RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Best American Noir of the Century

James Ellroy

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About the Book

In his introduction to the *The Best American Noir of the Century*, James Ellroy writes, “noir is the most scrutinised offshoot of the hard-boiled school of fiction. It’s the long drop off the short pier and the wrong man and the wrong woman in perfect misalliance. It’s the nightmare of flawed souls with big dreams and the precise how and why of the all-time sure thing that goes bad.” Offering the best examples of literary sure things gone bad, this collection ensures that nowhere else can readers find a darker, more thorough distillation of American noir fiction.

James Ellroy and Otto Penzler, series editor of the annual *The Best American Mystery Stories*, mined one hundred years of writing, 1910–2010, to find this treasure trove of thirty-nine stories. From noir’s twenties-era infancy come gems like James M. Cain’s “Pastorale,” and its postwar heyday boasts giants like Mickey Spillane and Evan Hunter. Packing an undeniable punch, diverse contemporary incarnations include Elmore Leonard, Dennis Lehane, Patricia Highsmith and William Gay, with many page-turners appearing in the last decade.

About the Author

James Ellroy was born in Los Angeles in 1948. He is the author of the acclaimed 'LA Quartet': *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *LA Confidential* and *White Jazz*, as well as the first two parts of his 'Underworld USA Trilogy', *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* which were both *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

Otto Penzler is the founder of the Mysterious Bookshop and Mysterious Press, and is series editor of *The Best American Mystery Stories*.

The Best American Noir of the Century

EDITED BY
JAMES ELLROY &
OTTO PENZLER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JAMES ELLROY

WINDMILL BOOKS

FOREWORD

The French word *noir* (which means “black”) was first connected to the word *film* by a French critic in 1946, and has subsequently become a prodigiously overused term to describe a certain type of film or literary work. Curiously, *noir* is not unlike *pornography*, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it. Like many other certainties, it is often wildly inaccurate.

This volume is devoted to short noir fiction of the past century, but it is impossible to divorce the literary genre entirely from its film counterpart. Certainly, *noir* most commonly evokes the great crime films of the 1940s and 1950s that were shot in black-and-white with cinematography that was heavily influenced by early-twentieth-century German expressionism: sharp angles (venetian blinds, windows, railroad tracks) and strong contrasts between light and dark. Most of us have a collective impression of film noir as having certain essentials: a femme fatale, some tough criminals, an equally tough cop or private eye, an urban environment, and night … endless night. There are bars, nightclubs, menacing alleys, seedy hotel rooms.

While it may be comforting to recognize these elements as the very definition of *film noir*, it is as simplistic a view as that which limits the mystery genre to detective fiction, failing to accept the numerous other elements of that rich literature, such as the crime novel and suspense stories.

Certainly the golden age of film noir occurred in those decades, the ’40s and ’50s, but there were superb examples in the 1930s, such as *M* (1931), in which Peter Lorre had his first starring role, and *Freaks* (1932), Tod Browning’s unforgettable biopic in which the principal actors were actual carnival “human curiosities.” And no one is likely to dispute that the noir motion picture continued into the 1960s and beyond, as evidenced by such classics as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Body Heat* (1981), and *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

Much of film noir lacks some or all of the usual clichéd visual set pieces of the genre, of course, but the absolutist elements by which the films are known are less evident in the literature, which relies more on plot, tone, and theme than on the chiaroscuro effects choreographed by directors and cinematographers.

Allowing for the differences of the two mediums, I also believe that most film and literary critics are entirely wrong about their definitions of *noir*, a genre which famously — but erroneously — has its roots in the American hard-boiled private eye novel. In fact, the two subcategories of the mystery genre, private detective stories and noir fiction, are diametrically opposed, with mutually exclusive philosophical premises.

Noir works, whether films, novels, or short stories, are existential, pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists, who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The tone is generally bleak and nihilistic, with characters whose greed, lust, jealousy, and alienation lead them into a downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry. Whether their motivation is as overt as a bank robbery, or as subtle as the willingness to compromise integrity for personal gain, the central figures in noir stories are doomed to hopelessness. They may be motivated by the pursuit of seemingly easy money or by love — or, more commonly, physical desire — almost

certainly for the wrong member of the opposite sex. The machinations of their relentless lust will cause them to lie, steal, cheat, and even kill as they become more and more entangled in a web from which they cannot possibly extricate themselves. And, while engaged in this hopeless quest, they will be double-crossed, betrayed, and, ultimately, ruined. The likelihood of a happy ending in a noir story is remote, even if the protagonist's own view of a satisfactory resolution is the criterion for defining *happy*. No, it will end badly, because the characters are inherently corrupt and that is the fate that inevitably awaits them.

