

Man from the South

It was almost six o'clock, so I thought I'd buy a beer and go out and sit by the swimming pool and have a little evening sun.

I went to the bar and got the beer and carried it outside and wandered down the garden. It was a fine garden and there were plenty of chairs around the pool. There were white tables and huge brightly coloured umbrellas and sunburned men and women sitting around in bathing suits. In the pool itself there were three or four girls and about a dozen boys, all splashing about and making a lot of noise and throwing a large rubber ball at one another.

I stood watching them. The girls were English girls from the hotel. I didn't know about the boys, but they sounded American, and I thought they were probably young sailors from the American ship which had arrived in harbour that morning.

I went over and sat down under a yellow umbrella where there were four empty seats, and I poured my beer and settled back comfortably with a cigarette. It was pleasant to sit and watch the bathers splashing about in the green water.

The American sailors were getting on nicely with the English girls. They'd reached the point where they were diving under the water and pulling the girls up by their legs.

Just then I noticed a small old man walking quickly around the edge of the pool. He was beautifully dressed in a white suit and a cream-coloured hat, and as he walked he was looking at the people and the chairs.

He stopped beside me and smiled. I smiled back.

'Excuse me please, but may I sit here?'

'Certainly,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

He inspected the back of the chair for safety, then he sat down and crossed his legs.

'A fine evening,' he said. 'They are all fine evenings here in Jamaica.' I couldn't tell if his accent was Italian or Spanish, but I felt sure he was some sort of a South American. He was old, too, when you looked at him closely. Probably around sixty-eight or seventy.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's wonderful here, isn't it?'

'And who are all these? These are not hotel people.' He was pointing at the bathers in the pool.

'I think they're American sailors,' I told him.

'Of course they are Americans. Who else in the world is going to make as much noise as that? You are not American, no?'

'No,' I said. 'I am not.'

Suddenly one of the young sailors was standing in front of us. He was still wet from the pool and one of the English girls was standing there with him.

'Are these chairs free?' he said.

'Yes,' I answered.

'Mind if I sit down?'

'Go ahead.'

'Thanks,' he said. He had a towel in his hand, and when he sat down he unrolled it and produced a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. He offered the cigarettes to the girl but she refused; then he offered them to me and I took one. The old man said, 'Thank you, no, but I think I will have a cigar.' He took a cigar out of his pocket, then he produced a knife and cut the end off it.

'Here, let me give you a light.' The American boy held up his lighter.

'That will not work in this wind.'

'Sure it'll work. It always works.'

The old man removed the cigar from his mouth, moved his head to one side and looked at the boy.

'Always?' he said slowly.

'Sure, it never fails. Not with me anyway.'

'Well, well. So you say this famous lighter never fails. Is that what you say?'

'Sure,' the boy said. 'That's right.' He was about nineteen or twenty, with pale skin and a rather sharp nose. He was holding the lighter in his hand, ready to turn the little wheel. He said, 'I promise you it never fails.'

'One moment, please.' The hand that held the cigar came up high, as if it were stopping traffic. 'Now just one moment.' He had a curiously soft voice and kept looking at the boy all the time. He smiled. 'Shall we not make a little bet on whether your lighter lights?'

'Sure, I'll bet,' the boy said. 'Why not?'

'You like to bet?'

'Sure, I'll always bet.'

The man paused and examined his cigar, and I must say I didn't much like the way he was behaving. It seemed he was trying to embarrass the boy, and at the same time I had the feeling he was enjoying a private little secret.

He looked up again at the boy and said slowly, 'I like to bet, too. Why don't we have a bet on this thing? A big bet.'

'Now wait a minute,' the boy said. 'I can't do that. But I'll bet you a dollar. I'll even bet you ten, or whatever the money is over here.'

The old man waved his hand again. 'Listen to me. Let's have some fun. We make a bet. Then we go up to my room here in the hotel where there's no wind, and I bet you you cannot light this famous lighter of yours ten times one after another without missing once.'

'I'll bet I can,' the boy said.

'All right. Good. We make a bet, yes?'

'Sure, I'll bet you ten dollars.'

'No, no. I am a rich man and I am a sporting man also. Listen to me. Outside the hotel is my car. It's a very fine car. An American car from your country. Cadillac —'

'Now, wait a minute.' The boy leaned back and laughed. 'I can't offer you anything like that. This is crazy.'

'It's not crazy at all. You strike the lighter successfully ten times and the Cadillac is yours. You'd like to have this Cadillac, yes?'

'Sure, I'd like to have a Cadillac.' The boy was still smiling.

'All right. Fine. We make a bet and I offer my Cadillac.'

'What do I offer?'

The old man said, 'I never ask you, my friend, to bet something that you cannot afford. You understand?'

'So what do I bet?'

'I'll make it easy for you, yes?'

'OK. You make it easy.'

