling good yarn Stop me if I’ve told you this one before. . . .” One man, standing up a little unsteadily, facing the table nearest to Mr. Robinson, made a speech: “. . . . the last time delightful company fair sex happiest hours of my life mustn’t waste your time us mere men as the Irishman said to the Scotsman when happiest moments of all my life one minute and I shall be done always remember the happiest days of all my well, I mustn’t keep you I heard a little story the other day” And all the time his audience leaned together round their table, embarrassed, looking away over the dark plain or murmuring together with bent heads. The only woman whose face Mr. Robinson might have seen was shielding her face with her hands and shaking with silent laughter. The speaker was wavering on his feet, very much as the caterpillar had wavered on its tail, and his wide gestures, clawing the air in search of the attention of his friends, suggested to Mr. Robinson the caterpillar’s wild groping for foothold where no foothold was. “Yes,” thought Mr. Robinson, “The caterpillar was *my* host. No other face is turned to me.”

However, as he thought this, a man came from a further table and stood quite close, under the olive tree, between Mr. Robinson and the lighted doorway, looking down on him. The

man stretched out his hand to the tree and leaned upon it. A freak of light caught the broad, short hand, walnut-knuckled and brown, crooked over the bough. Mr. Robinson could not see the man's face at all, but he felt that the visit was friendly. To conciliate this sympathetic stranger, he would even have talked about the weather, or made a joke about pretty girls or beer, but he could not think of anything of that kind to say to a man whose hand, grasping an olive bough, was all that could be known of him. All that Mr. Robinson could do for the moment was to wonder what could have sent the man here. "It could not have been," thought Mr. Robinson humbly, "that he was attracted by my face, because nobody ever is." And then he began thinking how one man's loss is nearly always another man's gain, if considered broadly enough. For one to be forsaken, really, means that another has a new friend. "This young man," thought Mr. Robinson, gazing at the black outline of the stranger's head, "has probably come here blindly, because of some sudden hurt, some stab, some insult, inflicted by his friends at that table over there—probably by a woman. Perhaps he thinks he has a broken heart (for he has young shoulders)—nothing short of a wound that temporarily robbed him of his social balance could make him do so strange a thing as suddenly to leave his friends and come here to stand silent by me in the shade. Yet if he only could—as some day, I am convinced, we all shall—know that the sum remains the same—that some other lover is the happier for this

loss of his—and that if he had gained a smile from her, the pain he now feels would simply have been shifted to another heart—not dispelled. . . . We only have to think impersonally enough, and even death—well, we are all either nearly dead or just born, more or less, and the balance of birth and death never appreciably alters. Personal thinking is the curse of existence. Why are we all crushed under the weight of this strangling ME—this snake in our garden?” So he said to the young man, “Isn’t it a curious thing, looking round at young people and old people, that it doesn’t really matter if they are born or dead—I mean to say, it’s all the same whatever happens, if you follow me, and so many people mind when they needn’t, if people would only realise——” At this moment there was a burst of clapping from the far table, and the young man bounded from Mr. Robinson’s side back to his friends, shouting, “Good egg—have you thought of a word already? Animal, vegetable or mineral—and remember to speak up because I’m rather hard of hearing. . . .”

Mr. Robinson suddenly felt like Herbert Robinson, personally affronted. The sum of happiness (which of course remained unaltered by his set-back) for a moment did not matter in the least. He pushed back his chair and walked away, leaving his cheese uneaten and the clownfaced dog without support. He went to his bedroom and sat down opposite his mirror, facing the reflection of his outward ME. There sat the figure in the mirror, smooth, plump, pale, with small

pouched eyes and thick, straight, wet-looking hair. "What is this?" asked Mr. Robinson, studying the reflection of his disappointed face—the only human face he had seen that evening. "Look at me—I *am* alive—I am indeed very acutely alive—more alive, perhaps, than all these men and women half-blind—half-dead in their limitations of greed and sex. . . . It is true I have no personal claim on life; I am a virgin and I have no friends—yet I live intensely—and there are—there *are—there are* other forms of life than personal life. The eagle and the artichoke are equally alive—and perhaps my way of life is nearer to the eagle's than the artichoke's. And must I be alone—must I live behind cold shoulders because I see *out* instead of *in*—the most vivid form of life conceivable, if only it could be lived perfectly?"

