

V. S. Pritchett (1900-1997) was an English short story writer, novelist, literary critic, journalist, travel writer, biographer, and autobiographer. Though not an innovator in terms of style, he was nevertheless an interesting and highly competent writer.

V.S. Pritchett, who was born on December 16, 1900, in Ipswich, England, to Sawdon and Beatrice (Martin) Pritchett, told the story of his life in two volumes. The first of these is *A Cab at the Door: A Memoir* (the British subtitle is *Childhood and Youth, 1900-1920*), and the second is *Midnight Oil* (1971). His account of his life is humorous at times and rather detached. His father, a religious seeker, found refuge in later years in Christian Science. Micawber-like, Sawdon Pritchett was optimistic about the get-rich-quick schemes which left the family in straitened circumstances and which accounted for the title, *A Cab at the Door*. The family had to move frequently, with disastrous consequences for Pritchett's formal education. The mother, Beatrice Martin, was a sometimes vain and sometimes foolish woman of a decent lower class family.

Pritchett loved literature and read Dickens and Hardy. He felt that he lacked grounding in mathematics and science. When his father, in 1915, decided that the son must learn a trade, the youth was upset at having his education interrupted. Though he didn't like his work in the leather trade, he did enjoy meeting and associating with people. At 20 he left for Paris. He continued to read not only British authors and poets but the more important modern French ones. He acquired a fluency in French of which he was very proud.

It was almost by chance that he submitted three pieces for publication in 1921. The *Christian Science Monitor* published one of these, and his career was launched. During his two-year stay in Paris he made friends with other young people, though he was rather shy and certainly innocent by today's standards. He longed for the love of a young woman and ultimately lost his innocence. Evidently there was something about this short, shy youth that brought out the maternal instinct in older women: more than once he was mothered and advised by a woman older than himself.

In 1923 he returned to London and was asked by the *Christian Science Monitor* to write a series of articles about Ireland. The extended visit to Ireland, as well as a subsequent visit to Spain, led to a series of travel books written over a span of nearly 40 years. Pritchett traveled to various parts of Ireland to acquire first-hand material for his articles and in the process developed an admiration for the Irish, though an occasional dreariness of the landscape depressed him. When he visited Spain he was impressed with the country, and it provided him with the setting for some of his stories and furnished him with journalistic material. He published his first novel, *Clare Drummer*, in 1929 and a collection of short stories, *The Spanish Virgin and Other Stories*, in 1930. Neither book was a critical success. These were followed by another novel, *Elopement Into Exile*—or *Shirley Sanz*, to give it its British title. This book was not a critical success either.

Nothing Like Leather, which appeared in 1935, traces the material success and moral disintegration of Matthew Burkle when by dint of hard work he begins to rise in the leather tannery where he is employed. The industrial town in which the novel is set is vividly and realistically described. In 1935 *Dead Man Leading* appeared. Its setting—the jungles of Brazil—was more exotic. As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, there is a symbolic journey motif, and two of the men who make the journey, Philips and Johnson, attempt to find in Wright a father figure.

After 15 years, in 1951, another novel, *Mr. Beluncle*, appeared. Like Pritchett's own father, Beluncle, the protagonist, is searching for religious fulfillment. Brendan Gill, writing in the *New Yorker*, admitted that the novel amused, yet he thought it only partially successful because he

found it also "forced and cold." In *Midnight Oil* Pritchett mentions in passing that his father thought that he saw himself in the novel, and the author nowhere denies that the protagonist was based on his father, whose penchant for schemes of easy wealth has already been mentioned. It may be that the objectivity that can be achieved by the lapse of time between actual events and their recollection had not yet been reached.

Certainly Pritchett's biography of the great 19th-century novelist Honoré de Balzac deserves mention. Though Millicent Bell pointed out that in *Balzac* (1974) he broke no new ground, she found him good at "describing persons and scenes" and considered that he wrote "in a sinewy and witty style." There can be no doubt that his sympathies lie with his subject, and Balzac's lover, Madame Hanska, who might have treated the author more handsomely than she did (though she did fulfill on his deathbed her promise to marry him), comes out a decided second best.

In reviewing his *Collected Stories* (1982), Valentine Cunningham, who called Pritchett "the best living English author, " commented that he was "always on the alert for the illustrative moment, " that he turned "human moments into epiphanies, " and that he was "celebrating the heroicness of banal life." The last comment rings true, for the lives examined are only *seemingly* banal and the deep current beneath them is all. Cunningham singled out for special praise "Many Are Disappointed"; however, another superior story, "Blind Love, " which deals with a blind man and his housekeeper who hides from the world a disfiguring birthmark that the blind man cannot see, truly illustrates that a rich and turbulent life can exist beneath an outwardly placid, banal one. In 1983 *More Collected Stories* was published. Both this collection and the earlier one go back many years. *A Man of Letters: Selected Essays* by Pritchett was published in 1986.

As a literary critic Pritchett was incisive, and in a happy choice of phrase he could lay bare for the reader an author's method of approaching his subject. In *The Myth Makers: Literary Essays* (1979) he said of Jean Genet that "he proceeds from criminal ritual to the literary without losing his innate interest in violence, " and again, "Genet is the natural product of an age of violence, a cult figure for those who feel guilty because they have escaped martyrdom." In his essay on Gustave Flaubert he says of Madame Bovary of his famous novel *Madame Bovary*: "She is dignified by a real fate—not by a false word 'Fate, ' one of the clichés Flaubert derided, " and he described Flaubert himself as "her fellow adolescent." Of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's method in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he said that "Marquez seems to be sailing down the blood stream of his people, " and spoke of "the slippery comedies and tragedies of daily life" as depicted in that novel.

In an essay on the British writer Henry Yorke, Pritchett called the author "sensitive to that rarity which is buried in people who outwardly might be commonplace, " and he went on to say that he thought that Yorke's characters "were living in the imagination and this made him a master of comedy of what can only be called the human underground." These words aptly fit Pritchett's own method and characters.

Pritchett himself preferred his travel books, short stories, and novels to his reviews, but he was wrong to so belittle his talents as a critic, and his critical ability, if anything, grew with the passage of time. Cunningham shared Pritchett's own belief that the short stories he wrote in the 1920s were merely "apprenticeship work" and that he came into his own in the 1930s. At his very best he endowed his stories with an interest and understanding of the human condition that will be felt by readers yet unborn.

Even into his eighties, Pritchett took on an enormous workload, writing reviews nearly full time and publishing his final biography, of Chekhov, in 1988. V.S. Pritchett died in London's Whittingham Hospital on March 21, 1997, at the age of 96

Blind Love (TEXT)

"I'm beginning to be worried about Mr. 'Wolverhampton' Smith," said Mr. Armitage to Mrs. Johnson, who was sitting in his study with her notebook on her knee and glancing from time to time at the window. She was watching the gardener's dog rooting in a flower bed. "Would you read his letter again: the second paragraph about the question of a partnership?"

Since Mr. Armitage was blind it was one of Mrs. Johnson's duties to read his correspondence.

"He had the money — that is certain; but I can't make out on what conditions," he said.

"I'd say he helped himself. He didn't put it into the business at Ealing — he used it to pay off the arrears on the place at Wolverhampton," she said in her cheerful manner.

"I'm afraid you're right. It's his character I'm worried about," said Mr. Armitage.

"There isn't a single full stop in his letter — a full page on both sides. None. And all his words are joined together. It's like one word two pages long," said Mrs. Johnson.

"Is that so?" said Mr. Armitage. "I'm afraid he has an unpunctuated moral sense."

Coming from a blind man whose open eyes and face had the fixed gleam of expression you might have seen on a piece of rock, the word "unpunctuated" had a sarcasm unlike an ordinary sarcasm. It seemed, quite delusively, to come from a clearer knowledge than any available to the sighted.

"I think I'll go and smell out what he's like. Where is Leverton Grove? Isn't it on the way to the station? I'll drop in when I go up to London tomorrow morning," said Mr. Armitage.

The next morning he was driven in his Rolls-Royce to Mr. Smith's house, one of two or three little villas that were part of a building speculation that had come to nothing fifty years before. The yellow-brick place was darkened by the firs that were thick in this district. Mrs. Johnson, who had been brought up in London houses like this, winced at the sight of them. (Afterwards she said to Mr. Armitage, "It brings it back." They were talking about her earlier life.) The chauffeur opened the car door, Mrs. Johnson got out, saying "No curb," but Armitage waving her aside, stepped out unhelped and stood stiff with the sainted upward gaze of the blind; then, like an army detail, the party made a sharp right turn, walked two paces, then a sharp left to the wooden gate, which the chauffeur opened, and went forward in step.

"Daffodils," said Mrs. Johnson, noting a flower bed. She was wearing blue to match her bold, practical eyes, and led the way up the short path to the door. It was opened before she rang by an elderly, sick-looking woman with swollen knuckles who half-hid behind the door as she held it, to expose Smith standing with his gray jacket open, his hands in his pockets — the whole man an arrangement of soft smiles from his snowball head to his waistcoat, from his fly to his knees, sixteen stone of modest welcome with nothing to hide.

"It is good of you to come," he said. He had a reverent voice.

"On my way to the station," said Armitage.

Smith was not quite so welcoming to Mrs. Johnson. He gave her a dismissive frown and glanced peremptorily at his wife.

"In here?" said Mrs. Johnson, briskly taking Armitage's arm in the narrow hall.

"Yes," he said.

They all stood just inside the doorway of the front room.

A fir tree darkened it. It had, Mrs. Johnson recorded at once, two fenders in the fireplace, and two sets of fire-irons; then she saw two of everything — two clocks on the fireplace, two small sofas, a dining table folded up, even two carpets on the floor, for underneath the red one, there was the fringe of a worn yellow one.

Mr. Smith saw that she noted this and raising a grand chin and now unsmiling, said, "We're sharing the 'ouse, the house, until we get into something bigger."

And at this, Mrs. Smith looked with the searching look of an agony in her eyes, begging Mrs. Johnson for a word.

