

The Crossing



AT THE OUTERMOST edge of the *VIII^e arrondissement* of Paris, isolated from both the passage of streetcars and the demands of society, stands a tall, narrow house. In this house there is a kitchen, and in that kitchen is an exceptionally pretty maid named Lisette. She has already set out a delicate white plate, on which she places several slices of very good cheese. Next to the cheese, she places a crescent roll, which the French call a *croissant*.

She is now slicing a fruit. It is a peculiar, brownish-gray fruit, firm and hairy, with bright green flesh marked in a starburst pattern. A shipment of them arrived to Paris from China only the day before, and *l'Authorité de passage*, which takes very good care of its agents, immediately procured some and disbursed them appropriately.

Lisette arranges the medallions of fruit artfully on the plate. She is careful to compose them so that the addition of the final slice would spoil the effect. The surplus she eats herself; it is pleasantly tangy, tasting of gooseberry. She wipes her hands, straightens her ruffled apron, and ascends the stairs with a small tray.

She is not to blame, not directly. Lisette cannot be expected to know

that she is about to precipitate the most extensive, and indeed, the first disaster in the history of the trans-Atlantic Crossing.

“Is Paris really worth it?” Mrs. Elliott clutched a cotton handkerchief in a tight wad at her mouth. The pink-dyed ostrich feather in her hat looked wilted, like a sprig of celery too-long parted from the parent plant.

“You said it would be,” sighed Mr. Elliott, patting his wife’s free hand as if soothing a strange dog. “Remember? You said I wouldn’t be able to remember what my life was like before Paris. You said the experience would alter me entirely.”

“And she was quite right, you know,” said Thomas Long, the fishing magnate. He swirled the last swallow of a cocktail around the hollow of his martini glass before draining it. He smacked his lips before speaking again. “I’ve made the Crossing at least a dozen times. Two dozen! Ha!” He brought the empty glass down on the table beside his overstuffed chair.

Mrs. Elliott pursed her lips, and Mr. Elliott knew, by virtue of long acquaintance, what his wife was thinking. She deplored extravagance, in the comportment of others if not in her own. She had personally witnessed two servants bring that chair into the Crossing chamber. These two worthies roundly (and rustically) criticized the wastefulness of its future occupant, using vocabulary that Mrs. Elliott had heard only on the stage.

To find that very profligate in their own circle for the entire Crossing! It gave her a mind to be short, perhaps even uncivil. But she was distracted by her own worries, and satisfied herself by merely staring coldly, when she recalled herself to do so.

“Two dozen!” repeated Thomas Long, the fishing magnate. That was how he had introduced himself to them, and how Mr. Elliott would always think of him. Like the subtitle of a three-volume novel. *Thomas Long; or, The Fishing Magnate*. “Business on both sides, you see. Very important.” He waggled his eyebrows and tapped his nose, as if imparting some great secret.

“That’s loony. Why don’t you take one of your boats?” asked a befreckled boy. Mr. Elliott did not know his age, but judged it to be around a decade. Enough for port, but not quite enough for whiskey.

“Hush, Tommy!” The elderly woman at the lad’s side made a curious cuffing motion that somehow failed to touch the boy at all. Her shirtwaist

and bustled skirt were dyed such a deep shade of plum that it could have passed for weeds of mourning. The steward had introduced her as the governess to Master Thomas Morton. Thomas Morton, unlike other Thomases, was not a fishing magnate. He was instead on his way to a preparatory school in France, where such presumptuous questioning must inevitably be removed from him by force.

“A fair question!” boomed Thomas Long, the fishing magnate, having left his sense of injured dignity behind along with the olive in his last cocktail. “Tommy, eh? Good name. Good name. Used it myself once.” He beckoned to the steward, who appeared at his elbow with another drink. “You ever been fishing, my boy?”

The younger Thomas shrugged.

“Caught a boatful, I’m sure. Did you like it?”

The boy wrinkled his nose. “Hated it. You’d have to be a real chump to fish for a living.”