'Some small thing you can afford to give away, and if you did lose it you would not feel too bad. Right?'

'Like what?'

'Like, perhaps, the little finger on your left hand.'

'My *what*?' The boy stopped smiling.

'Yes. Why not? You win, you take the car. You lose, I take the finger.'

'I don't understand. How d'you mean, you take the finger?'

'I chop it off.'

'That's crazy. I think I'll just bet ten dollars.'

'Well, well, well,' the old man said. 'I do not understand. You say it lights but you will not bet. Then we forget it, yes?'

The boy sat quite still, staring at the bathers in the pool. Then he remembered that he hadn't lit his cigarette. He put it between his lips, opened the lighter and turned the wheel. It lit and burned with a small, steady, yellow flame, and the way he held his hands meant that the wind didn't get to it at all.

'Could I have a light, too?' I said.

'God, I'm sorry, I forgot you didn't have one.'

He stood up and came over to light my cigarette. There was a silence then, and I could see that the old man had succeeded in

disturbing the boy with his ridiculous suggestion. He was sitting there very still, obviously tense. Then he started moving about in his seat, and rubbing his chest and stroking the back of his neck. Finally he placed both hands on his knees and began tapping his fingers against them. Soon he was tapping with one of his feet too.

'Now just let me check I understand,' he said at last. 'You say we go up to your room and if I make this lighter light ten times one time after another I win a Cadillac. If it misses just once then I lose the little finger of my left hand. Is that right?'

'Certainly. That is the bet. But I think you are afraid.'

'What do we do if I lose? Do I have to hold my finger out while you chop it off?'

'Oh, no! That would not be good. And you might refuse to hold it out. What I would do is tie one of your hands to the table before we started, and I would stand there with a knife ready to chop the moment your lighter missed.'

'How old is the Cadillac?'

'How old? It is last year's. Quite a new car. But I see you are not a betting man. Americans never are.'

The boy paused for a moment and he glanced first at the English girl, then at me. 'Yes,' he said suddenly. 'I'll bet you.'

'Good!' The old man clapped his hands together. 'Fine,' he said. 'We will do it now. And you, sir.' He turned to me. 'You would perhaps be good enough to, what do you call it, to – to referee.'

'Well,' I said, 'I think it's a crazy bet. I don't like it very much.'

'Neither do I,' said the English girl. It was the first time she'd spoken. 'I think it's a stupid, ridiculous bet.'

'Are you serious about cutting off this boy's finger if he loses?' I said.

'Certainly I am. Also about giving him my Cadillac if he wins. Come now. We will go to my room. Would you like to put on some clothes first?' he said to the boy.

'No,' the boy answered. 'I'll come like this.' Then he turned to me. 'I'd consider it a favour if you'd come along as a referee.'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll come along but I don't like the bet.'

'You come too,' he said to the girl. 'You come and watch.'

The old man led the way back through the garden to the hotel. He was excited now and that seemed to make him walk with more energy. 'Would you like to see the car first? It's just here.' He took us to a pale-green Cadillac.

'There it is. The green one. You like?'

'That's a nice car,' the boy said.

'All right. Now we will go up and see if you can win her.'

We all went up the stairs and into a large pleasant double bedroom. There was a woman's dress lying across the bottom of one of the beds.

'First,' he said, 'let's have a little drink.'

The drinks were on a small table in the far corner, all ready to be poured, and there was ice and plenty of glasses. He began to pour the drinks, and then he rang the bell and a little later there was a knock at the door and a maid came in.

'Ah!' he said, putting down the bottle and giving her a pound note. 'You will do something for me now please. We are going to play a little game in here and I want you to go off and find for me two – no, three things. I want some nails, I want a hammer, and I want a big knife, a butcher's knife which you can borrow from the kitchen. You can get these, yes?'

'A *butcher's* knife!' The maid opened her eyes wide. 'You mean a real butcher's knife?'

'Yes, of course. Come on now, please. You can find those things surely for me.'

'Yes, sir, I'll try. I'll try to get them.' And she went.

The old man handed round the drinks. We stood there drinking: the boy; the English girl, who watched the boy over the top of her glass all the time; the little old man with the colourless

eyes standing there in his elegant white suit, drinking and looking at the girl. I didn't know what to think about it all. The man seemed serious about the bet and he seemed serious about the business of cutting off the finger. But what would we do if the boy lost? Then we'd have to rush him to hospital in the Cadillac that he hadn't won. It would all be a stupid, unnecessary thing in my opinion.

'Before we begin,' the old man said, 'I will present to the – to the referee the key of the car.' He produced the key from his pocket and gave it to me. 'The papers,' he said, 'and the insurance are in the pocket of the car.'

Then the maid came in again. In one hand she carried a butcher's knife, and in the other a hammer and a bag of nails.