He tried to see himself in the mirror, as was his habit, as a mere pliable pillar of life, a turret of flesh with a prisoner called *life* inside it. He stared himself out of countenance, trying, as it were, to dissolve his poor body by understanding it—poor white, sweating, rubbery thing that was called Herbert Robinson and had no friends. But to-night the prisoner called *life* clung to his prison—to-night his body tingled with egotism—to-night the oblivion that he called wisdom would not come, and he could not become conscious, as he longed to, of the live sky above the roof, the long winds streaming about the valleys, the billions of contented, wary or terrified creatures moving about the living dust, weeds and waters of

the world. He remained just Herbert Robinson, who had not seen any human face while in the midst of his fellow-men.

He began to feel an immediate craving—an almost revengeful lust—to be alone, far from men, books, mirrors and lights, watching, all his life long, the bodiless, mindless movements of animals—ecstatic living things possessing no ME. “I should scarcely know I was alive, then, and perhaps never even notice when I died. . . .” He decided he would go away next day, and give no group again the chance to excommunicate him.

He remembered that he had seen a notice at the door of the hotel, giving the rare times at which an omnibus left and arrived at St. Pierre. “I will leave by the early ’bus, before anyone is awake to turn his back on me.”

He could not sleep, but lay uneasily on his bed reading the advertisements in a magazine he had brought with him. Advertisements always comforted him a good deal, because advertisers really, he thought, took a broad view; they wrote of—and to—their fellow-men cynically and subtly, taking advantage of the vulgar passion for personal address, and yet treating humanity as an intricate mass—an instrument to be played upon. This seemed the ideal standpoint, to Mr. Robinson, and yet he was insulted by the isolation such an ideal involved.

He dressed himself early, replaced in his suitcase the few clothes he had taken out, put some notes in an envelope addressed to Monsieur Dupont, and leaned out of the window

to watch for the 'bus. St. Pierre, a sheaf of white and pink plaster houses, was woven together on a hill, like a haystack. The town, though compact and crowned by a sharp white belltower, seemed to have melted a little, like a thick candle; the centuries and the sun had softened its fortress outlines. The other hills, untopped by towns, seemed much more definitely constructed; they were austere built of yellow and green blocks of vineyard, cemented by the dusky green of olive trees. Gleaming white, fluffy clouds peeped over the hills—"like kittens," thought Mr. Robinson, who had a fancy for trying to make cosmic comparisons between the small and the big. On the terrace of the inn, half-a-dozen dogs sprawled in the early sun. Over the valley a hawk balanced and swung in the air, so hungry after its night's fast that it swooped rashly and at random several times, and was caught up irritably into the air again after each dash, as though dangling on a plucked thread. Mr. Robinson leaned long on his sill looking at it, until his elbows felt sore from his weight, and he began to wonder where the 'bus was that was going to take him away to loneliness. He went down to the terrace, carrying his suitcase, and stood in the archway. There was no sound of a coming 'bus—no sound at all, in fact, except a splashing and a flapping and a murmuring to the left and right of him. A forward step or two showed him that there were two long washing troughs, one on each side of the archway, each trough shaded by a stone gallery and further enclosed in a sort of trellis of

leaning kneading women. Mr. Robinson noticed uneasily that he could not see on woman's face; all were so deeply bent and absorbed. After a moment, however, a woman's voice from the row behind him asked him if he was waiting for the 'bus. He turned to reply, hoping to break the spell by finding an ingenuous rustic face lifted to look at him. But all the faces were bent once more, and it was another woman behind him again who told him that the 'bus had left ten minutes before. Once more the speaker bent over her work before Mr. Robinson had time to turn and see her face. "What a curious protracted accident," he thought, and had time to curse his strange isolation before he realised the irritation being unable to leave St. Pierre for another half-dozen hours. He flung his suitcase into the hall of the inn, and walked off up the path that led through the vineyards. As if the whole affair had been prearranged, all the dogs on the terrace rose up and followed him, yawning and stretching surreptitiously, like workers reluctantly leaving their homes at the sound of a factory whistle.