"Bigger," echoed Mrs. Smith and watched to see the word sink in. And then, putting her fingers over her face, she said, "Much bigger," and laughed.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Smith, who did not care for his wife's laugh, "while we talk — er ..."

"I'll wait outside in the car," said the decisive Mrs. Johnson, and when she was in the car she saw Mrs. Smith's gaze of appeal from the step.

A half an hour later, the door opened and Mrs. Johnson went to fetch Mr. Armitage.

"At this time of the year the daffodils are wonderful round here," said Armitage as he shook hands with Smith, to show that if he could not see there were a lot of things he knew. Mr. Smith took the point and replaced his smiling voice with one of sportive yet friendly rebuke, putting Mr. Armitage in his place.

"There is only one eye," he stated as if reading aloud.

"The eye of God."

Softly the Rolls drove off, with Mrs. Smith looking at it fearfully from the edge of the window curtain.

"Very rum fellow," said Armitage in the car. "I'm afraid he's in a mess. The Inland Revenue are after him as well.

He's quite happy because there's nothing to be got out of him. Remarkable. I'm afraid his friends have lost their money."

Mrs. Johnson was indignant.

"What's he going to do down here? He can't open up again."

"He's come here," Armitage said, "because of the chalk in London water. The chalk, he says, gets into the system with the result that the whole of London is riddled with arthritis and nervous diseases. Or rather the whole of London is riddled with arthritis and nervous diseases because it believes in the reality of chalk. Now, chalk has no reality.

We are not living on chalk nor even on gravel: we dwell in God. Mr. Smith explains that God led him to manage a chemist's shop in Wolverhampton, and to open one of his own in Ealing without capital. He now realizes that he was following his own will, not the will of God. He is now doing God's work. Yesterday he had a cable from California.

He showed it to me. 'Mary's cancer cured gratitude check follows.' He's a faith healer."

"He ought to be in jail," said Mrs. Johnson.

"Oh, no. He's in heaven," said Armitage. "I'm glad I went to see him. I didn't know about his religion, but it's perfect: you get witnesses like him in court every day, always moving on to higher things."

The Rolls arrived at the station and Mr. Armitage picked up his white stick.

"Cancer today. Why not blindness tomorrow? Eh?" he said. Armitage gave one low laugh from a wide mouth. And though she enjoyed his dryness, his rare laugh gave a dangerous animal expression to a face that was usually closed.

He got out of the car and she watched him walk into the booking hall and saw knots of people divide to make way for him on the platform.

In the damp town at the bottom of the hills, in the shops, at the railway station where twice a week the Rolls waited for him to come back from London, it was agreed that Armitage was a wonder. A gentleman, of course, they said; he's well-off, that helps. And there is that secretary-housekeeper, Mrs. Johnson. That's how he can keep up his legal business. He takes his stick to London, but down here he never uses it. In London he has his lunch in his office or in his club, and can manage the club stairs which worry some of the members when they come out of the bar. He knows what's in the papers — ever had an argument with him? — of course Mrs. Johnson reads them to him.

All true. His house stood, with a sudden flash of Edwardian prosperity, between two larch coppices on a hill five miles out and he could walk out on to the brick terrace and smell the lavender in its season and the grass of the lawns that went steeply down to his rose garden and the blue tiles of his swimming pool boxed in by yew.

"Fabian Tudor. Bernard Shaw used to come here — before our time, of course," he would say, disparaging the high, paneled hall. He was really referring to his wife, who had left him when he was going blind twenty-two years ago. She had chosen and furnished the house. She liked leaded windows, brass, plain velvet curtains, Persian carpets, brick fireplaces and the expensive smell of wood smoke.

"All fake," he would say, "like me."

You could see that pride made him like to embarrass. He seemed to know the effect of jokes from a dead face. But, in fact, if he had no animation — Mrs. Johnson had soon perceived in her commonsensical way — this was because he was not affected, as people are, by the movements on other faces. Our faces, she had learned from Armitage, threw their lives away every minute. He stored his. She knew this because she stored hers. She did not put it like this, in fact what she said appeared to contradict it. She liked a joke.

"It's no good brooding. As mother used to say, as long as you've got your legs you can give yourself an airing."

Mrs. Johnson had done this. She had fair hair, a good figure and active legs, but usually turned her head aside when she was talking, as if to an imaginary friend. Mrs. Johnson had needed an airing very badly when she came to work for Mr. Armitage.

At their first interview — he met her in the paneled hall: "You do realize, don't you, that I am totally blind. I have been blind for more than twenty years," he said.

"Yes," she said. "I was told by Dr. James." She had been working for a doctor in London.

He held out his hand and she did not take it at once. It was not her habit to shake hands with people; now, as always, when she gave in she turned her head away. He held her hand for a long time and she knew he was feeling the bones. She had heard that the blind do this, and she took a breath as if to prevent her bones or her skin passing any knowledge of herself to him. But she could feel her dry hand coming to life and she drew it away. She was surprised that, at the touch, her nervousness had gone.

To her, Armitage's house was a wonderful place. The space, the light made friendly by the small panes of the tall leaded windows, charmed her.

"Not a bit like Peckham," she said cheerfully.

Mr. Armitage took her through the long sitting room, where there were yellow roses in a bowl, into his study. He had been playing a record and put it off.

"Do you like music?" he said. "That was Mozart."

"I like a bit of a sing-song," she said. "I can't honestly say I like the classical stuff."

He took her round the house, stopped to point to a picture or two and, once more down in the long room, took her to a window and said, "This is a bad day for it. The haze hasn't lifted. On a clear day you can see Sevenham Cathedral. It's twelve miles away. Do you like the country?"

"Frankly I've never tried it."

"Are you a widow, Mrs. Johnson?"

"No. I changed my name from Thompson to Johnson and not for the better. I divorced my husband," said Mrs. Johnson crisply.

"Will you read something to me — out of the paper?" he said. "A court case."

She read and read.

"Go on," he said. "Pick out something livelier."

"Lonely monkeys at the zoo?"

"That will do."

She read again and she laughed.

"Good," he said.

"As Father used to say, 'Speak up ...' she began, but stopped. Mr. Armitage did not want to hear what Father said.

"Will you allow me," Armitage said, getting up from his desk, "would you allow me to touch your face?"

Mrs. Johnson had forgotten that the blind sometimes asked this.

She did not answer at once. She had been piqued from the beginning because he could not see her. She had been to the hairdresser's. She had bought a blouse with a high frilled neck which was meant to set off the look of boyish impudence and frankness of her face. She had forgotten about touch. She feared he would have a pleading look, but she saw that the wish was part of an exercise for him. He clearly expected her to make no difficulty about it.

"All right," she said, but she meant him to notice the pause, "if you want to."

She faced him and did not flinch as his hand lightly touched her brow and cheek and chin. He was, she thought, "after her bones," not her skin, and that, though she stiffened with resistance, was "O.K. by her." But when, for a second, the hand seemed about to rest on her jaw, she turned her head.

"I weigh eight stone," she said in her bright way.

"I would have thought less," he said. That was the nearest he came to a compliment. "It was the first time," she said afterwards to her friend Marge in the town, "that I ever heard of a secretary being bought by weight."

She had been his secretary and housekeeper for a long time now. She had understood him at once. The saintly look was nonsense. He was neither a saint nor a martyr. He was very vain; especially he was vain of never being deceived, though in fact his earlier secretaries had not been a success. There had been three or four before her. One of them — the cook told her — imagined him to be a martyr because she had a taste for martyrdom and drank to gratify it; another yearned to offer the compassion he hated, and muddled everything. One reckoning widow lasted only a month. Blatantly she had added up his property and wanted to marry him. The last, a "lady," helped herself to the household money, behind a screen of wheezing grandeur and name-dropping.

Remembering the widow, the people who came to visit Mr. Armitage when he gave a party were relieved after their meeting with Mrs. Johnson.

"A good honest-to-God Cockney" or "Such a cheery soul." "Down to earth," they said. She said she had "knocked about a bit." "Yes, sounds as if she had": they supposed they were denigrating. She was obviously not the kind of woman who would have any dangerous appeal to an injured man. And she, for her part, would go to the pictures when she had time off or simply flop down in a chair at the house of her friend Marge and say, "Whew, Marge. His nibs has gone to London. Give me a strong cuppa. Let's relax."

"You're too conscientious."

"Oh, I don't mind the work. I like it. It occupies your mind. He has interesting cases. But sometimes I get keyed up."

Mrs. Johnson could not herself describe what keyed her up — perhaps, being on the watch? Her mind was stretched.

She found herself translating the world to him and it took her time to realize that it did not matter that she was not "educated up to it." He obviously liked her version of the world but it was a strain having versions. In the mornings she had to read his letters. This bothered her. She was very moral about privacy. She had to invent an impersonal, uninterested voice. His lack of privacy irked her; she liked gossip and news as much as any woman, but here it lacked the salt of the secret, the whispered, the found out. It was all information and statement. Armitage's life was an abstraction for him. He had to know what he could not see. What she liked best was reading legal documents to him.

He dressed very well and it was her duty to see that his clothes were right. For an orderly, practical mind like hers, the order in which he lived was a new pleasure. They lived under fixed laws: no chair or table, even no ashtray must be moved. Everything must be in its place. There must be no hazards. This was understandable: the ease with which he moved without accident in the house or garden depended on it. She did not believe when he said, "I can hear things before I get to them. A wall can shout, you know." When visitors came she noticed he stood in a fixed spot: he did not turn his head when people spoke to him and among all the head-turning and gesturing he was the still figure, the lawgiver. But he was very cunning. If someone described a film they had seen, he was soon talking as if he had been there. Mrs. Johnson, who had duties when he had visitors, would smile to herself, at the surprise on the faces of people who had not noticed the quickness with which he collected every image or scene or character described.

