

The Actual Thing

THE odor, if it was an odor, came from the other end of the attic, Mr. Tupper decided. He was looking about for a long wooden croquet box which had certain of his possessions in it—his Knights Templar sword, the works of Ingersoll, and an album of pressed flowers from the Holy Land. The attic was dreadfully hot and it might only be that, he thought—the dust and the heat. All at once he gave up pushing boxes and trunks around and went to the other end and stood sniffing in front of the bookcase. Then he began taking books down by twos and threes—“The Clansman” and “Truxton King,” and dreary-looking textbooks that his nieces, Marjorie and Anne, and his nephew Joe had brought up to the country with them one summer or another and never opened. On the third shelf, behind the “Æneid,” there was a dead blue jay. It had been dead a long time. A month, probably. The feathers were a dusty blue and the face was as dry and fragile and almost the same color as ashes. When Mr. Tupper bent forward to look at it over the tops of his glasses, the odor was quite sharp.

How did it ever manage to get in behind the books, he said to himself, and went to the window and threw it open. The air outside was saturated with August. There were voices calling, down by the tennis court. Young Joe’s voice, high and uncertain. Then the voice of his friend, whose name Mr. Tupper couldn’t for the moment remember. Stillwell or Stimson—some such name. “Thirty-forty,” they said. “Deuce. . . . Deuce it is.” And then, “My ad.” Mr. Tupper, listening, felt as old as the hills. It was not probable, he said to himself—it was not even reasonable to *suppose* that he would live much longer. When he was gone, Henrietta, being his only sister, might keep his picture about somewhere, inconspicuously. And she would wait a year before doing his bedroom over into a guest room. But eventually she *would* do it over, and they would ask people out for the weekend—business acquaintances of Frank’s who would undoubtedly stand at the window, as Mr. Tupper was doing now, and hear young voices coming up from the tennis court at the bottom of the hill.

The thought of such an end to his identity was sufficient to make Mr. Tupper lose whatever interest he had had earlier in the afternoon in the croquet box. He left the window open and turned and made his way down the attic steps.

In the living room it was pleasantly cool and dark, and Henrietta was there before him in a faded pink kimono and her gray hair pinned up on top of her head.

"Hello," he said.

She merely glanced at him from the sofa where she was sitting. She had a large pair of shears in her hand and a heap of flowered cretonne spread about her. Mr. Tupper stood and watched her. All Henrietta needed to do, apparently, was to lay an old curtain on the new material across her lap and in a careless way begin cutting. The cretonne was yellow and pale-green and mustard-color.

"Aren't you afraid you'll cut something you oughtn't to?" he asked.

But she was not afraid. "Perfectly simple," she explained without looking up. Mr. Tupper sat down near her and took out a cigarette. When it appeared that there weren't going to be matches in any of his trousers pockets, Henrietta gathered her shears and her curtain and the folds of her material into one hand and found him a packet of matches with the other, so that he didn't have to get up and go out to the kitchen, after all.

"There," she said, pushing an ashtray toward him. And when Mr. Tupper started to put the matches in his pocket, she said, "If you'll put them back in that little blue box," indicating the end table, "they'll be there when you want them the next time."

Mr. Tupper nodded. His sister was not really silly. It was just that she and Frank had been very poor when they were first married, and she had had to look after the children herself. From being alone with children so much, she had developed the habit of talking as if to a large audience of them.

"Etta," he said thoughtfully, "have you made your will?" She didn't answer him, but then she didn't always answer him, and so he went right on, "Because if you haven't, I think you ought to. Now that the girls are both married and have left home, it's important. It's really quite important."

"I suppose it is," she said as the shears cut through the centre of a large yellow poppy. "I suppose it is," she repeated. Then she stopped and looked at him oddly. It was the look she used to have sometimes when they were children, when she saw him coming toward her and knew that in a minute she would have to defend her dolls. Then the look changed. "Edward," she exclaimed. "Your hands!"