Mr. Robinson, true to his habit, concentrated his attention on—or rather diffused it to embrace—the colours about him. The leaves of the vines especially held his eye; they wore the same frosty bloom that grapes themselves often wear—a sky-blue dew on the green leaf. Two magpies, with a bottle-green sheen on their wings, gave their police-rattle cry as he came near and then flew off, flaunting their long tails clumsily. A

hundred feet higher, where the ground became too steep even for vines, Mr. Robinson found a grove of gnarled old olive trees, edging a thick wood of Spanish chestnuts. Here he sat down and looked between the tree-trunks and over the distorted shadows at the uneven yellow land and the thin blade of matt blue sea stabbing the furthest hills. The dogs stood round him, expecting him to rise in a minute and lead them on again. Seeing that he still sat where he was, they wagged their tails tolerantly but invitingly. Finally they resigned themselves to the inevitable and began philosophically walking about the grove, sniffing gently at various points in search of a makeshift stationary amusement. Mr. Robinson watched them with a growing sense of comfort. "Here," he thought, "are the good, undeliberate beasts again; I knew they would save me. They don't shut themselves away from life in their little individualities, or account uniquely for their lusts on the silly ground of personality. Their bodies aren't prisons—they're just dormitories. . . ." He delighted in watching the dogs busily engrossed in being alive without self-consciousness. After all, he thought, he did not really depend on men. (For he had been doubting his prized detachment most painfully.)

One of the dogs discovered a mousehole, and, after thrusting his nose violently into it to verify the immediacy of the smell, began digging, but not very cleverly, because he was too large a dog for such petty sports. The other dogs hurried to the spot and, having verified the smell for themselves, stood

restively round the first discoverer, wearing the irritable look we all wear when watching someone else bungle over something we feel (erroneously) that we could do very much better ourselves. Finally, they pushed the original dog aside, and all began trying to dig in the same spot, but finding this impossible, they tapped different veins of the same lode-smell. Soon a space of some ten feet square was filled with a perfect tornado of flying dust, clods, grass, and piston-like forepaws. Hindlegs remained rooted while forelegs did all the work, but whenever the accumulation of earth to the rear of each dog became inconveniently deep, hindlegs, with a few impatient, strong strokes, would dash the heap away to some distance—even as far as Mr. Robinson's boots. Quite suddenly, all the dogs, with one impulse, admitted themselves beaten; they concluded without rancour that the area was unmistakeably mouseless. They signified their contempt for the place in the usual canine manner, and walked away, sniffing, panting, sniffing again for some new excitement. Mr. Robinson, who had been, for the duration of the affair, a dog in spirit, expecting at every second that a horrified mouse would emerge from this cyclone of attack, imitated his leaders and quietened down with an insouciance equal to theirs. But he had escaped the menace of humanity; he was eased—he was sleepy. . . .

He slept for a great many hours, and when he awoke the sun was slanting down at the same angle as the hill, throwing immense shadows across the vineyards. The dogs had gone

home. And there, on the space of flattened earth between two spreading tree-roots, was a mouse and its family. Mr. Robinson, all mouse now, with no memory of his canine past, lay quite still on his side. The mother mouse moved in spasm, stopping to quiver her nose over invisible interests in the dust. Her brood were like little curled feathers, specks of down blown about by a fitful wind. There seemed to be only one license to move shared by this whole mouse family; when mother stopped, one infant mouse would puff forward, and as soon as its impulse expired, another thistledown brother would glide erratically an inch or two. In this leisurely way the family moved across the space of earth and into the grass, appearing again and again between the green blades. Mr. Robinson lay still, sycophantically reverent.

