

Stories from

Love in the Afternoon

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Love in the Afternoon

It was an exquisite moment of fulfilment when the body still tingles with a slowly ebbing sense of carnal pleasure. Nora's head was nestling in the crook of his arm, her hair softly caressing his skin, her musk filling him with irresistible erotic excitement.

They shared a cigarette. As his eyes followed the slowly rising smoke he pondered the aphorism 'After coition every animal is sad.' Indeed the afterglow of sexual gratification was tinged with a trace of sadness. This 'love in the afternoon' situation could not endure and it harboured the seed of its own destruction.

Nora was Mrs Norman Finch, the wife of an insurance salesman. There were two children aged five and seven. The relationship had known its passion but their marriage had settled down to a reasonably contented but stale relationship. The routine the couple had become accustomed to made it impossible for Nora to meet him in evenings or at weekends without arousing suspicion. The best she could manage was the odd hour or two during the working day while her husband homed in on his next closing and the children were at school or in a playground.

Their frequent afternoon trysts managed to quench their lust but did not quell the lovers' longing for shared experiences and an emotional bond.

One afternoon when they were unable to make their schedules mesh, Nora made do with the dreamy recollection of the first time she had set eyes on David. It was during dinner at the roof-top restaurant of the Royal Garden Hotel where Norman had taken her as a treat to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. She had noticed the man sitting on the sofa next to her the moment she sat down. There was something about his animated, sun-tanned features that attracted her with unexpected intensity. The deep, sexy voice of his conversation with his companion, an attractive blonde, resonated within her like a tuning fork responding to a musical note. She longed to look into his eyes but could not do so without turning her head and becoming too obvious. Somehow she had the feeling that he too was

aware of her presence, and as he took his partner to the dance floor they exchanged meaningful glances. When the music stopped and he approached his table, he gave her a conspirational little smile, which captivated her completely.

In a flash of uncharacteristic impetuosity, Nora decided she had to find a way to make contact. Her handbag was lying next to her within his reach, and she opened it unobtrusively hoping that he would notice.

When she returned from a dance with Norman, Nora groped for her handkerchief and was thrilled to feel a visiting card between her fingers. She had never before experienced such a mixture of elation and frivolity. During the rest of the evening both were conversing with their partners animatedly, acutely aware that they were listening to each other. This dialogue-by-proxy filled her with a sensation of warm anticipation.

Back at home Nora waited impatiently until she was alone. Still in thrall to the occasion, her husband was uncommonly—almost annoyingly—attentive, fuelled by a volatile blend of romance, nostalgia and liquor. It seemed an eternity before he succumbed to the temptation to check his email and provide her with the breathing space to check her handbag. The card read:

David Lindon, CEO
Global Enterprises Plc.
Tel...
Fax...

On the reverse side of the card was written: ‘Please phone soon.’

Her train of thought was interrupted when David looked at his watch, ‘Darling, I must go, I have a meeting at five o’clock.’ Nora tried, unsuccessfully, to hide her disappointment, but David’s lingering kiss mollified her.

On the way to his office, David felt anew extreme frustration at these short sessions, when what he really craved was to spend more time with a life partner, to linger and to savour the aftermath of physical contact. He longed for a deeper relationship to satisfy his need for companionship. He did not want to look elsewhere to give him what he was missing with Nora. He was too fond of her for that. On the other hand, being a bachelor, he had a lot of time on his hands. He knew she would not divorce Norman because of the children. However the affair could not survive the ‘love in the afternoon’ limitations. He had to find a solution.

The answer occurred to him suddenly, in the midst of an especially tiresome telephone conversation with the manager of one of his overseas offices. His company was multinational and as its chief executive he had to visit the overseas subsidiaries at regular intervals. This could provide the answer. He advertised in the *Evening Standard*:

Part-time sales representative required for occasional overseas travel. No previous experience needed, but good working knowledge of French, German and Urdu is a condition. Applicants must be British subjects, aged 30-40.

Suitable candidates are invited to write, enclosing CV, to Evening Standard Box No...