Sometimes, a lady would say to her, "I do think he's absolutely marvelous," and, if he overheard this — and his hearing was acute — Mrs. Johnson would notice a look of ugly boredom on his face. He was, she noted, particularly vain of his care of money and accounts. This pleased Mrs. Johnson because she was quick to understand that here a blind man who had servants might be swindled. She was indignant about the delinquency of her predecessor.

He must have known he was being swindled.

Once a month Mrs. Johnson would go through the accounts with him. She would make out the checks and take them to his study and put them on his desk.

The scene that followed always impressed her. She really admired him for this. How efficient and devious he was!

He placed the check at a known point on his blotter. The blunt fingers of his hairless hands had the art of gliding and never groping, knowing the inches of distance; and then, as accurately as a geometrician, he signed. There might be a pause as the fingers secretly measured, a pause alarming to her in the early days, but now no longer alarming; sometimes she detected a shade of cruelty in this pause. He was listening for a small gasp of anxiety as she watched.

There was one experience which was decisive for her. It occurred in the first month of her employment and had the lasting stamp of a revelation. (Later on, she thought he had staged the incident in order to show her what his life was like and to fix in her mind the nature of his peculiar authority.) She came into the sitting room one evening in the winter to find a newspaper and heard sharp, unbelievable sounds coming from his study. The door was open and the room was in darkness. She went to it, switched on the light, and saw he was sitting there typing in the darkness.

Well, she could have done that if she had been put to it — but now she saw that for him there was no difference between darkness and light.

"Overtime, I see," she said, careful not to show surprise.

This was when she saw that his mind was a store of maps and measured things; a store of sounds and touches and smells that became an enormous translated paraphernalia.

"You'd feel sorry for a man like that," her friend Marge said.

"He'd half kill you if you showed you were sorry," Mrs. Johnson said. "I don't feel sorry. I really don't."

"Does he ever talk about his wife?"

"No."

"A terrible thing to do to leave a man because he's blind."

"She had a right to her life, hadn't she?" said Mrs. Johnson flatly. "Who would want to marry a blind man?"

"You are hard," Marge said.

"It's not my business," said Mrs. Johnson. "If you start pitying people you end up by hating them. I've seen it. I've been married, don't forget."

"I just wish you had a more normal life, dear."

"It suits me," said Mrs. Johnson.

"He ought to be very grateful to you."

"Why should he be? I do my job. Gratitude doesn't come into it. Let's go and play tennis."

The two women went out and played tennis in the park and Mrs. Johnson kept her friend running from court to court.

"I smell tennis balls and grass," said Mr. Armitage when she returned.

In the March of her third year a bad thing happened.

The winter was late. There was a long spell of hard frost and you could see the cathedral tower clearly over the lowlying woods on most days. The frost coppered the lawns and scarcely faded in the middle of the day. The hedges were spiked and white. She had moved her typing table into the sitting room close to the window to be near a radiator and when she changed a page she would glance out at the garden. Mr. Armitage was out there somewhere and she had got into the habit of being on the watch. Now she saw him walk down the three lawns and find the brick steps that led to the swimming pool. It was enclosed by a yew hedge and was frozen over. She could see Armitage at the far side of it pulling at a small fallen branch that had been caught by the ice. His foot had struck it. On the other side of the hedge, the gardener was cutting cabbage in the kitchen garden and his dog was snuffling about. Suddenly a rabbit ran out, ears down, and the dog was yelping after it.

The rabbit ran through the hedge and almost over Armitage's feet with the dog nearly on it. The gardener shouted.

The next moment Armitage, who was squatting, had the dog under his legs, lost his balance and fell full length through the ice into the pool. Mrs. Johnson saw this. She saw the gardener drop his knife and run to the gap in the hedge to help Armitage out. He was clambering over the side. She saw him wave the gardener's hand away and shout at him and the gardener step away as Armitage got out. He stood clawing weed off his face, out of his hair, wringing his sleeves and brushing ice off his shirt as he marched back fast up the garden. He banged the garden door in a rage as he came in.

"That bloody man. I'll have that dog shot," shouted Armitage.

She hurried to meet him. He had pulled off his 'jacket and thrown it on a chair. Water ran off his trousers and sucked in his shoes. Mrs. Johnson was appalled.

"Go and change your things quickly," she said. And she easily raced him to the stairs to the landing and to his room. By the time he got there she had opened several drawers, looking for underclothes, and had pulled out a suit from his cupboard. Which suit? She pulled out another.

He came squelching after her into the room.

"Towel," she cried. "Get it all off. You'll get pneumonia."

"Get out. Leave me alone," shouted Armitage, who had been tugging his shirt over his head as he came upstairs.

She saw, then, that she had done a terrible thing. By opening drawers and putting clothes on the bed, she had destroyed one of his systems. She saw him grope. She had never seen him do this before. His bare white arms stretched out in a helpless way and his brown hands pitifully closed on air. The action was slow and his fingers frightened her.

"I told you to leave me alone," he shouted.

She saw she had humiliated him. She had broken one of the laws. For the first time she had been incompetent.

Mrs. Johnson went out and quietly shut the door. She walked across the landing to the passage in the wing where her own room was, looking at the wet marks of his muddy shoes on the carpet, each one accusing her. She sat down on the edge of her bed. How could she have been such a fool!

How could she have forgotten his rule? Half naked to the waist, hairy on the chest and arms, he shocked because the rage seemed to be not in his mind but in his body like an animal's. The rage had the pathos of an animal's. Perhaps when he was alone he often groped; perhaps the drilled man she was used to, who came out of his bedroom or his study, was the expert survival of a dozen concealed disasters?

Mrs. Johnson sat on her bed listening. She had never known Armitage to be angry; he was a monotonously considerate man. The shout abashed her and there was a strange pleasure in being abashed; but her mistake was not a mere mistake. She saw that it struck at the foundation of his life and was so gross that the surface of her own confidence was cracked. She was a woman who could reckon on herself, but now her mind was scattered. Useless to say to herself, "What a fuss about nothing," or "Keep calm." Or, about him, "Nasty temper." His shout, "Get out. I told you to leave me alone," had, without reason (except that a trivial shame is a spark that sets fire to a long string of greater shames), burned out all the security of her present life.

She had heard those words, almost exactly those words, before. Her husband had said them. A week after their wedding.

Well, he had had something to shout about, poor devil.

She admitted it. Something a lot more serious than falling into a pond and having someone commit the crime of being kind to you and hurting your silly little pride.

She got up from the bed and turned on the tap of the washbasin to cool down her hot face and wash her hands of the dirt of the jacket she had brought upstairs. She took off her blouse and as she sluiced her face she looked through the water at herself in the mirror. There was a small birthmark, the size of a red leaf which many people noticed and which, as it showed over the neck of the high blouses she usually wore, had the enticement of some signal or fancy of the blood; but under it, and invisible to them, were two smaller ones and then a great spreading ragged liver-colored island of skin which spread under the tape of her slip and crossed her breast and seemed to end in a curdle of skin below it. She was stamped with an ineradicable bloody in-suit. It might have been an attempt to impose another woman on her. She was used to seeing it, but she carried it about with her under her clothes, hiding it and yet vaunting.

Now she was reaching for a towel and inside the towel, as she dried herself, she was talking to Armitage.

"If you want to know what shame and pride are, what about marrying a man who goes plain sick at the sight of your body and who says 'You deceived me. You didn't tell me.' "

She finished drying her face and put the towel on the warm rail and went to her dressing table. The hairbrush she picked up had been a wedding present and at each hard stroke of the brush on her lively fair hair, her face put up a fight, but it exhausted her. She brushed the image of Armitage away and she was left staring at the half-forgotten but never-forgotten self she had been.

How could she have been such a fool as to deceive her husband? It was not through wickedness. She had been blinded too — blinded by love; in a way, love had made her so full of herself that, perhaps, she had never seen him.

And her deceptions: she could not stop herself smiling at them, but they were really pitiable because she was so afraid of losing him and to lose him would be to lose this new beautifully deluded self. She ought to have told him.

There were chances. For example, in his flat with the gray sofa with the spring that bit your bottom going clang, clang at every kiss, when he used to carry on about her wearing dresses that a man couldn't get a hand into. He knew very well she had had affairs with men, but why, when they were both "worked up," wouldn't she undress and go to the bedroom? The sofa was too short. She remembered how shocked his face looked when she pulled up her skirts and lay on the floor. She said she believed in sex before marriage, but she thought some things ought to wait: it would be wrong for him to see her naked before their wedding day. And to show him she was no prude — there was that time they pretended to be looking out of the window at a cricket match; or Fridays in his office when the staff was gone and the cleaners were only at the end of the passage.

"You've got a mole on your neck," he said one day.

"Mother went mad with wanting plums when she was carrying me. It's a birthmark."

"It's pretty," he said and kissed it.

He kissed it. He kissed it. She clung to that when after the wedding they got to the hotel and she hid her face in his shoulder and let him pull down the zip of her dress. She stepped away, and pretending to be shy she undressed under her slip. At last the slip came off over her head. They both looked at each other, she with brazen fear and he — she couldn't forget the shocked blank disgust on his face.

From the neck over the left shoulder down to the breast and below, and spreading like a red tongue to the back was this ugly blob — dark as blood, like a ragged liver on a butcher's window, or some obscene island with ragged edges. It was as if a bucket of paint had been thrown over her.

"You didn't tell me," he said. If only she had told him, but how could she have done? She knew she had been cursed.

"That's why you wouldn't undress, you little hypocrite."

He himself was in his underpants with his trousers on the bed and with his cuff links in his hand, which made his words absurd and awful. His ridiculous look made him tragic and his hatred frightening. It was terrible that for two hours while they talked he did not undress and worse that he gave her a dressing gown to cover herself. She heard him going through the catalogue of her tricks.

"When ..." he began in a pathetic voice. And then she screamed at him.

"What do you think? Do you think I got it done, that I got myself tattooed in the Waterloo Road? I was born like it."

"Ssh," he said, "You'll wake the people in the next room."