The private detective story is a different matter entirely. Raymond Chandler famously likened the private eye to a knight, a man who could walk mean streets but not himself be mean, and this is true of the overwhelming majority of those heroic figures. They may well be brought into an exceedingly dark situation, and encounter characters who are deceptive, violent, paranoid, and lacking a moral center, but the American private detective retains his sense of honor in the face of all the adversity and duplicity with which he must do battle. Sam Spade avenged the murder of a partner because he knew he "was supposed to do something about it." Mike Hammer found it easy to kill a woman to whom he had become attached because he learned she had murdered his friend. Lew Archer, Spenser, Elvis Cole, and other iconic private eyes, as well as policemen who, like Harry Bosch and Dave Robicheaux, often act as if they are unconstrained by their official positions, may bend (or break) the law, but their own sense of morality will be used in the pursuit of justice. Although not every one of their cases may have a happy conclusion, the hero nonetheless will emerge with a clean ethical slate.

Film noir blurs the distinction between hard-boiled private eye narratives and true noir stories by employing similar design and camerawork techniques for both genres, though the discerning viewer will easily recognize the

opposing life-views of a moral, even heroic, often romantic detective, and the lost characters in noir who are caught in the inescapable prisons of their own construction, forever trapped by their isolation from their own souls, as well as from society and the moral restrictions that permit it to be regarded as civilized.

This massive collection seldom allows exceptions to these fundamental principles of noir stories. They are dark and often oppressive, failing to allow redemption for most of the people who inhabit their sad, violent, amoral world. Carefully wrought plans crumble, lovers deceive, normality morphs into decadence, and decency is scarce and unrewarded. Nonetheless, the writers who toil in this oppressive landscape have created stories of such relentless fascination that they rank among the giants of the literary world. Some, like Cornell Woolrich, David Goodis, and Jim Thompson, wrote prolifically but produced little that did not fall into the noir category, accurately reflecting their own troubled, tragic lives. Others, like Elmore Leonard, Evan Hunter, and Lawrence Block, have written across a more varied range of crime fiction, from dark to light, from morose to hilarious. Just not in this volume. If you find light and hilarity in these pages, I strongly recommend a visit to a mental health professional.

Otto Penzler
May 2009

INTRODUCTION

We created it, but they love it more in France than they do here. Noir is the most scrutinized offshoot of the hard-boiled school of fiction. It's the long drop off the short pier, and the wrong man and the wrong woman in perfect misalliance. It's the nightmare of flawed souls with big dreams and the precise *how* and *why* of the all-time sure thing that goes bad. Noir is opportunity as fatality, social justice as sanctified shuck, and sexual love as a one-way ticket to hell. Noir indicts the other subgenres of the hard-boiled school as sissified, and canonizes the inherent human urge toward self-destruction.

Noir sparked before the Big War and burned like a four-coil hot plate up to 1960. Cheap novels and cheap films about cheap people ran concurrent with American boosterism and yahooism and made a subversive point just by being. They described a fully existing fringe America and fed viewers and readers the demography of a Secret Pervert Republic. It was just garish enough to be laughed off as unreal and just pathetic enough to be recognizably human. The concurrence said: *Something is wrong here*. The subtext was: *Malign fate has a great and unpredictable power and none of us is safe*.

The thrill of noir is the rush of moral forfeit and the abandonment to titillation. The social importance of noir is its grounding in the big themes of race, class, gender, and systemic corruption. The overarching joy and lasting appeal of noir is that it makes doom fun.

The inhabitants of the Secret Pervert Republic are a gas. Their intransigence and psychopathy are delightful. They relentlessly pursue the score, big and small. They only succeed at a horrific cost that renders it all futile. They are wildly delusional and possessed of verbal flair. Their overall job description is “grandiose lowlife.” They speak their own language. Safecrackers are “box men” who employ explosive “soup.” Grifters perfect the long con, the short con, and the dime hustle. Race-wire scams utilize teams of scouts who place last-minute bets and relay information to bookmaking networks. A twisted professionalism defines all strata of the Secret Pervert Republic. This society grants women a unique power to seduce and destroy. A six-week chronology from first kiss to gas chamber is common in noir.

The subgenre officially died in 1960. New writer generations have resurrected it and redefined it as a sub-subgenre, tailored to meet their dramatic needs. *Doom is fun*. Great sex preceded the gas-chamber bounce. Older Secret Pervert Republicans blew their wads on mink coats for evil women. Present-day SPRs go broke on crack cocaine. Lethal injection has replaced the green room. Noir will never die — it’s too dementedly funny not to flourish in the heads of hip writers who wish they could time-trip to 1948 and live postwar malaise and psychoses. The young and feckless will inhabit the Secret Pervert Republic, reinvent it, wring it dry, and reinvent it all over again.

The short stories in this volume are a groove. Exercise your skeevy curiosity and read every one. You’ll be repulsed and titillated. You’ll endure moral forfeit. Doom is fun. You’re a perv for reading this introduction. Read the whole book and you’ll die on a gurney with a spike in your arm.