Between two blades of grass the senior mouse came out on to a little plateau, about eighteen inches away from Mr. Robinson's unwinking eyes. At that range Mr. Robinson could see its face as clearly as one sees the face of a wife over a breakfast table. It was a dignified but greedy face; its eyes, in so far as they had any expression at all, expressed a cold heart; its attraction lay in its texture, a delicious velvet—and *that* the mouse would never allow a human finger, however friendly, to enjoy. It would have guarded its person as a classical virgin guarded her honour. As soon as Mr. Robinson saw the mouse's remote expression, he felt as a lost sailor on a sinking ship might feel, who throws his last rope—and no

saving hands grasp it.

He heard the sound of human footsteps behind him. There was a tiny explosion of flight beside him—and the mouse family was not there. Through the little grove marched a line of men in single file, going home from their work in the vineyards over the hill. Mr. Robinson sat up, and noticed, with a cold heart, that all the men wore the rush hats of the country pulled down against the low last light of the sun, and that not one face was visible.

Mr. Robinson sat for some time with his face in his hands. He felt his eyes with his finger, and the shape of his nose and cheekbone; he bit his finger with his strong teeth. Here was a face—the only human face in the world. Suddenly craving for the sight of that friend behind the mirror, he got up and walked back to the Trois Moineaux. He found himself very hungry, having starved all day, but his isolation gave him a so much deeper sense of lack than did his empty stomach that, although dinner was in progress among the bands of light and shade on the terrace, his first act was to run to his room and stand before the mirror. There was a mistiness in the mirror. He rubbed it with his hand. The mistiness persisted—a compact haze of blankness that exactly covered the reflection of his face. He moved to a different angle—he moved the mirror—he saw clearly the reflection of the room, of his tweed-clad figure, of his tie, of his suitcase in the middle of the floor—but his face remained erased, like an unsatisfactory

charcoal sketch. Filled with an extraordinary fear, he stood facing the mirror for some minutes, feeling with tremulous fingers for his eyes, his lips, his forehead. There seemed to him to be the same sensation of haze in his sense of touch as in his eyesight—a nervelessness—a feeling of nauseating contact with a dead thing. It was like touching with an unsuspecting hand one's own limb numbed by cold or by an accident of position.

Mr. Robinson walked downstairs, dazed, and out on to the terrace. As before, the shadowed tables looking out over the edge of the terrace were already surrounded by laughing, chattering parties. Mr. Robinson took his seat, as before, under the olive tree. "Bring me a bottle of . . . Sauterne," he said to the waiter (for he remembered that his late unmarried sister used to sustain upon this wine a reputation for wit in the boarding-house in which she had lived). "And, waiter, isn't there a table free looking out at the view? I can't see anything here." It was not the view he craved, of course, but only a point of vantage from which to see the faces of his mysterious, noisy neighbours. His need for seeing faces was more immediate than ever, now that his one friend had failed him. "There will be tables free there in a moment," said the waiter. "They are all going to dance soon. They're only waiting for the moon." And the waiter nodded his shadowed face towards a distant hill, behind which—looking at this moment like a great far red fire—the moon was coming up. "Look, the moon, the moon,

the moon, look . . .” everyone on the terrace was saying. And a few moments later, the moon, now completely round, but cut in half by a neat bar of cloud, took flight lightly from the top of the hill.

There was a scraping of chairs, the scraping of a gramophone, and half-a-dozen couples of young men and women began dancing between the tall Italian urns and the olive trees on the terrace. Mr. Robinson poured himself out a large tumbler of Sauterne. “Waiter, I don’t want a table at the edge now—I want one near the dancers—I want to see their faces.”

“There are no tables free in the centre of the terrace now. Several are vacant at the edge.”

“I can see a table there, near the dancers, with only two chairs occupied. Surely I could sit with them.”

“That table is taken by a large party, but most of them are dancing. They will come back there in a moment.”

Mr. Robinson, disregarding the waiter, and clutching his tumbler in one hand and his bottle in the other, strode to the table he had chosen. “I’m *too* lonely—I *must* sit here.”