The fishing magnate laughed heartily and bent in contemplation of the new drink, which he appeared to have just discovered. This allowed the younger Thomas to make a rude gesture at the back of his head.

A deprecatory sniff came from Mr. Elliott’s left. It emerged from the upturned nostrils of M. Delacroix, who learned over to his new wife, Mme. Delacroix, and made a long remark in French. This couple rounded out the circle with whom they would be Crossing. The couple had been married some three months before, and were returning from their *voyage de noces* in America.

The female half of this pair blushed and looked away. Mr. Elliott did not speak French, but he also did not make remarks that embarrassed beautiful women. He liked to think that in that regard, at least, he outstripped the dark, lean Frenchman. Mme. Delacroix glanced around the circle, and when her eyes alighted on Mr. Elliott, he fancied a small smile appeared on her lips.

Mrs. Elliott did not like Mme. Delacroix. Mr. Elliott knew this instinctively. Mme. Delacroix was about twenty-three. She was tall and slim. Her blond hair was arrayed artfully atop her head, cascading down from a stylish silk hat in little ringlets that trailed down her neck. Her gown was expertly cut, suggesting more than obscuring her graceful silhouette. She sat with an

easy composure that bespoke an unshakable confidence in the world and her place in it. And what was more, Mrs. Elliott had tried to engage her in conversation, and Mme. Delacroix had snubbed her.

Mr. Elliott, on the other hand, liked her for precisely these same reasons.

The conversation had been mostly on Mrs. Elliott's side, and consisted of her usual prattle. She had asked if Mme. Delacroix had enjoyed her time in America ("*Comment?*"), whether Mme. Delacroix had found the fashions of New York equal to those of Paris ("*Desolée, qu'est-ce que vous m'avez dit?*"), and whether Mme. Delacroix was much anxious about the crossing ("*Pardon, Madame, mais je ne parle pas bien l'anglais.*").

It rankled with her, and the combination of her dislike for the M. and Mme. Delacroix, and her anxiety, and the Crossing, proved powerful indeed. To add the subject of fishing, a hobby of Mr. Elliott's that she did not approve of, caused the whole mixture to bubble over. As usual, Mrs. Elliott relieved the pressure by speech. "Nor should I liked to be cooped up on board a ship just to go to Paris!" she said. "And certainly not with fish! Nasty, smelly things."

"Smelly, yes, but profitable," said Thomas Long, the fishing magnate. He fished the onion out of his cocktail and crunched it. "For all you have to say of our finned friends, madam, you cannot deny that. Of more worry to me is the length of the voyage. One month! During which time I should be cut off from all aspects of my business." He shook his head. "Not that I shouldn't be glad of the break. When I think of how many years have passed since I actually held a rod myself..."

"Have you been in business long?" asked Mr. Elliott. He hoped to silence his wife on any more insults against this man's profession, knowing that if given the chance, she could equal young Master Thomas for effrontery.

"All my life," replied Thomas Long, the fishing magnate. He sighed, and stared moodily at the scant remainder of his cocktail. "Grew up on the deck of a fishing boat, you know. Never went to school. The ocean, that was my tutor."

"My pop says that anyone who doesn't go to school is an uneducated rube." This came from Tommy Morton, who had found an apple in his pocket. He proceeded to eat it in a manner calculated to give as much offense as possible.

“Tommy!” His governess made as if to cuff him again, but a quick look at Tommy made her reconsider. He had the look of a child who had seen many governesses come and go in his life, and was more than willing to ease the transition, one unto the next.

“My pop is sending me to the best school in Paris.” Tommy pushed himself up to the arm of the sofa, where he sat swinging his legs in great contentment. “Bet you wish you had gone there. Then maybe you wouldn’t have to sell fish for a living.”

The fishing magnate, began to turn red. He opened his mouth, and whether it was to consume the remainder of his drink or to rebuke his small namesake, Mr. Elliott was never to learn.