James Ellroy
July 2009

1923

TOD ROBBINS

SPURS

CLARENCE AARON "TOD" ROBBINS (1888–1949) graduated from Washington and Lee University in Virginia and soon became an expatriate, moving to the French Riviera. When World War II erupted and the Nazis occupied France, he refused to leave and was put into a concentration camp for the duration of the war.

He wrote mostly horror and dark fantasy fiction for the pulps, publishing two collections of these stories, *Silent, White, and Beautiful and Other Stories* (1920) and *Who Wants a Green Bottle? and Other Uneasy Tales* (1926). Among his novels, the most successful was *The Unholy Three* (1917), twice adapted for films of the same title: a silent directed by Tod Browning in 1925 and a sound version in 1930 directed by Jack Conway, both of which starred Lon Chaney. Robbins's earlier novel, *Mysterious Martin* (1912), was about a man who creates art that can be deadly; he later rewrote the enigmatic story and published it as *The Master of Murder* (1933). He also wrote *In the Shadow* (1929) and *Close Their Eyes Tenderly* (1947), published only in Monaco in a tiny edition, an anti-

Communist novel in which murder is treated as comedy and farce.

"Spurs" was the basis for the classic noir film *Freaks*, which was released by MGM in 1932. It was directed by Robbins's friend Tod Browning, who enjoyed enormous success with *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi, which was released the previous year. *Freaks* used real-life carnival performers for most roles, horrifying audiences so much that it was banned in England and the studio cut the ninety-minute film to sixty-four minutes. Public outrage led to the swift end of Tod Browning's career as a director. It featured the midget Harry Earles, who had also appeared in *The Unholy Three*.

This very dark film retained little of the equally dark story on which it was based. It remains the story of carnival people and a midget, Jacques Courbé (Hans in the film), who falls in love with the bareback rider Jeanne Marie (Cleopatra in the film), a beautiful tall blonde.

"Spurs" was first published in the famous pulp magazine *Munsey's* (February 1923) and first collected in book form in *Who Wants a Green Bottle? and Other Uneasy Tales* (London: Philip Allan, 1926).

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I

JACQUES COURBÉ WAS a romanticist. He measured only twenty-eight inches from the soles of his diminutive feet to the crown of his head; but there were times, as he rode into the arena on his gallant charger, St. Eustache, when he felt himself a doughty knight of old about to do battle for his lady.

What matter that St. Eustache was not a gallant charger except in his master's imagination — not even a pony,

indeed, but a large dog of a nondescript breed, with the long snout and upstanding aura of a wolf? What matter that M. Courbé's entrance was invariably greeted with shouts of derisive laughter and bombardments of banana skins and orange peel? What matter that he had no lady, and that his daring deeds were severely curtailed to a mimicry of the bareback riders who preceded him? What mattered all these things to the tiny man who lived in dreams, and who resolutely closed his shoe-button eyes to the drab realities of life?

The dwarf had no friends among the other freaks in Copo's Circus. They considered him ill-tempered and egotistical, and he loathed them for their acceptance of things as they were. Imagination was the armor that protected him from the curious glances of a cruel, gaping world, from the stinging lash of ridicule, from the bombardments of banana skins and orange peel. Without it, he must have shriveled up and died. But those others? Ah, they had no armor except their own thick hides! The door that opened on the kingdom of imagination was closed and locked to them; and although they did not wish to open this door, although they did not miss what lay beyond it, they resented and mistrusted anyone who possessed the key.

Now it came about, after many humiliating performances in the arena, made palatable only by dreams, that love entered the circus tent and beckoned commandingly to M. Jacques Courbé. In an instant the dwarf was engulfed in a sea of wild, tumultuous passion.

Mlle. Jeanne Marie was a daring bareback rider. It made M. Jacques Courbé's tiny heart stand still to see her that first night of her appearance in the arena, performing brilliantly on the broad back of her aged mare, Sappho. A tall, blond woman of the amazon type, she had round eyes of baby blue which held no spark of her avaricious peasant's soul, carmine lips and cheeks, large white teeth

which flashed continually in a smile, and hands which, when doubled up, were nearly the size of the dwarf’s head.

Her partner in the act was Simon Lafleur, the Romeo of the circus tent — a swarthy, herculean young man with bold black eyes and hair that glistened with grease, like the back of Solon, the trained seal.

From the first performance, M. Jacques Courbé loved Mlle. Jeanne Marie. All his tiny body was shaken with longing for her. Her buxom charms, so generously revealed in tights and spangles, made him flush and cast down his eyes. The familiarities allowed to Simon Lafleur, the bodily acrobatic contacts of the two performers, made the dwarf’s blood boil. Mounted on St. Eustache, awaiting his turn at the entrance, he would grind his teeth in impotent rage to see Simon circling round and round the ring, standing proudly on the back of Sappho and holding Mlle. Jeanne Marie in an ecstatic embrace, while she kicked one shapely, bespangled leg skyward.