This advertisement was designed to fit Nora like a glove. She spoke all these languages fluently, including Urdu having been born in Pakistan as the daughter of the British ambassador to Karachi.

When Nora heard of his plan she was thrilled. She did not doubt that her husband would agree to her applying for this promising position. The additional income would be very useful.

In view of the unusual job specification, David expected only Nora's application. He was therefore surprised and intrigued to receive a letter from a Miss Catherine Tomkins. Her CV not only met all the requirements of the advertisement but also offered high-level academic qualifications including a PhD. His first reaction was not to see her as it would serve no purpose, but on second thoughts he realised that not interviewing her would appear strange considering she was eminently suitable for the position as advertised. He telephoned her to arrange a meeting for the following day.

When his secretary announced Miss Tomkins he had forgotten the interview and he had to keep her waiting as he was in conference.

When he was ready to see her, he had every intention of cutting the meeting short. However he changed his mind as soon as she entered his office. She was like an apparition from every man's fantasy. The first thought that came to his mind was an old song *Did you ever see a dream walking*. Catherine Tomkins was tall, slim and long-legged. She could be described in two words: 'strikingly beautiful'. Invited to sit down, she crossed her legs with a movement in which her entire body participated.

David was completely lost for words. He looked at her CV, trying to compose himself. He felt as if he were being interviewed—flustered and trying desperately to make a good impression.

Catherine did not seem to notice and began in an easy conversational tone to tell her story.

She was 28 and divorced. Born in Hyderabad of an English father and a Pakistani mother from a Brahmin sect in Azad Kashmir, she had spent a carefree and well-protected childhood, until her parents divorced and her father, a BP executive, was relocated first to Hamburg and then to Paris. She was multilingual to perfection, had first attended Heidelberg and then the Sorbonne and finally obtained her PhD in London.

Her marriage had been a mistake and she was now looking for an interesting career, preferably full-time. The only condition of the advertised job specification she could not meet, she added with an enchanting little smile, was her age. Catherine then wanted to know a little more about the job, and David had to think hard to sound plausible. He was completely captivated by this young woman. Is this what the French call a *coup de foudre*? he asked himself, ‘a lightning attraction’, ‘love at first sight’? He took her to the door and held her hand slightly too long. It was only then that he noticed Nora who was waiting to be interviewed.

She looked wistfully at Catherine as she walked by and then joined David in his office. They made fun of the charade they were involved in and arranged to meet the following day. Yet during the light-hearted banter, David was aware of the unasked question about the striking young woman who had spent time in his office.

In the early evening, David phoned Catherine and suggested dinner to discuss the job in more detail. In spite of the short notice she responded almost eagerly which filled him with elated anticipation. He was amused at the thought that first he had to invent qualifications for a non-existing job, and now he would have to invent a job to fit the qualifications.

The following afternoon, Nora was already waiting for him. The intimacy of their love-making and the ecstasy of fulfilment was the same as they had experienced so many times before, except for a strange feeling of sadness that seemed to cover them like a soft, silky veil. David lingered over the goodbye embrace a moment

longer than usual before they went their separate ways. The next day they telephoned frequently, mostly on Nora's initiative. David sounded depressed and preoccupied. He pretended to be too busy for a meeting.

A day or two later, Nora received a letter on Global Enterprises' notepaper:

Dear Mrs Finch

Thank you for attending the recent interview.

Regretfully I have to inform you that the vacancy has now been filled.

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely
David Lindon

Nora was in a state of numb shock. She could not decide what hurt more—the contents of the letter or the fact that, judging by the date, it must have been dictated before their last meeting. She felt physical pain at the thought that never again would David take her into his arms. Life would never be the same.

If Norman was surprised at the depth of her disappointment in failing to get the job, he did not show it and tried to console Nora. It did not help but she was grateful.