The floor shook, and the electric bulbs overhead dimmed and went out. Mrs. Elliott gasped, and Mr. Elliott reached over to pat her hand again. From elsewhere in the Crossing chamber, assorted gasps went up. “Have we wrecked?” she cried out. “Oh, my! Agatha said this would happen. She said it would!”

M. Delacroix barked a short, unpleasant laugh. “No, Madame,” he said in heavily-accented English. “We have this moment departed. What, do you think electrical wires can reach where we go?”

“Oh, my!” said Mrs. Elliott again, and Mr. Elliott sighed. He had warned his wife of this, but no doubt she had been too occupied in her own thoughts to pay attention to him. Their circle was well lit by an arrangement of very good oil lamps, just the sort his grandmother had favored. They reminded him of late nights during his childhood in Rhode Island. It gave the room a rosy, comforting glow. Mme. Delacroix was particularly attractive in that light.

The floor shook again, sending a ripple through all of them. Upon arrival at the Crossing chamber, Mr. Elliott had requested a brandy and soda, took two sips, and promptly forgot about it; now some of the liquid sloshed out onto the table beside him.

The steward, who did not seem to notice the perturbations in the floor, picked up the glass, wiped the spilled liquid, and returned it to its place. “Madame is unused to the Crossing?” he asked Mrs. Elliott, in English only lightly tinged with French.

“Not unused!” she said fussily. “I’ve just... never Crossed before.”

“It is perfectly safe,” he said, and smiled. “Perhaps Madame would like a tour? Many first time passengers find that their anxiety is relieved by greater understanding.”

His wife looked a fearful question at Mr. Elliott. How strangely she forgot herself! Why, yielding a decision to him? That had not occurred since their engagement. And now that he thought of it, Mrs. Elliott had not commented on his weight for over an hour. He felt younger by years. “I think that would be quite pleasant, dear,” said Mr. Elliott, becoming expansive. He rose and offered an arm. “Shall we?”

“I want to go too!” said Tommy. His governess made as if to restrain him, then waved a weary hand. Mr. Elliott suddenly noticed that she had matched Thomas Long, the fishing magnate, cocktail for cocktail. Her face was burnished to a glowing, rosy hue, rivaling the lamplight for warmth.

Across the low table, a susurrations began between the couple, low murmurs of French that rose in intensity. Mrs. Elliott, finding something other than the underfoot rumblings to occupy her attention, took great pleasure in disdaining them. Finally, Mme. Delacroix rose, holding her head at a stiff and noble angle, and joined the party by the steward.

“Me, I would like to go too,” said she, and to Mr. Elliott, the voice of Heaven itself had just sung out with a charming French accent.

The steward bowed gracefully and said something in French, then held open the door of the chamber for them to pass.

Upon the top floor of a tall, narrow house in the *VIII^e arrondissement* of Paris, a man sits before a broad, worn oaken desk. His name is M. Alexandre Michel Caneau-Bussard, and he is a Crossing agent. His activities may appear unusual to the first time observer. At one point, they were strange even to M. Caneau-Bussard, but now they are merely the mundane details of his profession, tasks to be completed as expeditiously as possible so that he can return to his true passion—being seen in public, in as many places as possible, with his mistress.

Even Lisette, his maid, is no longer taken aback by the spectacle of her employer in the performance of his duties. She is fully aware that a trans-Atlantic Crossing will take M. Caneau-Bussard a full six hours to complete, during which time he would not observe if, for example, she and

the handsome new footman were to take a stroll in the garden. She is intent upon placing the breakfast tray at her employer's elbow and leaving him to his work, and this is what she does.

It is at this point that Lisette leaves our story—at least until the inquest that follows the deplorable incident, when she will swear that she had remained by M. Caneau-Bussard's side to the last, trying desperately to breathe life back into his prone and flailing body.