“Ah, the dog!” M. Jacques Courbé would mutter. “Some day I shall teach this hulking stable boy his place! *Ma foi*, I will clip his ears for him!”

St. Eustache did not share his master’s admiration for Mlle. Jeanne Marie. From the first, he evinced his hearty detestation of her by low growls and a ferocious display of long, sharp fangs. It was little consolation for the dwarf to know that St. Eustache showed still more marked signs of rage when Simon Lafleur approached him. It pained M. Jacques Courbé to think that his gallant charger, his sole companion, his bedfellow, should not also love and admire the splendid giantess who each night risked life and limb before the awed populace. Often, when they were alone together, he would chide St. Eustache on his churlishness.

“Ah, you devil of a dog!” the dwarf would cry. “Why must you always growl and show your ugly teeth when the lovely Jeanne Marie condescends to notice you? Have you no feelings under your tough hide? Cur, she is an angel, and

you snarl at her! Do you not remember how I found you, starving puppy in a Paris gutter? And now you must threaten the hand of my princess! So this is your gratitude, great hairy pig!”

M. Jacques Courbé had one living relative — not a dwarf, like himself, but a fine figure of a man, a prosperous farmer living just outside the town of Roubaix. The elder Courbé had never married; and so one day, when he was found dead from heart failure, his tiny nephew — for whom, it must be confessed, the farmer had always felt an instinctive aversion — fell heir to a comfortable property. When the tidings were brought to him, the dwarf threw both arms about the shaggy neck of St. Eustache and cried out:

“Ah, now we can retire, marry and settle down, old friend! I am worth many times my weight in gold!”

That evening as Mlle. Jeanne Marie was changing her gaudy costume after the performance, a light tap sounded on the door.

“Enter!” she called, believing it to be Simon Lafleur, who had promised to take her that evening to the Sign of the Wild Boar for a glass of wine to wash the sawdust out of her throat. “Enter, *mon chéri!*”

The door swung slowly open; and in stepped M. Jacques Courbé, very proud and upright, in the silks and laces of a courtier, with a tiny gold-hilted sword swinging at his hip. Up he came, his shoe-button eyes all aglitter to see the more than partially revealed charms of his robust lady. Up he came to within a yard of where she sat; and down on one knee he went and pressed his lips to her red-slippered foot.

“Oh, most beautiful and daring lady,” he cried, in a voice as shrill as a pin scratching on a windowpane, “will you not take mercy on the unfortunate Jacques Courbé? He is hungry for your smiles, he is starving for your lips! All

night long he tosses on his couch and dreams of Jeanne Marie!”

“What play-acting is this, my brave little fellow?” she asked, bending down with the smile of an ogress. “Has Simon Lafleur sent you to tease me?”

“May the black plague have Simon!” the dwarf cried, his eyes seeming to flash blue sparks. “I am not play-acting. It is only too true that I love you, mademoiselle; that I wish to make you my lady. And now that I have a fortune, not that —” He broke off suddenly, and his face resembled a withered apple. “What is this, mademoiselle?” he said, in the low, droning tone of a hornet about to sting. “Do you laugh at my love? I warn you, mademoiselle — do not laugh at Jacques Courbé!”

Mlle. Jeanne Marie’s large, florid face had turned purple from suppressed merriment. Her lips twitched at the corners. It was all she could do not to burst out into a roar of laughter.

Why, this ridiculous little manikin was serious in his lovemaking! This pocket-sized edition of a courtier was proposing marriage to her! He, this splinter of a fellow, wished to make her his wife! Why, she could carry him about on her shoulder like a trained marmoset!

What a joke this was — what a colossal, corset-creaking joke! Wait till she told Simon Lafleur! She could fairly see him throw back his sleek head, open his mouth to its widest dimensions, and shake with silent laughter. But she must not laugh — not now. First she must listen to everything the dwarf had to say; draw all the sweetness of this bonbon of humor before she crushed it under the heel of ridicule.

“I am not laughing,” she managed to say. “You have taken me by surprise. I never thought, I never even guessed —”

“That is well, mademoiselle,” the dwarf broke in. “I do not tolerate laughter. In the arena I am paid to make

laughter; but these others pay to laugh at me. I always make people pay to laugh at me!”

“But do I understand you aright, M. Courbé? Are you proposing an honorable marriage?”

The dwarf rested his hand on his heart and bowed. “Yes, mademoiselle, an honorable marriage, and the wherewithal to keep the wolf from the door. A week ago my uncle died and left me a large estate. We shall have a servant to wait on our wants, a horse and carriage, food and wine of the best, and leisure to amuse ourselves. And you? Why, you will be a fine lady! I will clothe that beautiful big body of yours with silks and laces! You will be as happy, mademoiselle, as a cherry tree in June!”