“So lonely, po-oo-or man,” said the woman at the table, a stout, middle-aged woman with high shoulders and a high bosom, clad in saxe-blue sequins. She turned her face towards him in the pink light of the moon. Mr. Robinson, though desperate, was not surprised. Her face was the same blank—the same terrible disc of nothingness that he had seen in his mirror. Mr. Robinson looked at her companion in dreadful

certainty. A twin blank faced him.

“Sh-lonely, eh?” came a thick young voice out of nothingness. “Well, m’lad, you’ll be damn sight lonelier yet in minute ’f y’ come buttn’ in on——”

“Ow, Ronnie,” expostulated his frightful friend—but at that moment the gramophone fell silent, and the dancers came back to their table. Mr. Robinson scanned the spaces that should have been their faces one by one; they were like discs of dazzle seen after unwisely meeting the eye of the sun.

“This old feller sayzzz-lonely—pinched your chair, Belle.”

“Never mind, duckie,” said Belle, and threw herself across Mr. Robinson’s knee. “Plenty of room for little me.”

The white emptiness of her face that was no face blocked out Mr. Robinson’s view of the world.

“Oh, my God!” she cried, jumping up suddenly. “I know why he’s lonely—why—the man’s not alive. Look at his face!”

“I am—I am—I am!—” shouted Mr. Robinson in terror. “I’ll show you I am. . . .” He lurched after her and dragged her among the dancers as the music began again. He shut his eyes. He could hear her wild animal shrieks of laughter, and feel her thin struggling body under his hands.

Mr. Robinson sat, quite still but racked by confusion, excitement and disgust, beside the road on the wall of the vineyard, watching the last stars slip down into the haze that enhaloed the hills. The moon had gone long ago. All Mr. Robinson’s heart was set on catching the ’bus this morning;

to him the dawn that was even now imperceptibly replacing the starlight was only a herald of the 'bus and of escape. He had no thoughts and no plans, beyond catching the 'bus. He knew that he was cold—but flight would warm him; that he was hungry and thirsty—but flight would nourish him; that he was exhausted and broken-hearted—but flight would ease and comfort him.

A white glow crowned a hill, behind which the sky had long been pearly, and in a minute an unbearably bright ray shot from the hill into Mr. Robinson's eyes. The dazzling domed brow of the sun rose between a tree and a crag, and a lily-white light rushed into the valley.

The 'bus, crackling and crunching, waddled round the bend. Mr. Robinson hailed it with a distraught cry and gesture.

“Enfin très peu de place, m'sieu—n'y a qu'un tout p'tit coin par ici. . . .”

Mr. Robinson had no need now to look at the face of the driver, or at the rows of senseless sunlit ghosts that filled the 'bus. He knew his curse by now. He climbed into the narrow place indicated beside the driver. The 'bus lurched on down the narrow, winding road that overhung the steep vineyards of the valley. Far below—so far below that one could not see the movement of the water—a yellow stream enmeshed its rocks in a net of plaited strands.

Mr. Robinson sat beside the driver, not looking at the

phantom, faceless face—so insulting to the comfortable sun—but looking only at the road that was leading him to escape. How far to flee he did not know, but all the hope there was, he felt, lay beyond the furthest turn of the road. After one spellbound look at the sun-blinded face of St. Pierre, hunched on its hivelike hill, he looked forward only at the winding, perilous road.

And his acute eyes saw, in the middle of the way, half-a-dozen specks of live fur, blowing about a shallow rut. . . . The 'bus' heavy approach had already caused a certain panic in the mouse family. One atom blew one way, one another; there was a sort of little muddled maze of running mice in the road.

Mr. Robinson's heart seemed to burst. Before he was aware, he had sprung to his feet and seized the wheel of the 'bus' from the driver. He had about twenty seconds in which to watch the mice scuttering into the grass—to watch the low, loose wall of the outer edge of the road crumble beneath the plunging weight of the 'bus. He saw, leaning crazily towards him, the face—the *face*—rolling eyes, tight grinning lips—of the driver, looking down at death. There, far down, was the yellow net of the river, spread to catch them all.