It would take a long time to get David out of her system, for the thought of him to fade and recede and finally to settle in a distant corner of her memory. As the pain ebbed, she thought of the other relationships in her past. Each lover—there had been only a few—was special in his own way and every episode was like another life. The hurt she felt now, she also had to inflict on others. There is no easy and painless way to end an affair. David's method was cruel, comparable to using a surgeon's scalpel without anaesthetic, but the alternative would be worse, more like a terminal illness and a slow, lingering death. Perhaps David was right in making a clean break and she should not feel scorned. After all, the new woman in his life could probably give him more togetherness than she could. Would she have preferred to hear it face-to-face? Possibly, but it would have been just as painful.

They say that the human body renews every seven years; maybe, but the memory still remains and she would think fondly of David and the time they had spent together. It was simply that another chapter in her life had come and gone. How

many had she left? Time, the great healer, was also the intractable enemy and as depressing as the thought was, there had to be a last embrace. Fortunately one would not know that it was the last until much, much later.

She felt drained and took two Mogadons to help her to a deep and dreamless sleep.

‘Goodbye my love,’ she thought, ‘take care.’

Hit and Run

To say that William Hardy was a contented man would be an understatement. He was in fact serenely happy most of the time, with a strong sense of satisfaction that fate had treated him kindly.

In spite of being past middle age, at sixty-seven he was extremely fit and in robust health. He had a lovely family on whom he doted consisting of a charming wife, a son and daughter, and four young grandchildren. Playing with them every Sunday was a joyful experience. To top it all he had a thriving business, entirely recession-proof, Hardy & Company, funeral directors.

Indeed, there would be no story to tell but for an incident during the final minutes of his sixty-seventh birthday. It started as a happy and memorable occasion with all the family gathered to celebrate. Listening to the happy laughter filling the room William pondered, as he often did, on the unpredictable hand of fate which had led him to meet his wife Helen who as a consequence had given birth to the offspring who had become an indispensable part of his life. He sometimes wondered what he had done, in a quite unremarkable life, to deserve this abundance of good fortune.

Most of us can probably pin-point the moment that, for better or worse, altered the course of our lives. William's moment occurred on 23rd March, his 67th birthday, and it was definitely for the worse.

At about 11 p.m. he decided to take the family home. By that time the sandman had got the better of the young ones, and even their parents showed signs of fatigue. William, on the other hand, was exhilarated by the joys of the day and offered to drive the family home. The station wagon could just about accommodate all of them, and the party set off to matriarchal entreaties to drive carefully.

He had briefly considered ordering two chauffeur-driven hire cars as he had drunk a couple of whiskies and three glasses of wine with the meal. However he felt fully

in control of his faculties and would make a point of driving slowly and carefully. Besides, at this late hour, there would be hardly any traffic and few people about.

The two families lived in the same district and after dropping them off with final hugs and kisses, William headed for home. It was now close to midnight and had started to rain. Just as he was turning the corner opposite the church, about halfway home, he saw two men quarrelling violently and pushing each other around in front of a stationary vehicle.

Their argument appeared to be intensifying and William, wanting no part of it, accelerated. At that instant, one of the men was flung into the street, falling into the path of the station wagon, and was run over. Though his vehicle was not travelling fast, William was unable to brake in time or avoid the man. In a state of shock William stopped and got out of the car to look at the man. He lay motionless, his head at an unnatural angle, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth.

William felt for the pulse; there was nothing. The man was dead. He returned to his vehicle to call 999 on his mobile phone. When he heard a response he hesitated. Confused thoughts whirled through his head. He cut off the call, got out of the car and looked around. The street was deserted; the man's attacker had obviously fled in panic. William inspected the front of his vehicle.. There was no visible damage except for a small dent in the bumper and a scratch on the left wing.

He then made the fatal decision that would affect his whole life. He drove off. I am now a 'hit and run' criminal, he told himself, with a mixture of apprehension and faint amusement, dulled by his state of intoxication.

By the time he arrived home he had sobered up sufficiently to contemplate the consequences of his actions. There were no witnesses, except the other man who had fled the scene and who was unlikely to report the accident. Less likely still, in the heat of the moment, would he have identified the exact model of vehicle, let alone recorded its registration number. To be on the safe side, William would have the tell-tale signs repaired at his garage.