The dark blood slowly receded from Mlle. Jeanne Marie’s full cheeks, her lips no longer twitched at the corners, her eyes had narrowed slightly. She had been a bareback rider for years, and she was weary of it. The life of the circus tent had lost its tinsel. She loved the dashing Simon Lafleur; but she knew well enough that this Romeo in tights would never espouse a dowerless girl.

The dwarf’s words had woven themselves into a rich mental tapestry. She saw herself a proud lady, ruling over a country estate, and later welcoming Simon Lafleur with all the luxuries that were so near his heart. Simon would be overjoyed to marry into a country estate. These pygmies were a puny lot. They died young! She would do nothing to hasten the end of Jacques Courbé. No, she would be kindness itself to the poor little fellow; but, on the other hand, she would not lose her beauty mourning for him.

“Nothing that you wish shall be withheld from you as long as you love me, mademoiselle,” the dwarf continued. “Your answer?”

Mlle. Jeanne Marie bent forward, and with a single movement of her powerful arms, raised M. Jacques Courbé and placed him on her knee. For an ecstatic instant she held him thus, as if he were a large French doll, with his

tiny sword cocked coquettishly out behind. Then she planted on his cheek a huge kiss that covered his entire face from chin to brow.

“I am yours!” she murmured, pressing him to her ample bosom. “From the first I loved you, M. Jacques Courbé!”

II

The wedding of Mlle. Jeanne Marie was celebrated in the town of Roubaix, where Copo’s Circus had taken up its temporary quarters. Following the ceremony, a feast was served in one of the tents, which was attended by a whole galaxy of celebrities.

The bridegroom, his dark little face flushed with happiness and wine, sat at the head of the board. His chin was just above the tablecloth, so that his head looked like a large orange that had rolled off the fruit dish. Immediately beneath his dangling feet, St. Eustache, who had more than once evinced by deep growls his disapproval of the proceedings, now worried a bone with quick, sly glances from time to time at the plump legs of his new mistress. Papa Copo was on the dwarf’s right, his large round face as red and benevolent as a harvest moon. Next to him sat Griffo, the giraffe boy, who was covered with spots and whose neck was so long that he looked down on all the rest, including M. Hercule Hippo the giant. The rest of the company included Mlle. Lupa, who had sharp white teeth of an incredible length and who growled when she tried to talk; the tiresome M. Jegongle, who insisted on juggling fruit, plates, and knives, although the whole company was heartily sick of his tricks; Mme. Samson, with her trained boa constrictors coiled about her neck and peeping out timidly, one above each ear; Simon Lafleur, and a score of others.

The bareback rider had laughed silently and almost continually ever since Jeanne Marie had told him of her engagement. Now he sat next to her in his crimson tights. His black hair was brushed back from his forehead and so glistened with grease that it reflected the lights overhead, like a burnished helmet. From time to time, he tossed off a brimming goblet of burgundy, nudged the bride in the ribs with his elbow, and threw back his sleek head in another silent outburst of laughter.

"And you are sure you will not forget me, Simon?" she whispered. "It may be some time before I can get the little ape's money."

"Forget you, Jeanne?" he muttered. "By all the dancing devils in champagne, never! I will wait as patiently as Job till you have fed that mouse some poisoned cheese. But what will you do with him in the meantime, Jeanne? You must allow him some liberties. I grind my teeth to think of you in his arms!"

The bride smiled, and regarded her diminutive husband with an appraising glance. What an atom of a man! And yet life might linger in his bones for a long time to come. M. Jacques Courbé had allowed himself only one glass of wine, and yet he was far gone in intoxication. His tiny face was suffused with blood, and he stared at Simon Lafleur belligerently. Did he suspect the truth?

"Your husband is flushed with wine!" the bareback rider whispered. *"Ma foi*, madame, later he may knock you about! Possibly he is a dangerous fellow in his cups. Should he maltreat you, Jeanne, do not forget that you have a protector in Simon Lafleur."

"You clown!" Jeanne Marie rolled her large eyes roguishly and laid her hand for an instant on the bareback rider's knee. "Simon, I could crack his skull between my finger and thumb, like a hickory nut!" She paused to illustrate her example, and then added reflectively: "And,

perhaps, I shall do that very thing, if he attempts any familiarities. Ugh! The little ape turns my stomach!”

By now the wedding guests were beginning to show the effects of their potations. This was especially marked in the case of M. Jacques Courbé’s associates in the sideshow.