"Let them hear. I'll go and show them," she screamed. It was kind of him to put his arm around her. When she had recovered, she put on her fatal, sporty manner. "Some men like it," she said.

He hit her across the face. It was not then but in the following weeks when pity followed and pity turned to cruelty he had said, "Get out. Leave me alone."

Mrs. Johnson went to her drawer and got out a clean blouse.

Her bedroom in Armitage's house was a pretty one, far prettier than any she had ever had. Up till now she had been used to bed-sitters since her marriage. But was it really the luxury of the house and the power she would have in it that had weighed with her when she had decided to take on this strange job? She understood now something else had moved her in the low state she had been in when she came. As a punished and self-hating person she was drawn to work with a punished man. It was a return to her girlhood: injury had led her to injury.

She looked out of the window at the garden. The diamond panes chopped up the sight of the frozen lawns and the firs that were frost-whiskered. She was used to the view.

It was a view of the real world; that, after all, was her world, not his. She saw that gradually in three years she had drifted out of it and had taken to living in Armitage's filed memory. If he said, for example, "That rambler is getting wild. It must be cut back," because a thorn caught his jacket, or if he made his famous remark about seeing the cathedral on a clear day, the landscape limited itself to these things and, in general, reduced itself to the imposed topographical sketch in his mind.

She had allowed him, as a matter of abnegation and duty, to impose his world on hers. Now this shock brought back a lost sense of the right to her own landscape; and then to the protest, that this country was not hers at all. The country bored her. The fir trees bored her. The lanes bored her. The view from this window or the tame protected view of the country from the Rolls-Royce window bored her. She wanted to go back to London, to the streets, the buses and the crowds, to crowds of people with eyes in their heads. And — her spirits rising — "To hell with it, I want people who can see me."

She went downstairs to give orders for the carpet to be brushed.

In the sitting room she saw the top of Armitage's dark head. She had not heard him go down. He was sitting in what she called the cathedral chair facing the window and she was forced to smile when she saw a bit of green weed sticking to his hair. She also saw a heavy glass ashtray had fallen off the table beside him. "Clumsy," she said. She picked it up and lightly pulled off the piece of weed from his hair. He did not notice this.

"Mr. Armitage," she said in her decisive manner, "I lost my head. I'm sorry."

He was silent.

"I understand how you feel," she said. For this (she had decided in her room) was the time for honesty and for having things out. The impersonality could not go on, as it had done for three years.

"I want to go back to London," she said.

"Don't be a damn fool," he said.

Well, she was not going to be sworn at. "I'm not a damn fool," she said. "I understand your situation." And then, before she could stop herself, her voice shaking and loud, she broke out with: "I know what humiliation is."

"Who is humiliated?" said Armitage. "Sit down."

"I am not speaking about you," she said stiffly.

That surprised him, she saw, for he turned his head.

"I'm sorry, I lost my temper," he said. "But that stupid fellow and his dog ..."

"I am speaking about myself," she said. "We have our pride, too."

"Who is we?" he said, without curiosity.

"Women," she said.

He got up from his chair, and she stepped back. He did not move and she saw that he really had not recovered from the fall in the pool, for he was uncertain. He was not sure where the table was.

"Here," he said roughly, putting out a hand. "Give me a hand out of this."

She obediently took him by the arm and stood him clear of the table.

"Listen to me. You couldn't help what happened and neither could I. There's nothing to apologize for. You're not leaving. We get on very well. Take my advice. Don't be hard on yourself."

"It is better to be hard," she said. "Where would you have been if you had not been hard? I'm not a girl. I'm thirty-nine." He moved towards her and put his hand on her right shoulder and she quickly turned her head. He laughed and said, "You've brushed your hair back." He knew. He always knew.

She watched him make for his study and saw him take the wrong course, brush against the sofa by the fireplace, and then a yard or two further, he shouldered the wall.

"Damn," he said.

At dinner, conversation was difficult. He offered her a glass of wine which she refused. He poured himself a second glass and as he sat down he grimaced with pain.

"Did you hurt your back this afternoon?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I was thinking about my wife."

Mrs. Johnson blushed. He had scarcely ever mentioned his wife. She knew only what Marge Brook had told her of the town gossip: how his wife could not stand his blindness and had gone off with someone and that he had given her a lot of money. Someone said, ten thousand pounds. What madness! In the dining room Mrs. Johnson often thought of all those notes flying about over the table and out of the window. He was too rich. Ten thousand pounds of hatred and rage, or love, or madness. In the first place, she wouldn't have touched it.

"She made me build the pool," he said.

"A good idea," she said.

"I don't know why. I never thought of throwing her into it," he said.

Mrs. Johnson said, "Shall I read the paper?" She did not want to hear more about his wife.

Mrs. Johnson went off to bed early. Switching on the radio in her room and then switching it off because it was playing classical music, she said to herself, "Well, funny things bring things back. What a day!" and stepped yawning out of her skirt. Soon she was in bed and asleep.

An hour later, she woke up, hearing her name.

"Mrs. Johnson. The water got into my watch, would you set it for me?" He was standing there in his dressing gown.

"Yes," she said. She was a woman who woke up alert and clearheaded.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were listening to a program. I didn't know you were in bed," he said. He was holding the watch to his ear.

"Would you set it for me and put my alarm right?" He had the habit of giving orders. They were orders spoken into space — and she was the space, nonexistent. He gave her the watch and went off. She put on her dressing gown and followed him to his room. He had switched on the light for her. She went to the bedside table and bent down to wind the clock. Suddenly she felt his arms round her, pulling her upright, and he was kissing her head. The alarm went off suddenly and she dropped the clock. It went on screeching on the floor at her feet.

"Mr. Armitage," she said in a low angry voice, but not struggling. He turned her round and he was trying to kiss her on the lips. At this she did struggle. She twisted her head this way and that to stop him, so that it was her head rather than her body that was resisting him. Her blue eyes fought with all their light, but his eyes were dead as stone.

"Really, Mr. Armitage. Stop it," she managed to mutter. "The door is open. Cook will hear."

She was angry at being kissed by a man who could not see her face, but she felt the shamed insulted woman in her, that blotched inhabitant, blaze up in her skin.

The bell of the alarm clock was weakening and then choked to a stop and in her pettish struggle she stepped on it; her slipper had come off.

"I've hurt my foot." Distracted by the pain she stopped struggling and Armitage took his opportunity and kissed her on the lips. She looked with pain into his sightless eyes.

There was no help there. She was terrified of being drawn into the dark where he lived. And then the kiss seemed to go down her throat and spread into her shoulders, into her breasts and branch into all the veins and arteries of her body and it was the tongue of the shamed woman who had sprung up in her that touched his.

"What are you doing?" she was trying to say, but could only groan the words. When he touched the stained breast she struck back violently, saying, "No, no."

"Come to bed with me," he said.

"Please let me go. I've hurt my foot."

The surprising thing was that he did let her go, and as she sat panting and white in the face on the bed to look at her foot, she looked mockingly at him. She forgot that he could not see her mockery. He sat beside her but did not touch her and he was silent. There was no scratch on her foot. She picked up the clock and put it back on the table.

Mrs. Johnson was proud of the adroitness with which she had kept men away from her since her marriage. It was a war with the inhabitant of the ragged island on her body.

That creature craved for the furtive, for the hand that slipped under a skirt, for the scuffle in the back seat of a car, for a five-minute disappearance into a locked office.

But the other Mrs. Johnson, the cheerful one, was virtuous.

She took advantage of his silence and got quickly up to get away; she dodged past him, but he was quick too.

He was at the closed door. For a moment she was wily. It would be easy for her to dodge him in the room. And, then, she saw once more the sight she could not bear that melted her more certainly than the kisses which had rilled her mouth and throat: she saw his hands begin to open and search and grope in the air as he came towards the sound of her breathing. She could not move. His hand caught her.

The woman inside her seemed to shout, "Why not? You're all right. He cannot see." In her struggle she had not thought of that. In three years he had made her forget that blindness meant not seeing.

"All right," she said and the virtue in Mrs. Johnson pouted. She gently tapped his chest with her fingers and said with the sullenness of desire, "I'll be back in a minute."

It was a revenge: that was the pleasure.

"Dick," she called to her husband, "look at this," when the man was on top of her. Revenge was the only pleasure and his excitement was soon over. To please him she patted him on the head as he lay beside her and said, "You've got long legs." And she nearly said, "You are a naughty boy" and "Do you feel better?" but she stopped herself and her mind went off on to what she had to do in the morning; she listened and wondered how long it would be before he would fall asleep and she could stealthily get away. Revenge astonished by its quickness.

She slyly moved. He knew at once and held her. She waited. She wondered where Dick was now. She wished she could tell him. But presently this blind man in the bed leaned up and put both his hands on her face and head and carefully followed the round of her forehead, the line of her brow, her nose and lips and chin, to the line of her throat and then to her nape and shoulders. She trembled, for after his hands had passed, what had been touched seemed to be new. She winced as his hand passed over the stained shoulder and breast and he paused, knowing that she winced, and she gave a groan of pleasure to deceive him; but he went on, as if he were modeling her, feeling the pit under the arms, the space of ribs and belly and the waist of which she was proud, measuring them, feeling their depth, the roundness of her legs, the bone in her knees until, throwing all clothes back he was holding her ankle, the arch of her foot and her toes. Her skin and her bones became alive. His hands knew her body as she had never known it. In her brief love affairs which had excited her because of the risk of being caught, the first touch of a man stirred her at once, and afterwards, left her looking demurely at him; but she had let no one know her with a pedantry like his. She suddenly sat up and put her arms around him and now she went wild. It was not a revenge now; it was a triumph. She lifted the sad breast to his lips. And when they lay back she kissed his chest and then — with daring — she kissed his eyes.

It was six o'clock before she left him, and when she got to her room the stained woman seemed to bloom like a flower.

It was only after she had slept and saw her room in daylight again that she realized that once more she had deceived a man.