The following day he bought a few newspapers and anxiously scanned the pages. Nothing. The news had obviously not reached the papers before the editorial deadline. However the evening paper mentioned the accident in three lines on the third page under the heading 'Hit and Run'. The victim, a Caucasian male aged between 40 and 50, had not been identified.

In the weeks that followed there was no further mention, and as months went by the terrible events of that fateful night began to fade. Life continued in the pleasant routine he had become accustomed to over the years. But the ringing of his office phone at 3 p.m. one Friday was to change his life forever.

William had to repeat the name of his company twice before a gruff voice, with a strong Irish accent, responded.

‘Mr Hardy?’

‘Yes, who is this?’

‘Never mind who this is, I want to meet you.’

‘In what connection?’

‘In connection with saving your life.’

‘I don’t understand. Look, I’m very busy.’

‘In connection with the 23rd of March, just before midnight.’

There was no mistaking the slightly threatening undertone.

For a few seconds William was at a loss. The only significance of the date that occurred to him was that it was his birthday. Then it hit him like a blow to the pit of his stomach. He had to collect himself before sounding calm and unconcerned.

‘I don’t know what you mean, but if you want to discuss business why don’t you come along tomorrow morning at about eleven? I will be in the office until noon.’

‘Oh yes, I want to discuss business.’

The sarcasm in the voice could have been cut with a knife.

Although William took a double dose of Mogadon that evening he spent a traumatic night with intermittent periods of restless sleep.

The following morning at the office he was unable to concentrate on the work in hand. He had to deal with a cremation, two reposes and fobbing off a salesman extolling the virtues of some new-fangled scar congealer. It was almost a relief when Tracy, his secretary, announced a visitor who had given his name as O’Shane. This was unlikely to be his real name, but whoever he was he stormed into William’s office and sat down without being invited to. Tracy tried to hide her

surprise at his uncouth behaviour and hesitated before leaving the room.

The visitor came straight to the point.

‘Look Hardy, you’re in trouble. You have killed my friend and driven off without reporting the accident. This is a very serious criminal offence. Don’t waste my time trying to deny it. It was your vehicle—I took the number—besides you had the damage repaired in the garage across the road the next day. Myself, I don’t blame you. Only problem is, there’s the small matter of the law. As in the criminal law. As in, if you don’t persuade me into seeing things your way, you are going to watch your cosy, quiet life drift out to sea from behind the bars of a prison cell.’

William Hardy had listened silently, while his brain was working feverishly trying to find a way out.

‘You don’t seem to realise O’Shane that you are also in trouble—you are an accessory before, during and after the fact and there is nothing you can do without incriminating yourself.’

‘Can’t I now? I don’t care about this accessory stuff. If I go to the police, you go to jail, and you can wave goodbye to your business,’ O’Shane continued, easing back comfortably and crossing his legs. ‘On the other hand, I am not greedy, I am a reasonable man who knows his limitations. All I want is a grand every month, which you can easily afford, and your secret is safe with me as long as you keep your end of the bargain.’

William Hardy considered the proposition calmly. One thousand pounds a month was no big deal, particularly if he could account for it as a tax-allowable expense. On the other hand he had heard enough about blackmail to realise the danger of the screw being tightened by ever-increasing demands. He had to try calling the blackmailer’s bluff.

‘O’Shane, forget it, a thousand pounds is out of the question. Go to the police if you like, but please be careful crossing the road and I will take what’s coming to me.’

O’Shane got up brusquely. He grinned maliciously and made a circular motion with his index finger on his forehead. ‘I am not negotiating,’ he said, and walked briskly towards the door.

Hardy was in no position to argue. ‘Wait O’Shane, I agree. I will put you on the

payroll—it's safer that way.' They arranged that O'Shane would come to collect on the first Monday of every month, just after office hours when William was alone.