Griffo, the giraffe boy, had closed his large brown eyes and was swaying his small head languidly above the assembly, while a slightly supercilious expression drew his lips down at the corners. M. Hercule Hippo, swollen out by his libations to even more colossal proportions, was repeating over and over: “I tell you I am not like other men. When I walk, the earth trembles!” Mlle. Lupa, her hairy upper lip lifted above her long white teeth, was gnawing at a bone, growling unintelligible phrases to herself and shooting savage, suspicious glances at her companions. M. Jejongle’s hands had grown unsteady, and as he insisted on juggling the knives and plates of each new course, broken bits of crockery littered the floor. Mme. Samson, uncoiling her necklace of baby boa constrictors, was feeding them lumps of sugar soaked in rum. M. Jacques Courbé had finished his second glass of wine, and was surveying the whispering Simon Lafleur through narrowed eyes.

There can be no genial companionship among great egotists who have drunk too much. Each one of these human oddities thought that he or she was responsible for the crowds that daily gathered at Copo’s Circus; so now, heated with the good Burgundy, they were not slow in asserting themselves. Their separate egos rattled angrily together, like so many pebbles in a bag. Here was gunpowder which needed only a spark.

“I am a big — a very big man!” M. Hercule Hippo said sleepily. “Women love me. The pretty little creatures leave their pygmy husbands, so that they may come and stare at Hercule Hippo of Copo’s Circus. Ha, and when they return home, they laugh at other men always! ‘You may kiss me again when you grow up,’ they tell their sweethearts.”

“Fat bullock, here is one woman who has no love for you!” cried Mlle. Lupa, glaring sidewise at the giant over her bone. “That great carcass of yours is only so much food gone to waste. You have cheated the butcher, my friend. Fool, women do not come to see you! As well might they stare at the cattle being led through the street. Ah, no, they come from far and near to see one of their own sex who is not a cat!”

“Quite right,” cried Papa Copo in a conciliatory tone, smiling and rubbing his hands together. “Not a cat, mademoiselle, but a wolf. Ah, you have a sense of humor! How droll!”

“I have a sense of humor,” Mlle. Lupa agreed, returning to her bone, “and also sharp teeth. Let the erring hand not stray too near!”

“You, M. Hippo and Mlle. Lupa, are both wrong,” said a voice which seemed to come from the roof. “Surely it is none other than me whom the people come to stare at!”

All raised their eyes to the supercilious face of Griffo, the giraffe boy, which swayed slowly from side to side on its long, pipe-stem neck. It was he who had spoken, although his eyes were still closed.

“Of all the colossal impudence!” cried the matronly Mme. Samson. “As if my little dears had nothing to say on the subject!” She picked up the two baby boa constrictors, which lay in drunken slumber on her lap, and shook them like whips at the wedding guests. “Papa Copo knows only too well that it is on account of these little charmers, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, that the sideshow is so well-attended!”

The circus owner, thus directly appealed to, frowned in perplexity. He felt himself in a quandary. These freaks of his were difficult to handle. Why had he been fool enough to come to M. Jacques Courbé’s wedding feast? Whatever he said would be used against him.

As Papa Copo hesitated, his round, red face wreathed in ingratiating smiles, the long deferred spark suddenly alighted in the powder. It all came about on account of the carelessness of M. Jejongle, who had become engrossed in the conversation and wished to put in a word for himself. Absent-mindedly juggling two heavy plates and a spoon, he said in a petulant tone:

“You all appear to forget me!”

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when one of the heavy plates descended with a crash on the thick skull of M. Hippo; and M. Jejongle was instantly remembered. Indeed he was more than remembered; for the giant, already irritated to the boiling point by Mlle. Lupa’s insults, at the new affront struck out savagely past her and knocked the juggler head-over-heels under the table.

Mlle. Lupa, always quick-tempered and especially so when her attention was focused on a juicy chicken bone, evidently considered her dinner companion’s conduct far from decorous, and promptly inserted her sharp teeth in the offending hand that had administered the blow. M. Hippo, squealing from rage and pain like a wounded elephant, bounded to his feet, overturning the table.

Pandemonium followed. Every freak’s hands, teeth, feet, were turned against the others. Above the shouts, screams, growls, and hisses of the combat, Papa Copo’s voice could be heard bellowing for peace.

“Ah, my children, my children! This is no way to behave! Calm yourselves, I pray you! Mlle. Lupa, remember that you are a lady as well as a wolf!”

There is no doubt that M. Jacques Courbé would have suffered most in this undignified fracas, had it not been for St. Eustache, who had stationed himself over his tiny master and who now drove off all would-be assailants. As it was, Griffo, the unfortunate giraffe boy, was the most defenseless and therefore became the victim. His small, round head swayed back and forth to blows like a punching

bag. He was bitten by Mlle. Lupa, buffeted by M. Hippo, kicked by M. Jejongle, clawed by Mme. Samson, and nearly strangled by both of the baby boa constrictors which had wound themselves about his neck like hangmen's nooses. Undoubtedly he would have fallen a victim to circumstances, had it not been for Simon Lafleur, the bride, and half a dozen of her acrobatic friends, whom Papa Copo had implored to restore peace. Roaring with laughter, they sprang forward and tore the combatants apart.