When Mr. Elliott had entered the Crossing chamber at the start of the voyage, he had no leisure to closely examine his surroundings. His attention at that time was occupied with the fully demanding task of tolerating Mrs. Elliott. First, she criticized the way the porters took their equipage into the cargo annex. "I'm just sure our beautiful new suitcases will come back all covered in scratches," she fumed, and when Mr. Elliott said that he didn't mind, that accepting such treatment with equanimity in order to protect their contents was the intended purpose of the suitcase, Mrs. Elliott told him that he did not understand his new position and should try to live up to it.

His new position—what a damned nuisance! As a boy, Mr. Elliott spent a summer with his Uncle Charlie on Long Island. His uncle was a Man of Business, though what sort of business, the young Master had neither known nor cared. That summer they fished, and although his uncle never reached the status of fishing magnate, they passed a congenial July casting flies into the Long Island Sound.

Thereafter he had less to do with his Uncle Charlie. Mr. Elliott grew to run a moderately prosperous grocery trade in Boston and had little time to give thought to distant relations. Nevertheless, they kept up an infrequent correspondence over the years, and Mr. Elliott would usually include his latest Woolly Worm or Professor fly, the construction of which was a hobby in which he indulged whenever possible.

It was a surprise to the family circle when Uncle Charlie sold his business for over a million dollars and retired a rich man. It was a further surprise, and an agreeable one to Mr. Elliott's relations, when Uncle Charlie suddenly died of dysentery, three weeks into his world tour. The final shock came at the reading of his will, when it was revealed that the entire fortune,

including a house in Manhattan, another on Roslyn Harbor, three stallions, a collection of China dolls, a pack of hunting dogs and a she-goat named Esmeralda had all devolved upon Mr. Elliott. "In memory," the will said, "of the ninety-eight pound striped bass I once caught with the Gold Bend-back Shrimp fly he made me. I have never forgotten it."

Most overjoyed at this news was Mrs. Elliott, who had always felt that her natural talents were wasted as a grocer's wife, her true place being among society's elite. The policy of frugality which so marked their married life soon eroded, and before he knew it Mr. Elliott found himself stuffed into uncomfortable suits and shoes that pinched without mercy, forced to endure the company of those that would have disdained to purchase the merest pea from his grocery in happier days. It was intolerable.

The trip to Paris was her latest attempt to paint on a veneer of culture by introducing him to "the right sort of people." Her choices were always bad, in Mr. Elliott's opinion. Why could she not choose more agreeable companions? Like Mme. Delacroix, for instance. He felt that any dinner party could be improved by her inclusion at the board.

Mr. Elliott stole a glance at the Frenchwoman, who was staring upwards with a bright interest. He followed her glance. The walls of the corridor in which they found themselves stretched up twelve feet, and then stopped. The ceiling had disappeared, to be replaced with a roiling black mass of mist. Strange winds blew through this fog, which was lit from within by a light at once warm and sinister. If Mr. Elliott met his Uncle Charlie in Hades to fly fish in the River Styx, it would be under such a sky.

A sudden pain in his right bicep brought Mr. Elliott's attention back to ground level. His wife had gripped his arm. "Don't look!" she cried. "I can't bear to see it!"

"There is nothing to fear, Madame," replied the steward. "We are perfectly safe. Crossing is the safest way to travel. Did you know that we have been in operation for over ten years without the loss of a single life? Your antiquated steamship lines cannot make such a claim, I think."

"I heard you had a wreck once," chipped in Tommy Morton. He was just catching up to the group, having stopped briefly to steal a cigar from a humidor tucked into an alcove. "I heard there was one man who finished the Crossing with six fingers on his left hand, and another man only had

four. I heard the second made the first man cut it off and give it back to him!”

Mrs. Elliott gasped and clutched more tightly at Mr. Elliott’s arm. “Is that true?” she cried. “You didn’t mention that in the advertisement! I demand that you let me off this instant!”

The steward smiled slightly. “I’m afraid that is impossible, Madame. We are now in transit, and the Crossing cannot be stopped. But perhaps you would like to see the Crossing agent responsible for your transit today?” He gestured toward a door a little ways down the corridor.