The arrangement worked smoothly and soon O'Shane's visits were barely an irritant. In fact, they soon settled down to a regular business routine. The initial atmosphere of understandable hostility between blackmailer and victim had given way to a feeling of accommodation that suited both parties, to the extent that O'Shane was offered a drink every time the transaction was completed. William often speculated how much worse the situation could have been. The payments amounted to no more than about £9,000 annually after tax, representing a very modest percentage of his profits. A minor problem arose with the auditors, who were understandably inquisitive about the addition to the small staff that was never to be seen. William muttered something about an old family friend he was trying to help, and there the matter rested.

Months went by, and William's life of contented tranquillity was fully restored with the O'Shane problem no more than the feeling one has with a stone in the shoe. However, the devil may rest but he never sleeps, as the saying goes. The bombshell came one Monday evening with O'Shane's announcement that he was getting married.

'You must understand, Hardy, that this changes things. £12,000 was not very much to start with, it might just have been enough for a bachelor. But a couple with a kid on the way need rather more. There is also inflation. From next month I will be collecting £4,000 and I don't want to hear any ifs or buts.'

William took a deep breath. So that was it. The screw was being tightened a couple of threads, and even that might not be the end. The new demand was a double blow. The amount was way beyond his possibilities and, besides, could not possibly be disguised as a legitimate business expense. He tried to sound jovial, congratulated O'Shane on his engagement and suggested doubling his retainer to £2,000. The hostile, uncompromising look in the blackmailer's eyes convinced him that any attempt to negotiate was fruitless. 'Forget it,' added O'Shane, as if to confirm the obvious.

With some effort Hardy pretended to reconcile himself to the new arrangement and, while pouring the customary scotch on the rocks, he considered his options. He could still, at this late stage, surrender to the police and confess. There were

pros and cons to that solution. On the positive side it would teach O'Shane a lesson—as a blackmailer he would go to jail for a number of years. Against that, his own future would be in a shambles. The sentence would be custodial. He would have a criminal record, quite apart from problems with the Inland Revenue for tax evasion. The only other possible solution was to get rid of the blackmailer.

Williams explained to O'Shane that he could not remain on the payroll, and future payments would have to be in cash. This gave him a whole month to devise a perfect murder scenario. To kill O'Shane would be no problem; a dose of the right poison in his whisky would see to that. However, to decide which substance was most suitable for his purpose required research. Hardy was no toxicologist, and his knowledge of poisonous substances was only superficial. The internet would supply the necessary information and, being a methodical man, he first jotted down the specification for which he was looking.

1. The poison had to work quickly.

The only method of administration open to him was by ingestion, although he read that inhalation and subcutaneous injection would have worked faster.

2. It should be odourless and tasteless.

3. It should be obtainable without having to identify himself.

After careful study he found no one substance that would satisfy all these criteria.

Strychnine was a possibility. It would be very easy to get hold of as vermin killer, and it was tasteless and odour-free. It would act in about ten minutes but he was not certain that O'Shane could be made to stay that long. In the end Hardy opted for cyanide in the form of Scheele's Acid containing five per cent anhydrous prussic acid. This was available in the UK for various industrial uses, and a lethal dose of one or two millilitres would cause death in seconds rather than minutes. The victim would collapse with complete loss of muscular power. There was however one snag: cyanide compounds have a faint taste of bitter almonds. Nevertheless he decided that, all things considered, he would have to live with that minor flaw. After all, William pondered philosophically, nothing in life was perfect.

The next problem to be dealt with was the disposal of the body. It was at this point that he had a brilliant inspiration. After all, he was burying people legally all the time. What would be easier than to have one coffin accommodate two corpses? It

was only a matter of logistics and timing.

The routine presented no problems. After the corpse had lain in state for the bereaved to say good-bye and leave, William often screwed down the coffin lid himself before the funeral drove off. However, the timing had to be right. He would have to wait for a lean corpse, probably a woman, to have enough room left in the coffin to take the heavily-built O'Shane. A few payments might have to be made before everything fell into place, but that was a small price to pay.