M. Jacques Courbé was found sitting grimly under a fold of tablecloth. He held a broken bottle of wine in one hand. The dwarf was very drunk, and in a towering rage. As Simon Lafleur approached with one of his silent laughs, M. Jacques Courbé hurled the bottle at his head.

"Ah, the little wasp!" the bareback rider cried, picking up the dwarf by his waistband. "Here is your fine husband, Jeanne! Take him away before he does me some mischief. *Parbleu*, he is a bloodthirsty fellow in his cups!"

The bride approached, her blond face crimson from wine and laughter. Now that she was safely married to a country estate, she took no more pains to conceal her true feelings.

"Oh, la, la!" she cried, seizing the struggling dwarf and holding him forcibly on her shoulder. "What a temper the little ape has! Well, we shall spank it out of him before long!"

"Let me down!" M. Jacques Courbé screamed in a paroxysm of fury. "You will regret this, madame! Let me down, I say!"

But the stalwart bride shook her head. "No, no, my little one!" she laughed. "You cannot escape your wife so easily! What, you would fly from my arms before the honeymoon!"

"Let me down!" he cried again. "Can't you see that they are laughing at me!"

"And why should they not laugh, my little ape? Let them laugh, if they will; but I will not put you down. No, I will carry you thus, perched on my shoulder, to the farm. It will

set a precedent which brides of the future may find a certain difficulty in following!”

“But the farm is quite a distance from here, my Jeanne,” said Simon Lafleur. “You are strong as an ox, and he is only a marmoset; still I will wager a bottle of Burgundy that you set him down by the roadside.”

“Done, Simon!” the bride cried, with a flash of her strong white teeth. “You shall lose your wager, for I swear that I could carry my little ape from one end of France to the other!”

M. Jacques Courbé no longer struggled. He now sat bolt upright on his bride’s broad shoulder. From the flaming peaks of blind passion, he had fallen into an abyss of cold fury. His love was dead, but some quite alien emotion was rearing an evil head from its ashes.

“Come!” cried the bride suddenly. “I am off. Do you and the others, Simon, follow to see me win my wager.”

They all trooped out of the tent. A full moon rode the heavens and showed the road, lying as white and straight through the meadows as the parting in Simon Lafleur’s black, oily hair. The bride, still holding the diminutive bridegroom on her shoulder, burst out into song as she strode forward. The wedding guests followed. Some walked none too steadily. Griffo, the giraffe boy, staggered pitifully on his long, thin legs. Papa Copo alone remained behind.

“What a strange world!” he muttered, standing in the tent door and following them with his round blue eyes. “Ah, these children of mine are difficult at times — very difficult!”

III

A year had rolled by since the marriage of Mlle. Jeanne Marie and M. Jacques Courbé. Copo’s Circus had once more taken up its quarters in the town of Roubaix. For

more than a week the country people for miles around had flocked to the sideshow to get a peep at Griffo, the giraffe boy; M. Hercule Hippo, the giant; Mlle. Lupa, the wolf lady; Mme. Samson, with her baby boa constrictors; and M. Jejongle, the famous juggler. Each was still firmly convinced that he or she alone was responsible for the popularity of the circus.

Simon Lafleur sat in his lodgings at the Sign of the Wild Boar. He wore nothing but red tights. His powerful torso, stripped to the waist, glistened with oil. He was kneading his biceps tenderly with some strong-smelling fluid.

Suddenly there came the sound of heavy, laborious footsteps on the stairs. Simon Lafleur looked up. His rather gloomy expression lifted, giving place to the brilliant smile that had won for him the hearts of so many lady acrobats.

“Ah, this is Marcelle!” he told himself. “Or perhaps it is Rose, the English girl; or, yet again, little Francesca, although she walks more lightly. Well, no matter — whoever it is, I will welcome her!”

By now, the lagging, heavy footfalls were in the hall; and, a moment later, they came to a halt outside the door. There was a timid knock.

Simon Lafleur’s brilliant smile broadened. “Perhaps some new admirer that needs encouragement,” he told himself. But aloud he said, “Enter, mademoiselle!”

The door swung slowly open and revealed the visitor. She was a tall, gaunt woman dressed like a peasant. The wind had blown her hair into her eyes. Now she raised a large, toil-worn hand, brushed it back across her forehead and looked long and attentively at the bareback rider.

“Do you not remember me?” she said at length.

Two lines of perplexity appeared above Simon Lafleur’s Roman nose; he slowly shook his head. He, who had known so many women in his time, was now at a loss. Was it a fair question to ask a man who was no longer a boy and who

had lived? Women change so in a brief time! Now this bag of bones might at one time have appeared desirable to him.