It was late. She looked out of the window and saw Armitage in his city clothes talking to the chauffeur in the garden. She watched them walk to the garage.

"O.K." she said dryly to defend herself. "It was a rape."

During the day there would be moments when she could feel his hands moving over her skin. Her legs tingled. She posed as if she were a new-made statue. But as the day went on she hardened and instead of waiting for him to return she went into the town to see Marge.

"You've put your hair up," Marge said.

"Do you like it?"

"I don't know. It's different. It makes you look severe.

No, not severe. Something. Restless."

"I am not going back to dinner this evening," she said.

"I want a change. Leonard's gone to London."

"Leonard!" said Marge.

Mrs. Johnson wanted to confide in Marge, but Marge bored her. They ate a meal together and she ate fast. To Marge's astonishment she said, "I must fly."

"You are in a mood," Marge said.

Mrs. Johnson was unable to control a longing to see Armitage.

When she got back to the house and saw him sitting by the fire she wanted him to get up and at least put his arms round her; but he did not move, he was listening to music. It was always the signal that he wanted to be alone.

"It is just ending," said Armitage.

The music ended in a roll of drums.

"Do you want something, Helen?" he said.

She tried to be mocking, but her voice could not mock and she said seriously, "About last night. It must not happen again. I don't want to be in a false position. I could not go on living in the house."

She did not intend to say this; her voice, between rebuke and tenderness, betrayed this.

"Sit down."

She did not move.

"I have been very happy here," she said. "I don't want to spoil it."

"You are angry," he said.

"No, I'm not," she said.

"Yes, you are; that is why you were not here when I got back," he said.

"You did not wait for me this morning," she said. "I was glad you didn't. I don't want it to go on."

He came nearer to her and put his hand on her hair.

"I like the way your hair shows your ears," he said. And he kissed them.

"Now, please," she said.

"I love you," he said and kissed her on the forehead and she did not turn her head.

"Do you? I'm glad you said that. I don't think you do. When something has been good, don't spoil it. I don't like love affairs," she said.

And then she changed. "It was a party. Good night."

"You made me happy," he said, holding on to her hand.

"Were you thinking about it a long time?" she said in another voice, lingering for one more word.

"Yes," he said.

"It is very nice of you to say that. It is what you ought to say. But I mean what I said. Now, really, good night. And," giving a pat to his arm, she said, "Keep your watch wound up."

Two nights later he called to her loudly and curtly from the stairs: "Mrs. Johnson, where are you?" and when she came into the hall he said quietly, "Helen."

She liked that. They slept together again. They did not talk.

Their life went on as if nothing had happened. She began to be vain of the stain on her body and could not resist silently displaying, almost taunting him, when she undressed, with what he could not see. She liked the play of deceiving him like this; she was paying him out for not being able to see her; and when she was ashamed of doing this the shame itself would rouse her desire: two women uniting in her. And fear roused her too; she was afraid of his blindness. Sometimes the fear was that the blind can see into the mind. It often terrified her at the height of her pleasure that she was being carried into the dark where he lived. She knew she was not but she could not resist the excitement of imagining it. Afterwards she would turn her back to him, ashamed of her fancies, and as his finger followed the bow of her spine she would drive away the cynical thought that he was just filing this affair away in one of the systems of his memory.

Yet she liked these doubts. How dead her life had been in its practical certainties. She liked the tenderness and violence of sexual love, the simple kindness of the skin. She once said to him, "My skin is your skin." But she stuck to it that she did not love him and that he did not love her. She wanted to be simply a body: a woman like Marge who was always talking about love seemed to her a fool. She liked it that she and Armitage were linked to each other only by signs. And she became vain of her disfigurement, and looking at it, even thought of it as the lure.

I know what would happen to me if I got drunk, she thought at one of Armitage's cocktail parties, I'm the sort of woman who would start taking her clothes off. When she was a young woman she had once started doing so, and someone, thank God, stopped her.

But these fancies were bravado.

They were intended to stop her from telling him.

On Sundays Mrs. Johnson went to church in the village near the house. She had made a habit of it from the beginning, because she thought it the proper thing to do: to go to church had made her feel she need not reproach herself for impropriety in living in the same house as a man. It was a practical matter: before her love affair the tragic words of the service had spoken to her evil. If God had done this to her, He must put up with the sight of her in His house. She was not a religious woman; going to church was an assertion that she had as much right to fair play as anyone else.

It also stopped her from being "such a fool" as to fall to the temptation of destroying her new wholeness by telling him. It was "normal" to go to church and normality had been her craving ever since her girlhood. She had always taken her body, not her mind, to church.

Armitage teased her about her churchgoing when she first came to work for him; but lately his teasing became sharper: "Going to listen to Dearly Beloved Brethren?" he would say.

"Oh, leave him alone," she said.

He had made up a tale about her being in love with the vicar; at first it was a joke, but now there was a sharp edge to it. "A very respectable man," he said.

When the church bells rang on Sunday evening he said, "He's calling to you." She began to see that this joke had the grit of jealousy in it; not of the vicar, of course, but a jealousy of many things in her life.

"Why do you go there? I'd like to understand, seriously," he said.

"I like to get out," she said.

She saw pain on his face. There was never much movement in it beyond the deepening of two lines at the corners of his mouth; but when his face went really dead, it was as sullen as earth in the garden. In her sense, she knew, he never went out. He lived in a system of tunnels. She had to admit that when she saw the gray church she was glad, because it was not his house. She knew from gossip that neither he nor his wife had ever been to it.

There was something else in this new life; now he had freed her they were both more watchful of each other. One Sunday in April she saw his jealousy in the open. She had come in from church and she was telling him about the people who were there. She was sitting on the sofa beside him.

"How many lovers have you had?" he said. "That doctor you worked for, now?"

"Indeed not," she said. "I was married."

"I know you were married. But when you were working for those people in Manchester? And in Canada after the war?"

"No one else. That was just a trip."

"I don't believe you."

"Honestly, it's true."

"In Court I never believe a witness who says 'Honestly.' "

She blushed for she had had three or four lovers, but she was defending herself. They were no business of his.

The subject became darker.

"Your husband," he said. "He saw you. They all saw you."

She knew what he meant, and this scared her.

"My husband. Of course he saw me. Only my husband."

"Ah, so there were others."

"Only my husband saw me," she said. "I told you about it. How he walked out of the hotel after a week."

This was a moment when she could have told him, but to see his jealousy destroy the happiness he had restored to her made her indignant.

"He couldn't bear the sight of me. He had wanted," she invented, "to marry another woman. He told me on the first night of our marriage. In the hotel. Please don't talk about it."

"Which hotel was this?" he said.

The triviality of the question confused her. "In Kensington."

"What was the name?"

"Oh, I forget, the something Royal ..."

"You don't forget."

"I do honestly ..."

"Honestly!" he said.

He was in a rage of jealousy. He kept questioning her about the hotel, the length of their marriage. He pestered for addresses, for dates and tried to confuse her by putting his questions again and again.

"So he didn't leave you at the hotel!" he said.

"Look," she said. "I can't stand jealous men and I'm not going to be questioned like one of your clients."

He did not move or shout. Her husband had shouted and paced up and down, waving his arms. This man sat bolt upright and still, and spoke in a dry exacting voice.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She took his hand, the hand that groped like a helpless tentacle and that had modeled her; it was the most disturbing and living thing about him.

"Are you still in love with your husband?"

"Certainly not."

"He saw you and I have never seen you." He circled again to his obsession.

"It is just as well. I'm not a beautiful woman," she laughed. "My legs are too short, my bottom is too big. You be grateful — my husband couldn't stand the sight of me."

"You have a skin like an apple," he said.

She pushed his hand away and said, "Your hands know too much."

"He had hands. And he had eyes," he said in a voice grinding with violence.

"I'm very tired. I am going to bed," she said. "Good night."

"You see," he said. "There is no answer."

He picked up a Braille book and his hand moved fast over the sheets.

She went to her room and kicked off her shoes and stepped out of her dress.

I've been living in a dream, she thought. Just like Marge, who always thinks her husband's coming back every time the gate goes. It is a mistake, she thought, living in the same house.

The jealous fit seemed to pass. It was a fire, she understood, that flared up just as her shame used to flare, but two Sundays later the fit came on again. He must hate God, she thought and pitied him. Perhaps the music that usually consoled him had tormented him. At any rate, he stopped it when she came in and put her prayer book on the table.

There was a red begonia, which came from the greenhouse, on the table beside the sofa where he was sitting very up-right, as if he had been waiting impatiently for her to come back.

"Come and sit down," he said and began kindly -enough.

"What was Church like? Did they tell you what to do?"

"I was nearly asleep," she said. "After last night. Do you know what time it was?" She took his hand and laughed.

He thought about this for a while. Then he said, "Give me your hands. No. Both of them. That's right. Now spit on them."

"Spit!"

"Yes, that is what the Church tells you."

"What are you talking about?" she said, trying to get her hands away.

"Spit on them." And he forced her hands, though not roughly, to her lips.

"What are you doing?" she laughed nervously and spat on her fingers.

"Now — rub the spittle on my eyes."

"Oh, no," she said.

He let go of her wrist.

"Do as I tell you. It's what your Jesus Christ did when he cured the blind man."

He sat there waiting and she waited.

"He put dust or earth or something on them," he said.

"Get some."

"No," she said.

"There's some here. Put your fingers in it," he said shortly. She was frightened of him.

"In the pot," he insisted as he held one of her wrists so that she could not get away. She dabbed her wet fingers in the earth of the begonia pot.

"Put it on my eyes."

"I can't do that. I really can't," she said.

"Put it on my eyes," he said.

"It will hurt them."

"They are hurt already," he said. "Do as I tell you." She bent to him and, with disgust, she put her dirty fingers on the wet eyeballs. The sensation was horrible and when she saw the dirty patches on his eyes, like two filthy smudges, she thought he looked like an ape.

"That is what you are supposed to do," he said. Jealousy had made him mad.