He could not suppress a wry smile to himself as he realised how much a quotation from the German classics applied to his circumstances: 'Such is the curse of the evil deed that it forever evil does beget.' In his case however one evil deed would cancel out the other and he would escape retribution.

The opportunity to realise his plan came sooner than expected. On the Monday when the first increased payment was due the corpse of a Mrs Ann Armstrong, a woman of 35, was delivered for burial the following day.

Hardy withdrew £4,000 in £50 notes from his personal bank account and awaited O'Shane's arrival with an icy calmness that surprised even himself. As soon as O'Shane arrived Hardy handed him the envelope. Having counted the money and found it correct, the visitor rose to leave. 'Let's have our drink,' suggested Hardy, and started filling the glasses, one of which contained the dose of Scheeles's Acid—just enough to kill—with only the slightest whiff of bitter almonds.

Hardy was trying to get O'Shane to linger over the drink, but he seemed to be in a hurry and, saying 'Bottoms up,' drained the glass. Hardy started to panic. If the poison did not work before he left the office the plan would be in tatters. A collapse in the street would be a serious inconvenience and there was no Plan 'B'. O'Shane reached the door and was just about to open it when he turned round with an expression on his face that Hardy would not forget as long as he lived. O'Shane's eyes reflected pain and sudden comprehension before he collapsed.

It was more strenuous than Hardy would have thought to heave the body into the coffin on top of the woman's corpse. Perhaps there was some truth in the generally-held belief that a dead body was heavier than a live one, although nobody has ever offered a rational explanation for this paradox. He screwed down the coffin lid with the feeling of extreme relief at a job well done.

When the coffin was collected the following morning for burial, he stood at the door to watch the hearse move off. At that moment he was seized with a feeling of adrenalin-fuelled euphoria followed soon by extreme fatigue. For a few days thereafter he scanned the newspapers for any mention of O'Shane's disappearance. There was nothing. Apparently he wasn't missed by anyone, and very likely the story of impending marriage was simply a fabrication.

As weeks and then months went by, the whole episode faded from his memory until it assumed a dream-like quality. The day of retribution was Friday 13th April, when a letter was delivered with the morning post:

Dear Mr Hardy

Whereas application has been made to me Henry Coburn-Smith for permission to exhume the body of the late Ann Armstrong from the place of burial in St Mary's churchyard for the purpose of medical examination to provide evidence of administration of poison, I do hereby, under the powers vested in me, grant licence for the exhumation of the body of the said Ann Armstrong from the said grave.

You are hereby requested, as the undertaker of the said body, to attend at 10 a.m. on the sixteenth day of May for the purpose of identifying the coffin before removal from the churchyard.

I am,
Your obedient servant...

QM-II

It is easy to make friends during a trans-Atlantic crossing but such friendships seldom survive the five days from Southampton to New York. By tradition, first-class guests are expected to wear formal dress for dinner except on the first and last evenings of the journey.

The following took place during the third evening on the Queen Mary. After dinner at the captain's table and thereafter a few rubbers of bridge, a small but select group gathered for drinks and small-talk at the bar on the promenade deck. The group included a real-estate tycoon, Robert Waterman, his young secretary Anita Grey, French socialite Liana Croiseau with her latest flame, a toy-boy she called Bubi, and Count Rolando with his beautiful wife Elisabeth. Karl Hans Heldwein, the renowned Viennese jeweller, was entertaining the party with stories of great diamonds, some famous, some infamous, and their fates.

The great Mogul found in 1650 in India weighed 787 carats in the rough. The Orloff was stolen by a French soldier, bought by Prince Orloff and given to Catherine the Great of Russia. The most famous of them all, the Koh-I-Noor, changed hands many times and was acquired by the British in 1849. Possibly the most fascinating story is known as 'the curse of the Hope diamond'. This large blue diamond, weighing a remarkable 45.5 carats, is housed in a bullet-proof cabinet in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Harry Winston, the well-known jeweller, donated it to the Institution. As a publicity stunt, he sent it by recorded delivery in the mail. According to legend the stone was stolen from a Hindu temple where it adorned the face of the goddess Sita. This evil deed brought a curse on the diamond causing bad luck and even death to all who touched it.