He glanced at them. They were, as a matter of fact, quite black.

"Where on earth have you been?"

"In the attic," he said. And for a moment he was on the verge of explaining to her about the blue jay. But then he realized that it was only a trick—Henrietta's way of taking his mind off what he was saying, and getting him to talk about something unimportant. "I haven't made one," he continued. "I haven't made my own will. I keep putting it off. But tomorrow I'm going in to town and do something about it. I think it's high time. I'm fifty-seven, Etta—be fifty-eight in January—and I might have kicked off any time during the last ten years." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye to see whether or not she was shocked. Apparently the idea held no terror for her. "I'm convinced," he said, "that it was a mistake. I should have thought more about it."

"I really don't see why," she said.

Mr. Tupper looked at his hands. Then he got up suddenly and began to walk back and forth in the shadows of the living room. "Before Joe was born you thought about him, didn't you? You wondered whether Joe was going to be a boy or a girl and what you'd name him? And whether it would be hard on you when the time came?"

"That's different, Edward."

"What's different about it?"

"Well, for one thing, all this brooding about death is so . . ." She folded the material impatiently and cut at right angles to the two strips now hanging from her lap. "It's so morbid."

There! Mr. Tupper thought with satisfaction. That was what people invariably said. Death was morbid. Anything that people said about death was morbid. He came and stood beside his sister.

"How do you know, Etta—how do you know it's morbid to

think about death? You've never let yourself consider even the possibility of dying."

"Oh yes I have. Everybody does. Only I try not to let myself do it, Edward. I think about Joe or the girls, or I think of something around the house that needs fixing. And after a while it goes away." She bent her head over the flowered material so that he wouldn't be able to tell that she was upset. Mr. Tupper wheeled away from her and began walking again.

"From now on," he said, "I'm going to think about death a great deal. All the time, in fact."

"Very well. You may," she said, and her hand shook slightly as she began to cut again.

"What's more, I'm going to talk about it. I think everybody should talk about it. Everybody over forty. And there should be clinics in various parts of the country where people can go and learn about death. Because it isn't painful. The doctors say that death itself, the actual thing, is not at all painful. And people ought to know it. They ought to know how to get ready for it. How to put their affairs in order and how to compose their minds, so that when the time comes——"

"Oh dear!" Henrietta interrupted him. "Now I've gone and cut it all wrong."

Mr. Tupper stopped walking.

"Have you really?" he asked, without a great deal of sympathy.

"Yes, I have! And it's your fault, Edward. You came in here deliberately to bother and torment me!"

Mr. Tupper shook his head. It would have been easy enough to defend himself, but there were tears in her eyes, and he decided not to vex her any further. She was very good to him. She had made a home for him, of sorts, when it became apparent that he was never going to have one of his own. He bent over the coffee table and put his cigarette out.

"I told you," he said kindly, "I told you you were going to cut something you shouldn't."

In the attic the heat and the odor were quietly persisting. Mr. Tupper unfolded a month-old drama section of the *Sunday Times* and slipped it around the dead bird. All that remained was to carry it out to the rubbish pile and burn it there. A

simple matter, he said to himself, that needn't involve anyone. But when he got outside he saw young Joe and his friend Stimson coming up the hill from the tennis court. It would be a long time, Mr. Tupper reflected, before they were interested in a clinic where people could go and learn about death. You could discuss such things with Henrietta, who was middle-aged, who was of an age for dying. But with boys it was different. Joe probably intended to go right on living forever.

Mr. Tupper stood and waited. The boys had their tennis racquets with them and they were hot and very red in the face from playing. When Joe saw Mr. Tupper he grinned cheerfully.

"Where are you going, Uncle?" he said. "Can I go with you?"

Mr. Tupper shook his head. "No," he said, "I should say not." And drew the folds of newspaper together in his hand. For the first time he seemed to realize what it was that he was carrying, and he wanted suddenly to throw the dry, horrible thing as far away from him as he could.