I can't stay with a mad man, she thought. He's malicious.

She did not know what to do, but he solved that for her. He reached for his Braille book. She got up and left him there.

The next day he went to London.

His habits changed. He went several times into the nearby town on his own and she was relieved that he came back in a silent mood which seemed happy. The horrible scene went out of her mind. She had gone so far as to lock her bedroom door for several nights after that scene, but now she unlocked it. He had brought her a bracelet from London; she drifted into unguarded happiness. She knew so well how torment comes and goes.

It was full undreaming June, the leaves in the garden still undarkened, and for several days people were surprised when day after day the sun was up and hot and unclouded.

Mrs. Johnson went down to the pool. Armitage and his guests often tried to persuade her to go in but she always refused.

"They once tried to get me to go down to Peckham Baths when I was a kid, but I screamed," she said.

The guests left her alone. They were snobbish about Peckham Baths.

But Mrs. Johnson decided to become a secret bather.

One afternoon when Armitage was in London and the cook and gardener had their day off, she went down with the gardener's dog. She wore a black bathing suit that covered her body and lowered herself by the steps into the water. Then she splashed at the shallow end of the pool and hung on to the rail while the dog barked at her. He stopped barking when she got out and sniffed round the hedge where she pulled down her bathing dress to her waist and lay down to get sun-drunk on her towel.

She was displaying herself to the sun, the sky and the trees. The air was like hands that played on her as Armitage did and she lay listening to the snuffles of the dog and the humming of the bees in the yew hedge. She had been there an hour when the dog barked at the hedge. She quickly picked up a towel and covered herself and called to the dog: "What is it?"

He went on barking and then gave up and came to her.

She sat down. Suddenly the dog barked again. Mrs. Johnson stood up and tried to look through one of the thinner places in the hedge. A man who must have been close to the pool and who must have passed along the footpath from the lane, a path used only by the gardener, was walking up the lawns towards the house carrying a trilby hat in his hand. He was not the gardener. He stopped twice to get his breath and turned to look at the view. She recognized the smiling gray suit, the

wide figure and snowball head: it was "Wolverhampton" Smith. She waited and saw him go on to the house and ring a bell. Then he disappeared round the corner and went to the front of the house. Mrs. Johnson quickly dressed. Presently he came back to look into the windows of the sitting room. He found the door and for a minute or two went into the house and then came out.

"The cheek," she said. She finished dressing and went up the lawn to him.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "What a sweet place this is.

I was looking for Mr. Armitage."

"He's in London."

"I thought he might be in the pool," he said. Mr. Smith looked rich with arch, smiling insinuation.

"When will he be back?"

"About six. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, no, no," said Mr. Smith in a variety of genial notes, waving a hand. "I was out for a walk."

"A long walk — seven miles."

"I came," said Mr. Smith modestly lowering his eyes in financial confession, "by bus."

"The best way. Can I give you a drink?"

"I never touch it," Mr. Smith said, putting up an austere hand. "Well, a glass of water perhaps. As the Americans say, 'I'm mighty thirsty.' My wife and I came down here for the water, you know. London water is chalky. It was very bad for my wife's arthritis. It's bad for everyone really.

There's a significant increase in neuralgia, neuritis, arthritis in a city like London. The chalky water does it. People don't realize it"— and here Mr. Smith stopped smiling and put on a stern excommunicating air — "If you believe that man's life is ruled by water. I personally don't."

"Not by water only, anyway," said Mrs. Johnson.

"I mean," said Mr. Smith gravely, "if you believe that the material body exists." And when he said this, the whole sixteen stone of him looked scornfully at the landscape which, no doubt, concealed thousands of people who believed they had bodies. He expanded: he seemed to threaten to vanish.

Mrs. Johnson fetched a glass of water. "I'm glad to see you're still there," she laughed when she came back.

Mr. Smith was resting on the garden seat. "I was just thinking — thank you — there's a lot of upkeep in a place like this," he said.

"There is."

"And yet — what is upkeep? Money — so it seems. And if we believe in the body, we believe in money, we believe in upkeep and so it goes on," said Mr. Smith sunnily, waving his glass at the garden. And then sharply and loftily, free of this evil: "It gives employment." Firmly telling her she was employed. "But," he added, in warm contemplation, putting down his glass and opening his arms, gathering in the landscape, "but there is only one employer."

"There are a hell of a lot of employers."

Mr. Smith raised an eyebrow at the word "hell" and said, "Let me correct you there. I happen to believe that God is the only employer."

"I'm employed by Mr. Armitage," she said. "Mr. Armitage loves this place. You don't have to see to love a garden."

"It's a sweet place," said Mr. Smith. He got up and took a deep breath. "Pine trees. Wonderful. The smell! My wife doesn't like pine trees. She is depressed by them. It's all in the mind," said Mr. Smith. "As Shakespeare says. By the way, I suppose the water's warming up in the pool? June — it would be. That's what I should like — a swim."

He did see me! thought Mrs. Johnson.

"You should ask Mr. Armitage," she said coldly.

"Oh, no, no," said Mr. Smith. "I just feel that to swim and have a sun bathe would be the right idea. I should like a place with a swimming pool. And a view like this. I feel it would suit me. And, by the way," he became stern again, "don't let me hear you say again that Mr. Armitage enjoys this place although he doesn't see it. Don't tie his blindness on him. You'll hold him back. He does see it. He reflects allseeing God. I told him so on Wednesday."

"On Wednesday?"

"Yes," he said. "When he came for treatment. I managed to fit him in. Good godfathers, look at the time! I've to get the bus back. I'm sorry to miss Mr. Armitage. Just tell him I called. I just had a thought to give him, that's all. He'll appreciate it."

"And now," Mr. Smith said sportively, "I must try and avoid taking a dive into that pool as I go by, mustn't I?"

She watched his stout marching figure go off down the path.

For treatment! What on earth did Mr. Smith mean? She knew the rest when Armitage came home.

"He came for his check," he said. "Would you make out a check for a hundred and twenty pounds —"

"A hundred and twenty pounds!" she exclaimed.

"For Mr. Smith," he repeated. "He is treating my eyes."

"Your eyes! He's not an ophthalmic surgeon."

"No," said Armitage coldly. "I have tried those."

"You're not going to a faith healer!"

"I am."

And so they moved into their second quarrel. It was baffling to quarrel with Armitage. He could hear the firm ring of your voice but he could not see your eyes blooming wider and bluer with obstinacy; for her, her eyes were herself.

It was like quarreling with a man who had no self or, perhaps, with one that was always hidden.

"Your church goes in for it," he said.

"Proper faith healing," she said.

"What is proper?" he said.

She had a strong belief in propriety.

"A hundred and twenty pounds! You told me yourself Smith is a fraud. I mean, you refused his case. How can you go to a fraud?"

"I don't think I said fraud," he said.

"You didn't like the way he got five thousand pounds out of that silly young man."

"Two thousand," he said.

"He's after your money," she said. "He's a swindler."

In her heart, having been brought up poor, she thought it was a scandal that Armitage was well-off; it was even more scandalous to throw money away.

"Probably. At the end of his tether," he said. He was conveying, she knew, that he was at the end of his tether too.

"And you fall for that? You can't possibly believe the nonsense he talks."

"Don't you think God was a crook? When you think of what He's done?"

"No, I don't." (But, in fact, the stained woman thought He was.) "What did Smith talk about?"

"I was in the pool. I think he was spying on me. I forget what he was talking about — water, chalky water, was it?"

"He's odd about chalk!" Armitage laughed. Then he became grim again: "You see — even Smith can see you. You see people, you see Smith, everyone sees everything and so they can afford to throw away what they see and forget. But I have to remember everything. You know what it is like trying to remember a dream. Smith is right, I'm dreaming a dream," Armitage added sardonically. "He says that I'm only dreaming I cannot see."

She could not make out whether Armitage was serious.

"All right. I don't understand, but all right. What happens next?"

"You can wake up."

Mr. Armitage gave one of his cruel smiles. "I told you.

When I used to go to the Courts I often listened to witnesses like Smith. They were always bringing "God is my witness" into it. I never knew a more religious lot of men than dishonest witnesses. They were always bringing in a Higher Power. Perhaps they were in contact with it."

"You don't mean that. You are making fun of me," she said. And then vehemently: "I hate to see you going to an ignorant man like that. I thought you were too proud. What has happened to you?"

She had never spoken her mind so forcibly to him before.

"If a man can't see," he said, "if you couldn't see, humiliation is what you'd fear most. I thought I ought to accept it."

He had never been so open with her.

"You couldn't go lower than Mr. Smith," she said.

"We're proud. That is our vice," he said. "Proud in the dark. Everyone else has to put up with humiliation. You said you knew what it was — I always remember that. Millions of people are humiliated: perhaps it makes them stronger because they forget it. I want to join them."

"No, you don't," she said.

They were lying in bed and leaning over him she put her breast to his lips, but he lay lifeless. She could not bear it that he had changed her and that she had stirred this profound wretchedness in him. She hated confession: to her it was the male weakness — self-love. She got out of bed.

"Come to that," she said. "It's you who are humiliating me. You are going to this quack man because we've slept together. I don't like the compliment."

"And you say you don't love me," he said.

"I admire you," she said. She dreaded the word "love."

She picked up her clothes and left the room. She hadn't the courage to say she hadn't the courage. She stuck to what she had felt since she was a child: that she was a body. He had healed it with his body.

Once more she thought, I shall have to go. I ought to have stuck to it and gone before. If I'd been living in the town and just been coming up for the day it would have been O.K. Living in the house was your mistake, my girl.

You'll have to go and get another job. But, of course, when she calmed down, she realized that all this was self-deception: she was afraid to tell him. She brusquely drove off the thought, and her mind went to the practical.