Waterman then suggested that the most exciting diamond story was a recent one. He was referring to the foiled heist of the 200-carat Millennium Star. Based on some undercover work, the police mounted a complex operation, as a result of which six men were jailed for a total of eighty years.

This might be an opportune moment to introduce myself. I cannot claim to have been a member of this eminent gathering and the part I played in the small drama that unfolded was minor. Yet without me, there would be no story to tell. My name is James Alton Smith, but you can call me Jimmy. Friends, employers and most of the people I wait on do. I am one of the QM-II stewards, assigned by the captain to be at the beck and call of all the guests he invites to dine at his table. My duties require me to keep within earshot, empty the ashtrays, top up the drinks and generally be on hand ready to do his guests' every bidding while remaining not just in the background but part of the background—as unobtrusive as a light fitting. I presume that the captain chose me because I look good in a dinner jacket, and in fact if the jacket were white or black instead of service red, I could easily pass for one of his guests.

As it happens, and as a aside, I had been a paying guest on the QM-II only two years before, travelling west to east and occupying a balcony suite with the enchanting Vanessa Duval. However, that is a story for another time; I don't want to distract from the strange goings-on of this particular trip.

Bubi (I learned later that his name is a somewhat condescending German diminutive meaning 'little boy' or 'lad') did not behave quite as the captain might have expected. He acted strangely and tried repeatedly to make eye-contact with me. He touched my hand whenever I brought him a new drink. I am as broad-minded as the next person but I must admit that it was creepy and made me feel uncomfortable. I only wish the dark-eyed and coyly enigmatic Anita Grey, whom I found most attractive, would have flirted with me instead.

The conversation then turned to the high cost of insuring precious stones. To overcome this, Hans Heldwein explained, the most valuable gems were rarely worn. Rather, their owners kept them hidden away in bank vaults, wearing instead replicas for all but the most special occasions. Waterman was of the opinion that these imitations were of such excellent quality that only the closest expert examination would reveal a fake. Heldwein begged to differ and maintained that the trained eye would know the difference at arm's length. His assertion became the subject of hot debate.

To prove his point, Hans Heldwein looked at Madame Croiseau's exquisitely narrow wrist and, without hesitation, proclaimed the diamond bracelet adorning it a

perfect imitation. To alleviate her obvious embarrassment, he added, ‘Madame, I am sure that the real thing is safe and sound in the ship’s vault.’ A slight nod from Madame confirmed his diagnosis. A round of subdued applause acknowledged Heldwein’s expertise.

‘On the other hand,’ he continued, ‘the Countessa’s necklace is one of the most exquisite pieces of jewellery I have seen for some time.’ The Countess visibly blushed and looked at Heldwein with a strangely pleading expression. The Count smiled with obvious satisfaction. ‘This time you are mistaken, dear boy.’

‘Impossible!’ retorted the jeweller.

‘Would you care to wager, say \$500?’ said the Count.

Heldwein accepted, and the Countess handed him the necklace, somewhat reluctantly it seemed to me, for closer examination. He looked at it for a few seconds and then glanced at the Countess with an expression of surprise. Elisabeth looked into his eyes as if to implore him. Heldwein appeared to examine the necklace again and then turned to the count ‘You win,’ he said to the Count, handing him the amount wagered.

Soon thereafter, the party broke up and everyone made a move to return to their cabins. In passing, the countess asked me to bring two Alka Seltzers and a glass of mineral water to her suite. I did so about ten minutes later. Her husband was in the bathroom when she handed me an envelope and a \$50 tip. ‘Slip this under the door of Mr Heldwein’s cabin,’ she whispered.

I can resist anything except the temptation to steam open envelopes that I suspect contain juicy indiscretions, and I simply had to know what was going on between the two. This one did not disappoint. Its secret remained safe with me from that moment to this. The envelope contained five crisp hundred-dollar bills and a card with a lipstick mark on one side and on the other side the words: ‘Thank you so very much for your discretion.’