“Yes indeed,” said Mrs. Elliott, letting go of Mr. Elliott and striding forward, ahead of the group. “I wish to ask him what his qualifications are, and what he meant by shaking us around so.” She opened the door and stopped at the threshold, blinking in confusion, while the rest of the party joined her.

“M. Caneau-Bussard is currently in Paris, Madame,” said the steward, ushering them inside the room and closing the door behind him smoothly. “He can be seen from this room, however, if you wish to observe his work.”

They were in what appeared to be a small theater, with three rows of cushioned chairs all facing the same way. But where the stage should have been was instead a dark chasm, invested with the same boiling stew of fog and light that consumed the ceiling. Incongruously clear within the center of the miasma was a Frenchman, sitting at a broad table, calmly taking his breakfast.

They seated themselves. Mr. Elliott had a curious mind, and he watched the Frenchman in the mists avidly. “What’s he doing?”

“He’s eating,” said Tommy Morton in tones of obvious disappointment.

“I assure you, M. Caneau-Bussard is quite occupied. Look there, see?”

The figure in the mists had pushed aside his place, from which only two slices of cheese had been consumed. He had taken up a deck of cards, which he began to shuffle with deft movements. These he dealt in front of him into a curious spiral pattern. He peered intently at them, rearranging several cards of whose positions he did not approve. Once satisfied, he pulled out from a drawer a small wooden case in mahogany chased with silver. Within were dozens of thin daggers, *stilette* after the Italian style. With movements

both swift and sure he pierced each card, beginning with the innermost of the spiral and proceeding outwards.

The impalement had made its way less than halfway out when suddenly, Mr. Elliott felt a curious floating sensation, which just as suddenly faded. A crushing grip on his arm a moment later implied that Mrs. Elliot must have experienced something similar. "Stop, stop!" cried Mrs. Elliott. "He'll kill us all!"

"Naturally, Madame," replied the steward. "But I assure you, the procedure is perfectly safe."

"Did I understand you correctly?" Mr. Elliott asked, attempting to disengage himself from the clutches of his wife. He saw that Mme. Delacroix was visibly shaken, and wished he might do something to comfort her. "Am I to believe that we are now... deceased?"

"Only temporarily," the steward assured them. "It is no secret. The body must first be separated from the world, then the soul from the body. The body, and all that you see here, can then be transferred safely to your destination, where the soul and body are rejoined, then reintroduced to the world. I assure you," he held up a hand as if to stave off comment, "the process is perfectly safe. So safe, in fact, that while you are Crossing, no harm can befall you. Observe!"

From a pocket in his jacket, the steward withdrew a slim blade, much like the tools of the Frenchman who had just killed them. With a flourish, the steward gave the knife a half turn and plunged it into his own stomach. "You see?" he said, drawing it out to reveal not a mark left on his impeccable shirt front, "it is perfectly safe."

Mrs. Elliott fainted in her chair. Mme. Delacroix said, "*Mon dieu!*", and Tommy Morton asked to borrow the knife. His request was granted, and Tommy proceeded to stab the steward, and then himself, with all evidence of complete enjoyment.

The Frenchman in the mist had now turned his attention to four tall spindles. Two of these, the outermost, were stacked with a sequence of rings, which narrowed as they proceed up the spindle. One stack was white, the other black. His movements a blur, the Frenchman began transferring these rings between spindles, stacking and rearranging faster than the eye could follow.

They watched in silence. Mr. Elliott heard the door open, then close, and noticed that Tommy Morton was gone. "I think he still has your knife," he said to the steward, who swore in French and dashed out after him.

Another two minutes passed. "He is quite skillful," said Mr. Elliott finally, his voice only a trifle shaky. "His hands...." His voice trailed off.

"Yes," said Mme. Delacroix.

Mr. Elliott swallowed. "I hope you are not frightened," he said. "The steward said it was safe."

"I am not frightened." The unearthly glow of the mists made her cheeks glow. "At the beginning, yes, but not now." She leaned back in her chair, looking up at the turmoil that had replaced the ceiling. "It is a beauty of outside the world."