That hundred and twenty pounds! She was determined not to see him swindled. She went with him to Mr. Smith's next time. The roof of the Rolls-Royce gleamed over the shrubbery of the uncut hedge of Mr. Smith's house. A cat was sitting on the window sill. Waiting on the doorstep was the little man, wide-waisted and with his hands in his optimistic pockets, and changing his smile of welcome to a reminder of secret knowledge when he saw her. Behind the undressing smile of Mr. Smith stood the kind, cringing figure of his wife, looking as they all walked into the narrow hall.

"Straight through?" said Mrs. Johnson in her managing voice. "And leave them to themselves, I suppose?"

"The back gets the sun. At the front it's all these trees," said Mrs. Smith, encouraged by Mrs. Johnson's presence to speak out in a weak voice, as if it was all she did get. "I was a London girl."

"So am I," said Mrs. Johnson.

"But you've got a beautiful place up there. Have you got these pine trees too?"

"A few."

"They give me the pip," said Mrs. Smith. "Coffee? Shall I take your coat? My husband said you'd got pines."

"No, thank you, I'll keep it," said Mrs. Johnson. "Yes, we've got pines. I can't say they're my favorite trees. I like to see leaves come off. And I like a bit of traffic myself. I like to see a shop."

"Oh, you would," said Mrs. Smith.

The two women looked with the shrewd London look at each other.

"I'm so busy up there I couldn't come before. I don't like Mr. Armitage coming alone. I like to keep an eye on him," said Mrs. Johnson, set for attack.

"Oh yes, an eye."

"Frankly, I didn't know he was coming to see Mr. Smith."

But Mrs. Johnson got nothing out of Mrs. Smith. They were both half listening to the rumble of men's voices next door. Then the meeting was over and they went out to meet the men. In his jolly way Mr. Smith said to Mrs. Johnson as they left, "Don't forget about that swim!"

Ostentatiously to show her command and to annoy Armitage, she armed him down the path.

"I hope you haven't invited that man to swim in the pool," said Mrs. Johnson to Mr. Armitage on the way home.

"You've made an impression on Smith," said Armitage.

"No, / haven't."

"Poor Mrs. Smith," said Mrs. Johnson.

Otherwise they were silent.

She went a second, then a third, time to the Smiths' house. She sat each time in the kitchen talking and listening to the men's voices in the next room. Sometimes there were long silences.

"Is Mr. Smith praying?" Mrs. Johnson asked.

"I expect so," said Mrs. Smith. "Or reading."

"Because it is prayer, isn't it?" said Mrs. Johnson.

Mrs. Smith was afraid of this healthy downright woman and it was an effort for her to make a stand on what evidently for most of her married life had been poor ground.

"I suppose it is. Prayer, yes, that is what it would be.

Dad —" she changed her mind —"my husband has always had faith." And with this, Mrs. Smith looked nervously at being able loyally to put forward the incomprehensible.

"But what does he actually do? I thought he had a chemist's shop," pursued Mrs. Johnson.

Mrs. Smith was a timid woman who wavered now between the relics of dignity and a secretive craving to impart.

"He has retired," said Mrs. Smith. "When we closed the shop he took this up." She said this, hoping to clutch a certainty.

Mrs. Johnson gave a bustling laugh. "No, you misunderstand me. What I mean is, what does he actually do? What is the treatment?"

Mrs. Smith was lost. She nodded, as it were, to nothingness several times.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you'd call it prayer. I don't really understand it."

"Nor do I," said Mrs. Johnson. "I expect you've got enough to do keeping house. I have my work cut out too."

They still heard the men talking. Mrs. Johnson nodded to the wall.

"Still at it," said Mrs. Johnson. "I'll be frank with you, Mrs. Smith. I am sure your husband does whatever he does do for the best ..."

"Oh, yes, for the best," nodded Mrs. Smith. "It's saved us. He had a writ out against him when Mr. Armitage's check came in. I know he's grateful."

"But I believe in being open ..."

"Open," nodded Mrs. Smith.

"I've told him and I've told Mr. Armitage that I just don't believe a man who has been blind for twenty-two years —"

"Terrible," said Mrs. Smith. "— can be cured. Certainly not by — whatever this is. Do you believe it, Mrs. Smith?"

Mrs. Smith was cornered.

"Our Lord did it," she said desperately. "That is what my husband says..."

"I was a nurse during the war and I have worked for doctors," said Mrs. Johnson. "I am sure it is impossible.

I've knocked about a lot. You're a sensible woman, Mrs. Smith. I don't want to offend you, but you don't believe it yourself, do you?"

Mrs. Johnson's eyes grew larger and Mrs. Smith's older eyes were helpless and small. She longed for a friend. She was hypnotized by Mrs. Johnson, whose face and pretty neck grew firmly out of her frilled and high-necked blouse.

"I try to have faith ..." said Mrs. Smith, rallying to her husband. "He says I hold him back. I don't know."

"Some men need to be held back," said Mrs. Johnson and she gave a fighting shake to her healthy head. All Mrs. Smith could do in her panic was to watch every move of Mrs. Johnson's, study her expensive shoes and stockings, her capable skirt, her painted nails. Now, at the shake of Mrs. Johnson's head, she saw on the right side of the neck the small petal of the birthmark just above the frill of the collar.

"None of us are perfect," said Mrs. Smith slyly.

"I have been with Mr. Armitage four years," Mrs. Johnson said.

"It is a lovely place up there," said Mrs. Smith, eager to change the subject. "It must be terrible to live in such a lovely place and never see it..."

"Don't you believe it," said Mrs. Johnson. "He knows that place better than any of us, better than me."

"No," groaned Mrs. Smith. "We had a blind dog when I was a girl. It used to nip hold of my dress to hold me back if it heard a car coming when I was going to cross the road. It belonged to my aunt and she said 'That dog can see. It's a miracle.' "

"He heard the car coming," said Mrs. Johnson. "It's common sense."

The words struck Mrs. Smith.

"Yes, it is, really," she said. "If you come to think of it."

She got up and went to the gas stove to make more coffee and new courage came to her. We know why she doesn't want Mr. Armitage to see again! She was thinking: the frightening Mrs. Johnson was really weak. Housekeeper and secretary to a rich man, sitting very pretty up there, the best of everything. Plenty of money, staff, cook, gardener, chauffeur, Rolls-Royce — if he was cured where would her job be? Oh, she looks full of herself now, but she is afraid. I expect she's got round him to leave her a bit.

The coffee began to bubble up in the pot and that urgent noise put excitement into her and her old skin blushed.

"Up there with a man alone. As I said to Dad, a woman can tell! Where would she get another man with that spot spreading all over? She's artful. She's picked the right one."

She was telling the tale to herself.

The coffee boiled over and hissed on the stove and a sudden forgotten jealousy hissed up in Mrs. Smith's uncertain mind. She took the pot to the table and poured out a boiling hot cup and as the steam clouded up from it, screening her daring stare at the figure of Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Smith wanted to say: "Lying there stark naked by that swimming pool right in the face of my husband. What was he doing up there anyway?"

She could not say it. There was not much pleasure in Mrs. Smith's life; jealousy was the only one that enlivened her years with Mr. Smith. She had flown at him when he came home and had told her that God had guided him, that prayer always uncovered evil and brought it to the sur-

face; it had revealed to him that the Devil had put his mark on Mrs. Johnson, and that he wouldn't be surprised if that was what was holding up the healing of Mr. Armitage.

"What were you doing," she screamed at him, "looking at a woman?"

The steam cleared and Mrs. Smith's nervousness returned as she saw that composed face. She was frightened now of her own imagination and of her husband's. She knew him. He was always up to something.

"Don't you dare say anything to Mr. Armitage about this!" she had shouted at him.

But now she fell back on admiring Mrs. Johnson again.

Settled for life, she sighed. She's young. She is only fighting for her own. She's a woman.

And Mrs. Smith's pride was stirred. Her courage was fitful and weakened by what she had lived through. She had heard Mrs. Johnson was divorced and it gave Mrs. Smith strength as a woman who had "stuck to her husband." She had not gone round taking up with men as she guessed Mrs. Johnson might have done. She was a respectable married woman.

Her voice trembled at first but became stronger.

"Dad wanted to be a doctor when he was a boy," Mrs. Smith was saying, "but there wasn't the money so he worked in a chemist's but it was always Church on Sundays.

I wasn't much of a one for Church myself. But you must have capital and being just behind the counter doesn't lead anywhere. Of course I tried to egg him on to get his diploma and he got the papers — but I used to watch him.

He'd start his studying and then he'd get impatient. He's a very impatient man and he'd say 'Amy, I'll try the Ministry' — he's got a good voice — 'Church people have money.' "

"And did he?"

"No, he always wanted to, but he couldn't seem to settle to a church — I mean a religion. I'll say this for him, he's a fighter. Nixon, his first guv'nor, thought the world of him: quick with the sales. Nixon's Cough Mixture — well, he didn't invent it, but he changed the bottles and the labels, made it look — fashionable, dear — you know? A lot of Wesleyans took it."

Mrs. Smith spread her hands over her face and laughed through her fingers.

"When Nixon died someone in the church put up some money, a very religious, good man. One day Dad said to me — I always remember it — 'It's not medicine. It's faith does it.' He's got faith. Faith is — well, faith."

"In himself?" suggested Mrs. Johnson.

"That's it! That's it!" cried Mrs. Smith with excitement.

Then she quietened and dabbed a tear from her cheek. "I begged him not to come down here. But this Mrs. Rogers, the lady who owns the house, she's deaf and on her own, he knew her. She believes in him. She calls him Daniel. He's treating her for deafness, she can't hear a word, so we brought our things down after we closed up in Ealing, that's why it's so crowded, two of everything, I have to laugh."

"So you don't own the house?"

"Oh, no, dear — oh, no," Mrs. Smith said, frightened of the idea. "He wants something bigger. He wants space for his work."

Mrs. Smith hesitated and looked at the wall through which the sound of Mr. Smith's voice was coming. And then, fearing she had been disloyal, she said, "She's much better. She's very funny. She came down yesterday calling him. 'Daniel. Daniel. I hear the cuckoo.' Of course I didn't say anything: it was the man calling out "Coal." But she is better. She wouldn't have heard him at all when we came here."

