

SNAP

The boy stood up; he couldn't sit down. He stood and glared at the old man, and especially at the broad leather strap which encircled the man's waist.

Each morning, before shaving, the man would hook the heavy silver buckle over a door handle and sharpen his open razor by scraping it up and down over the leather surface of the belt. The man would grin down at the boy with yellow, age-loosened teeth, transforming the innocent gesture into an unmistakable ceremony of threat.

Slumped heavily in a rocking chair, the old man was taking his afternoon nap. He had just finished a meal of lamb stew and dumplings and drunk a jug of wine. The mulling of the wine caused the boy's stomach to churn with apprehension. The man would take the jug in his left hand, and with his right, snatch a red-hot poker from the flaming coals and plunge it down into the wine. It would sizzle and smoke and spit, hissing like an inferno, held by a demon.

Even in his sleep the man spread sounds of menace throughout the house. Growling snores split the silence.

A small girl knelt at the window framed by dark velvet drapes. "It's still raining," she sighed.

She ran a tiny finger over the glass, drawing pictures on clouds of condensation: condensation formed by her puffs of boredom. All her brother could see of her was a mass of thick chestnut hair, the hem of a dress and two tiny slippers.

The boy leaned against the table, chin cupped in hands, bottom out, standing on crossed sides of boots. In spite of his mother's attempt to keep his clothes darned, his bare elbows touched the table. He also sighed, sighed, and glanced wistfully at the draughts, at the draught-board, and at the pack of cards on the wooden dresser. He dismissed his thoughts immediately. To tap draughts over the squares at this hour would be unthinkable — to shout 'Snap', a sacrilege.

The boy closed his eyes for a second, but the image of the man stayed with him. His field of vision had been limited for so long, he could still see it all. Tobacco-stained moustache, ash-speckled waistcoat, silver watch chain looping one pocket to another. The belt.

The girl looked through the window waiting for a patch of blue to pierce the clouds.

That afternoon hundreds of people strolled around the borough of Westminster. They soaked up sensations along with the rain, they admired the architecture of the palace of Westminster, they gazed at the statue of King Charles I riding his horse for eternity along Whitehall. They peered up at Nelson, while patting his four bronze lions on guard below. Caps were doffed in deference towards the Cenotaph. "To our Glorious Dead" read the inscription. An empty tomb. In Hyde Park soap-box orators put forth radical points of view to a jeering/cheering crowd. Drury Lane theatres offered as much entertainment outside as in. On the site where Nell Gwynn once plied her trade, buskers sang and danced. Upturned caps awaited the price of a meal.

But Sunday afternoon for children kept in under strict surveillance was one of painful confinement and wearisome length.

The girl turned away from the window and watched dispassionately as the boy took a cardboard top from a bottle of milk and spun it over the table. Passively, they watched its revolutions leave a spiral milky trail. Suddenly the boy sprang up and walked over to the old man. The girl tipped her head to one side in query.

The old man's mouth was wide open, his snores reverberated around the walls. The girl stood on tiptoe to watch, hands clapped over mouth as the boy carefully placed the disc on the man's tongue.

The boy bit his lip at his own daring, his eyebrows and shoulders lifted in gleeful alarm. Each time the old man breathed in, the bottle-top veered dangerously to the back of his throat and almost disappeared. Just as it seemed about to be swallowed completely an outward snort sent it oscillating forward to the tip of his tongue again.

The children hugged themselves and each other, chuckling silently, wriggling and squeezing in an effort to stop themselves from laughing out loud. They watched the disc dance over the yellow-coated tongue; its girations propelled by the force of each breath.

The man sat up.

He spluttered and swore, spitting out guttural oaths in a paroxysm of rage. He literally foamed at the mouth, filling the room with an explosion of fury. His face darkened in colour from pink to red, then to a feverish shade of purple. Then he gasped a terrible choking finale.

The children ran out of the house in fright, clattering down the street clutching each other's hands, fingers welded together in panic.

* * * * *

Appropriately long-faced, the funeral congregation was composed mostly of inquisitive neighbours. One woman wore an embroidered veil which gave her the appearance of a victim of a medieval plague. Her neighbour wore a black straw hat from which sprouted long-stalked cherries.

"Apoplexy, I heard it was."

"Sad case."

"He had a terrible temper you know."

"I heard a bone got stuck in his throat — at least I think it was a bone."

"Choked to death . . . Awful."

The cherries nodded affirmation, and the woman in the veil looked up through it reverently to the sky.

"Makes you think," she said, "doesn't it?"

At the back of the church sat the usual huddle of relatives who confirm a grudging kinship at such times. The three bowed heads of wife, son and daughter were acknowledged with distant sympathy.

"Poor little mites."

"So sudden too. She must have had an awful shock."

"They'll miss him."

* * * * *

The trio walked up the path to the house, through puddles reflecting blue skies. They entered the front door without speaking, their thoughts too deep to express. The mother placed her hands gently on the children's shoulders for a second then went into the kitchen.

At the door of the room the children hesitated, eyeing the empty chair – its outstretched arms offered a mocking welcome.

The boy reached for the draught board, placed it on the table and set out the draughts. In the docile manner of subdued children they played a game which the boy won. A beam of dust lightened the room and the boy walked over to the window and tried to raise it. It was stuck. It was never opened. The girl helped him and they tugged together for some minutes until it jerked open letting in a fresh breeze, and the scent of rain-washed lilac.

The girl took down the cards and gave them to the boy who dealt them out, accidentally knocking the chair and causing it to sway. They watched with small tight mouths until it stopped. The boy looked around, waiting – but nothing happened. He pushed the chair again – daring. They listened . . . but heard nothing.

Seven red hearts covered seven red diamonds.

“Snap,” said the girl, a little louder than usual.

The boy smiled, relaxed. He slapped down a card and the girl topped it with another, making an even louder snap.

They became more animated with every movement.

The girl slapped down a card with as much force as she could muster.

“Snap.”

“Snap,” yelled the boy, just for the fun of it.

“Snap, SNAP, S N A P,” they shouted, laughing and bouncing noisily on the rocking chair.

They heard a voice call from the kitchen and looked at each other in amazement. They had never heard that voice raised before; never had they heard it call so loudly that they could hear it through the wall.

“Coming,” they answered. “Coming . . .”

From the open window the curtains fanned to a frivolous billow.

In the middle of the room the chair rocked.

The rockers tapped furiously – wood against wood.