"Uh, yes," said Mr. Elliott, who was spared the difficulty of further reply when Mrs. Elliott began to stir. She demanded to return to their circle right away, and he had no choice but to comply. As he left, he turned for one last look, but the chairs blocked his view of Mme. Delacroix. Instead, he pretended that he had been looking at the spectral Frenchman all along, who continued to break his fast as he worked.

In Paris, sitting at a broad table already pockmarked with thousands upon thousands of tiny *stiletto* wounds, M. Caneau-Bussard is bored. The chant that he learned so many years before runs through his mind. *Noir, blanche, blanche, noir, blanche, noir, noir, blanche*. The pattern continues, folded over itself like a skein of fabric, but the intricate chain is second nature now. With a single hand, M. Caneau-Bussard reaches out to take another slice of cheese.

Instead, his hand comes upon something moist and spongy, and only his training keeps his other hand from stopping in the flow. Such an interruption would not be disastrous, but it would be unpleasant to the passengers, and might earn him a rebuke from *l'Authorité de passage*.

M. Caneau-Bussard is no gastronomist, but he does have a taste for the finer things in life. He specifically requested this unusual fruit, because he believed his mistress would find its uncut form amusingly scandalous. He has no real desire to eat the thing, but supposes that he had better try it.

It is pleasantly tangy, and leaves a tingling sensation on his tongue and

soft palate. He eats three more pieces in quick succession before noticing that his fingers are itching where he touched the fruit. Still he continues to eat. Only when the last morsel is consumed does he notice a tightness in his throat.

“Lisette!” he cries, or attempts to, for he finds that it is unusually difficult to breathe. Still his hands fly over the rings. But he is barely half-finished with the Crossing, and when the cramps begin, he knows that he will not be able to complete it. Before unconsciousness claims him, he reflects that his passengers will find the next hours very unpleasant indeed, at least until a replacement agent comes to complete the Crossing.

What M. Caneau-Bussard does not understand, as he slumps over his broad oaken desk, clutching at his throat, is that the unconscious spasms that precede the total cessation of life function will displace several dozen *stiletti* and scatter the cards beneath them.

“It’s disgraceful!” said Mrs. Elliott, who no longer required the support of her husband to stand steady. She nevertheless retained a tight grip on his arm, with which she pulled him forward. “Card tricks and conjuring, that’s all it is! Imagine, trying to fool us into thinking that we were going to Paris. Why, I bet we haven’t even left New York!”

“But dear...,” Mr. Elliott began, but his heart wasn’t in it. He seemed to see the whole of his future life spread before him. He had taken a seat in the theater to view, not a spectral Frenchman engaged in their crossing, but a panoply of Mr. Elliotts, bursting from the seams of a succession of horrible suits. They sighed and they ate and they tried to pretend that the never-ending stream of Mrs. Elliotts had married them for love.

“Well?” said Mrs. Elliott, waiting in expectation at the door back to their circle’s sitting room. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

With a sigh echoed by all these future selves, Mr. Elliott reached out, grasped the doorknob. It shattered in his hand.

He looked down dumbly at the remains, fragments as fine as powder that seeped between his fingers. “They’ll make you pay for that!” barked Mrs. Elliott. “You fat, stupid, boorish...”

What noun was to serve as the lynch-pin of her string of invective would never be known, for Mrs. Elliott’s tongue broke off. It fell from

her mouth and skittered across the floor, where it struck the far wall and exploded into shining fragments. Mr. Elliott whipped his head around to follow it, but perhaps he did so too quickly, for it parted from his body at the neck and rolled dizzily. The last image that came to his eyes was of his wife's ankles, decomposing to a glittering powder, while black fog rose up from cracks in the floor to send it swirling into oblivion.

But his consciousness did not fade. Mr. Elliott, or at least the bundle of soul that was Mr. Elliott, floated in a void where thought was sensation, sensation was emotion, emotion was color. He was a thread upon the tapestry of reality, and his consciousness skittered upon that thread, across it to another, racing like a pulse through electrical circuits, isolated yet aware of the whole. He did not understand, for there was no need. He experienced what was, and was content.