They were both silent.

"You can't live your life from A to Z," Mrs. Smith said, waking up. "We all make mistakes. We've been married for forty-two years. I expect you have your troubles too, even in that lovely place."

After the hour Mr. Smith came into the kitchen to get Mrs. Johnson.

"What a chatter!" he said to her. "I never heard such a tittle tattle in my life."

"Yes, we had a fine chat, didn't we?"

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Smith boldly.

"How is it going on?" said Mrs. Johnson.

"Now, now," Mr. Smith corrected her. "These cases seemingly take time. You have to get to the bottom of it.

We don't intend to, but we keep people back by the thoughts we hold over them."

And then, in direct attack on her — "I don't want you to hold no wrong thoughts over me. You have no power over Divine Love." And he turned to his wife to silence her.

"And how would I do that?" said Mrs. Johnson.

"Cast the mote out of thine own eye," said Smith. "Heal yourself. We all have to." He smiled broadly at her.

"I don't know what all this talk about Divine Love is," said Mrs. Johnson. "But I love Mr. Armitage as he is."

Smith did not answer.

Armitage had found his way to the door of the kitchen.

He listened and said, "Goodbye, Mrs. Smith." And to Mr. Smith: "Send me your bill. I'm having the footpath closed."

They drove away.

"I love Mr. Armitage as he is." The words had been forced out of her by the detestable man. She hated that she had said to him what she could not say to Armitage. They surprised her. She hoped Armitage had not heard them.

He was silent in the car. He did not answer any of her questions.

"I'm having that path closed," he repeated.

I know! she thought. Smith has said something about me. Surely not about "it"!

When they got out of the car at the house he said to the chauffeur, "Did you see Mr. Smith when he came up here three weeks ago? It was a Thursday. Were you down at the pool?"

"It's my afternoon off, sir."

"I know that. I asked whether you were anywhere near the pool. Or in the garden?"

"No, sir."

Oh God, Mrs. Johnson groaned. Now he's turned on Jim.

"Jim went off on his motor bike. I saw him," said Mrs. Johnson.

They went into the house.

"You don't know who you can trust," Armitage said and went across to the stairs and started up. But instead of putting his hand to the rail which was on the right, he put it out to the left, and not finding it, stood bewildered. Mrs. Johnson quietly went to that side of him and nudged him in the right direction.

When he came down to lunch he sat in silence before the cutlets on his plate.

"After all these years! I know the rail is on the right and I put out my left hand."

"You just forgot," she said. "Why don't you try forgetting a few more things?"

She was cross about the questioning of the chauffeur.

"Say, one thing a day," she said.

He listened and this was one of those days when he cruelly paused a long time before replying. A minute went by and she started to eat.

"Like this?" he said, and he deliberately knocked his glass of water over. The water spread over the cloth towards her plate.

"What's this silly temper?" she said, and lifting her plate away, she lifted the cloth and started mopping with her table napkin and picked up the glass.

"I'm fed up with you blind people," she said angrily.

"All jealousy and malice, just childish. You're so clever, aren't you? What happened? Didn't that good Mr. Smith do the magic trick? I don't wonder your wife walked out on you. Pity the poor blind! What about other people? I've had enough. You have an easy life; you sail down in your Rolls and think you can buy God from Mr. Smith just because — I don't know why — but if he's a fraud you're a fraud." Suddenly the wronged inhabitant inside her started to shout: "I'll tell you something about that Peeping Jesus: he saw the lot. Oh, yes, I hadn't a stitch on. The lot!" she was shouting. And then she started to unzip her dress and pull it down over her shoulder and drag her arm out of it.

"You can't see it, you silly fool. The whole bloody Hebrides, the whole plate of liver."

And she went to his place, got him by the shoulder and rubbed her stained shoulder and breast against his face.

"Do you want to see more?" she shouted. "It made my husband sick. That's what you've been sleeping with. And" — she got away as he tried to grip her and laughed — "you didn't know! He did."

She sat down and cried hysterically with her head and arms on the table.

Armitage stumbled in the direction of her crying and put his hand on her bare shoulder.

"Don't touch me! I hate your hands." And she got up, dodged round him to the door and ran out sobbing; slower than she was, he was too late to hear her steps. He found his way back to the serving hatch and called to the cook.

"Go up to Mrs. Johnson. She's in her room. She's ill," he said.

He stood in the hall waiting; the cook came downstairs and went into the sitting room.

"She's not there. She must have gone into the garden."

And then she said at the window, "She's down by the pool."

"Go and talk to her," he said.

The cook went out of the garden door and on to the terrace.

She was a thin round-shouldered woman. She saw Mrs. Johnson move back to the near side of the pool; she seemed to be staring at something in the water. Then the cook stopped and came shouting back to the house.

"She's fallen in. With all her clothes on. She can't swim.

I know she can't swim." And then the cook called out, "Jim! Jim!" and ran down the lawns.

Armitage stood helpless.

"Where's the door?" he called. There was no one there.

Armitage made an effort to recover his system, but it was lost. He found himself blocked by a chair, but he had forgotten which chair. He waited to sense the movement of air in order to detect where the door was, but a window was half open and he found himself against glass. He made his way feeling along the wall, but he was traveling away from the door. He stood still again, and smelling a kitchen smell he made his way back across the center of the long room and at last found the first door and then the door to the garden. He stepped out, but he was exhausted and his will had gone. He could only stand in the breeze, the disorderly scent of the flowers and the grass mocking him. A jeering bird flew up. He heard the gardener's dog barking below and a voice, the gardener's voice, shouting "Quiet!" Then he heard voices coming slowly nearer up the lawn.

"Helen," called Armitage, but they pushed past him. He felt her wet dress brush his hand and her foot struck his leg; the gardener was carrying her.

"Marge," Armitage heard her voice as she choked and was sick.

"Upstairs. I'll get her clothes off," said the cook.

"No," said Armitage.

"Be quiet," said the cook.

"In my room," said Armitage.

"What an idea!" said the cook. "Stay where you are.

Mind you don't slip on all this wet."

He stood, left behind in the hall, listening, helpless.

Only when the doctor came did he go up.

She was sitting up in bed and Armitage held her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You'd better fill that pool up. It hasn't brought you any luck."

Armitage and Mrs. Johnson are in Italy now; for how long it is hard to say. They themselves don't know. Some people call her Mrs. Armitage, some call her Mrs. Johnson; this uncertainty pleases her. She has always had a secret and she is too old, she says, to give up the habit now. It still pleases Armitage to baffle people. It is impossible for her to deny that she loves Armitage, because he heard what she said to Smith; she has had to give in about that. And she does love him because his system has broken down completely in Italy. "You are my eyes," he says. "Everything sounds different here." "I like a bit of noise," she says.

Pictures in churches and galleries he is mad about and he likes listening to her descriptions of them and often laughs at some of her remarks, and she is beginning, she says, to get "a kick out of the classical stuff" herself.

There was an awkward moment before they set off for Italy when he made her write out a check for Smith and she tried to stop him.

"No," he said, "He got it out of you. I owe you to him."

She was fighting the humiliating suspicion that in his nasty prying way Smith had told Armitage about her before she had told him. But Armitage said, "I knew all the time. From the beginning. I knew everything about you."

She still does not know whether to believe him or not. When she does believe, she is more awed than shamed; when she does not believe she feels carelessly happy. He depends on her entirely here. One afternoon, standing at the window of their room and looking at the people walking in the lemonish light across the square, she suddenly said, "I love you. I feel gaudy!" She notices that the only thing he doesn't like is to hear a man talk to her.

Summary and analysis

"Blind Love" is one of Pritchett's most poignant and compelling short stories. Through an almost unnoticeable flashback technique the reader perceives a full delineation of the character of Mr. Armitage, a lawyer who has been blind for twenty years, and Mrs. Johnson, a secretary/housekeeper, who has a huge scar extending from the neck down across her chest. Armitage, who has a house in the country, is wealthy; he travels regularly into London to carry on his business affairs. For two years, these two have led a quiet but rather satisfying life. Mrs. Johnson goes regularly to church. Both have been divorced by their mates: Armitage's wife departed because of her husband's blindness, while Mrs. Johnson's husband, on their wedding night, was disgusted with her unsightly scar. Mrs. Johnson had not told her husband of this disfigurement, conceding in retrospect that she had been blinded by love. Armitage has instructed Mrs. Johnson that nothing is ever to be disturbed. One day, however, while in the garden, he is tripped by his dog near the swimming pool; he falls into the water and is rescued. In her kind attempt to help her employer, Mrs. Johnson enters his bedroom and starts to help him obtain dry

clothes. She breaks the cardinal rule, and Armitage demands that she get out and leave him alone. Mrs. Johnson, rebuffed by his rudeness, decides that since she has not enjoyed the country she should leave Armitage's employ. Shortly thereafter, Armitage apologizes and presses sexual attention on Mrs. Johnson, and they make love. Still defensive, Mrs. Johnson considers the lovemaking an act of revenge against her former husband. At this point neither person's handicap is a barrier to sex, one of the ironies for which Pritchett was famous.

Throughout the story, religious [imagery](#) prevails. Both Armitage and Mrs. Johnson fall into the pool, experiencing a kind of baptism. Armitage makes Mrs. Johnson rub spittle and dirt on his eyes to cure his blindness, just as Christ cured the blind man in Scripture. Both characters have wounds. There is an attempt at faith healing when Armitage goes to Mr. Smith, who preaches the spiritual life but who is obese and has two of everything. When Mrs. Johnson falls into the pool, is rescued, and cries that Mr. Smith saw her sunbathing near the pool nude and perceived her as a "plate of liver," she and Armitage experience a moment of epiphany. The story ends with the two aware that they no longer need to view their handicaps as weapons. Although both have been physically and emotionally scarred by fate, their defects have led to self-understanding and to a love for each other. Both have lost their pride as they sense their mutual need.