Parbleu! Fate was a conjurer! She waved her wand; and beautiful women were transformed into hogs, jewels into pebbles, silks and laces into hempen cords. The brave fellow who danced tonight at the prince's ball, might tomorrow dance more lightly on the gallows tree. The thing was to live and die with a full belly. To digest all that one could — that was life!

"You do not remember me?" she said again.

Simon Lafleur once more shook his sleek, black head. "I have a poor memory for faces, madame," he said politely. "It is my misfortune, when there are such beautiful faces."

"Ah, but you should have remembered, Simon!" the woman cried, a sob rising in her throat. "We were very close together, you and I. Do you not remember Jeanne Marie?"

"Jeanne Marie!" the bareback rider cried. "Jeanne Marie, who married a marmoset and a country estate? Don't tell me, madame, that you —"

He broke off and stared at her, open-mouthed. His sharp black eyes wandered from the wisps of wet, straggling hair down her gaunt person till they rested at last on her thick cowhide boots encrusted with layer on layer of mud from the countryside.

"It is impossible!" he said at last.

"It is indeed Jeanne Marie," the woman answered, "or what is left of her. Ah, Simon, what a life he has led me! I have been merely a beast of burden! There are no ignominies which he has not made me suffer!"

"To whom do you refer?" Simon Lafleur demanded. "Surely you cannot mean that pocket-edition husband of yours — that dwarf, Jacques Courbé?"

"Ah, but I do, Simon! Alas, he has broken me!"

"He — that toothpick of a man?" the bareback rider cried with one of his silent laughs. "Why, it is impossible!

As you once said yourself, Jeanne, you could crack his skull between finger and thumb like a hickory nut!”

“So I thought once. Ah, but I did not know him then, Simon! Because he was small, I thought I could do with him as I liked. It seemed to me that I was marrying a manikin. ‘I will play Punch and Judy with this little fellow,’ I said to myself. Simon, you may imagine my surprise when he began playing Punch and Judy with me!”

“But I do not understand, Jeanne. Surely at any time you could have slapped him into obedience!”

“Perhaps,” she assented wearily, “had it not been for St. Eustache. From the first that wolf-dog of his hated me. If I so much as answered his master back, he would show his teeth. Once, at the beginning, when I raised my hand to cuff Jacques Courbé, he sprang at my throat and would have torn me limb from limb had the dwarf not called him off. I was a strong woman, but even then I was no match for a wolf!”

“There was poison, was there not?” Simon Lafleur suggested.

“Ah, yes, I, too, thought of poison; but it was of no avail. St. Eustache would eat nothing that I gave him; and the dwarf forced me to taste first of all food that was placed before him and his dog. Unless I myself wished to die, there was no way of poisoning either of them.”

“My poor girl!” the bareback rider said pityingly. “I begin to understand; but sit down and tell me everything. This is a revelation to me, after seeing you stalking homeward so triumphantly with your bridegroom on your shoulder. You must begin at the beginning.”

“It was just because I carried him thus on my shoulder that I have had to suffer so cruelly,” she said, seating herself on the only other chair the room afforded. “He has never forgiven me the insult which he says I put upon him. Do you remember how I boasted that I could carry him from one end of France to the other?”

“I remember. Well, Jeanne?”

“Well, Simon, the little demon has figured out the exact distance in leagues. Each morning, rain or shine, we sally out of the house — he on my back, and the wolf-dog at my heels — and I tramp along the dusty roads till my knees tremble beneath me from fatigue. If I so much as slacken my pace, if I falter, he goads me with cruel little golden spurs; while, at the same time, St. Eustache nips my ankles. When we return home, he strikes so many leagues off a score which he says is the number of leagues from one end of France to the other. Not half that distance has been covered, and I am no longer a strong woman, Simon. Look at these shoes!”

She held up one of her feet for his inspection. The sole of the cowhide boot had been worn through; Simon Lafleur caught a glimpse of bruised flesh caked with the mire of the highway.

“This is the third pair that I have had,” she continued hoarsely. “Now he tells me that the price of shoe leather is too high, that I shall have to finish my pilgrimage barefooted.”

“But why do you put up with all this, Jeanne?” Simon Lafleur asked angrily. “You, who have a carriage and a servant, should not walk at all!”

“At first there was a carriage and a servant,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, “but they did not last a week. He sent the servant about his business and sold the carriage at a nearby fair. Now there is no one but me to wait on him and his dog.”

“But the neighbors?” Simon Lafleur persisted. “Surely you could appeal to them?”

“We have no neighbors; the farm is quite isolated. I would have run away many months ago, if I could have escaped unnoticed; but they keep a continual watch on me. Once I tried, but I hadn’t traveled more than a league before the wolf-dog was snapping at my ankles. He drove