The linear notion of time as a succession of moments cannot truly be said to apply in these situations. However, it is fair to say that he remained thus for a very, very long time.

"Sir?" The subdirector of the Crossing Authority straightened the stack of papers again, and spared a glance at the Archbishop of Paris, who sat at his left. They both regarded the man across the desk with a look at once solicitous and impatient.

"Yes?"

"Did you hear our question, sir? I will repeat it for you. What is your name?"

The gentleman across the table peered upward, as if expecting to find the reply inscribed in gold upon the ceiling. "Elliott?" he replied at last, turning it more into a question.

The subdirector leaned back in his chair and sighed. Another one. Perfection was not possible in a reconstruction, but really, three months and a team of agents should surely have done better. How difficult was it really to reposition the knives and cards as they had been?

"No, sir. I believe you may be confused. I am told that such confusion is natural after an incident such as the one you have experienced."

"Incident?" The eyes of the gentleman across the desk focused briefly, and were lost. "What happened?"

“A most deplorable breach of protocol,” said the subdirector. “One that, I assure you, will not be allowed to occur during future Crossings. Allow me to say on behalf of the Authority that your passage will be allowed free of charge for the remainder of your life. You have my assurance of that.”

“Thank you.” The gentleman across the desk stared at his hands, flexed them several times, then shook his head. The look of awareness came back into his eyes, and he noticed for the first time the archbishop. “Your Grace?”

“I am here for you in your time of need, my son,” replied the Archbishop. He rose from his chair. “I sense that there may be some weighty theological matters for us to discuss.”

The gentleman rose and accompanied the Archbishop towards the door of the office. As he reached it, though, he turned back to the subdirector. “My wife...?” He swallowed.

“No ill effects whatsoever,” said the subdirector. “She is waiting for you.”

The gentleman nodded slowly, almost resignedly, and left the office. He found himself in a small waiting room. A young boy of about ten years sat in a chair much too large for him, swinging his legs.

“I know you,” said the gentleman. “Tommy?”

The boy had a dazed look. “They said I could go fishing. Whenever I want!” The sentiment appeared to give him pleasure. “Whenever I want!” he repeated.

At least, the gentleman thought that was what he said. The boy was peculiarly difficult to understand, as if not all of his words were known to the gentleman. He passed on.

“Your wife is waiting out here for you,” said the Archbishop. “You see? There she is.”

A tall, slim figure perched on the edge of an ornate sofa. She clutched a handbag on her lap, and her hands were trembling. As she watched him, she bit her lower lip in a way that made the gentleman wish to stroke her hair.

The gentleman looked a question at the Archbishop, who nodded to him in encouragement. “No, no....” said the gentleman. “This is not....”

“Is there something wrong, Mr. Delacroix?” asked the Archbishop.

The man’s eyes widened. The widened still further as they caught the reflection in the broad oval of a framed mirror, which hung over the sofa.

“But I’m not....”

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh,” quoted the Archbishop. “One flesh, Mr. Delacroix. No mention is made of the soul. When questioned, the Holy Father was very clear on this point.”

“But I don’t even speak French.”

The Archbishop laughed. “But sir, what do you think we are speaking now?”

As if unable to restrain himself, the woman upon the sofa rose to her feet. She rushed to him, took up his hands in hers. “Frédéric?”

“Yes.... Yes, I am here.”

“They warned me that you might be confused for some time.” She lowered her eyes for a moment, and when they returned to his, they were filled with tears. “And... our luggage, Frédéric. They said it is gone. I am sorry.”

He reached up, brushed a tear from her cheek. “What of the luggage? We are safe. We are together. That is all that matters.”

A start of surprise colored her face, and she looked away again, blushing. She spoke in tones of wonder. “You are... very kind, Frédéric.” And Mr. Delacroix led his wife away, arm in arm.