'Good! You got them all. Thank you, thank you. Now you can go.' He waited until she had gone, then he put the things on one of the beds and said, 'Now we will prepare ourselves, yes?' The old man moved the little hotel writing-desk away from the wall and removed the writing things. 'And now,' he said, 'a chair.' He picked up a chair and placed it beside the table. 'And now the nails. I must put in the nails.' He fetched the nails and began to hammer them into the top of the table.

We stood there, the boy, the girl and I, watching the man at work. We watched him hammer two nails into the table, about fifteen centimetres apart, allowing a small part of each one to stick up. Then he tested that they were firm with his fingers.

Anyone would think that he had done this before, I told myself. He never hesitated. Table, nails, hammer, knife. He knows exactly what he needs and how to arrange it.

'And now,' he said, 'all we want is some string.' He found some string. 'All right, at last we are ready. Will you please sit here at the table?' he said to the boy.

The boy sat down.

'Now place the left hand between these two nails. The nails

are only so that I can tie your hand in place. All right, good. Now I tie your hand securely to the table – like that.'

He tied the string around the boy's wrist, then several times around the wide part of the hand, then he tied it tightly to the nails. When he finished it was impossible for the boy to pull his hand away. But he could move his fingers.

'Now please, make a fist, all except for the little finger. You must leave the little finger sticking out, lying on the table. Excellent! Excellent! Now we are ready. With your right hand you light the lighter. But one moment, please.'

He hurried over to the bed and picked up the knife. He came back and stood beside the table with the knife in his hand.

'We are all ready?' he said. 'Mr Referee, you must say when to begin.'

'Are you ready?' I asked the boy.

'I'm ready.'

'And you?' to the old man.

'Quite ready,' he said and he lifted the knife up in the air and held it there about sixty centimetres above the boy's finger, ready to cut. The boy watched it, but he didn't react and his mouth didn't move at all. He only raised his eyebrows and frowned.

'All right,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

The boy said, 'Will you please count aloud the number of times I light it.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'll do that.'

With his thumb he raised the top of his lighter, and again with his thumb he turned the wheel sharply. There appeared a small yellow flame.

'One!' I called.

He didn't blow the flame out; he closed the top of the lighter on it and waited for perhaps five seconds before opening it again. He turned the wheel very strongly and once more there was a small flame.

'Two!'

No one else said anything. The boy kept his eyes on the lighter. The man held the knife up in the air and he too was watching the lighter.

'Three!'

'Four!'

'Five!'

'Six!'

'Seven!' Obviously it was one of those lighters that worked. I watched the thumb closing the top down on to the flame. Then a pause. Then the thumb raising the top once more. The thumb did everything. I took a breath, ready to say eight. The thumb turned the wheel. The little flame appeared.

'Eight!' I said, and as I said it the door opened. We all turned and we saw a woman standing in the doorway, a small black-haired woman, rather old, who stood there for about two seconds then rushed forward, shouting, 'Carlos! Carlos!' She grabbed his wrist, took the knife from him, threw it on the bed, took hold of the man by his jacket and began shaking him with great strength, talking to him fast and loud and fiercely all the time in some Spanish-sounding language. She pulled the old man across the room and pushed him backwards on to one of the beds.

'I am sorry,' the woman said. 'I am so terribly sorry that this should happen.' She spoke almost perfect English. 'It is too bad,' she went on. 'I suppose it is really my fault. For ten minutes I left him alone to go and have my hair washed and I come back and he is doing it again.'

The boy was untying his hand from the table. The English girl and I stood there and said nothing.

'He is a danger to others,' the woman said. 'Where we live at home, he has taken altogether forty-seven fingers from different people, and he has lost eleven cars. In the end they threatened to put him away somewhere. That's why I brought him up here.'

'We were only having a little bet,' whispered the old man.

'I suppose he bet you a car,' the woman said.

'Yes,' the boy answered. 'A Cadillac.'

'He has no car. It's mine. And that makes it worse,' she said.

'He has bet you when he has nothing to bet with. I am ashamed and very sorry about it all.' She seemed a very nice woman.

'Well,' I said, 'then here's the key to your car.' I put it on the table.

'We were only having a little bet,' whispered the old man again.

'He hasn't anything left to bet with,' the woman said. 'He hasn't a thing in the world. Not a thing. In fact I myself won it all from him a long time ago. It was hard work, but I won it all in the end.' She looked up at the boy and she smiled, a slow, sad smile, and she came over and put out a hand to take the key from the table.

I can see it now, that hand of hers; it had only one finger on it, and a thumb.

Beware of the Dog

Down below there was only a vast white sea of clouds. Above there was the sun, and the sun was white like the clouds, because it is never yellow when one looks at it from high in the air.

He was still flying the Spitfire.* His right hand was on the controls. It was quite easy. The machine was flying well. He knew what he was doing.

Everything is fine, he thought. I know my way home. I'll be there in half an hour. When I land I shall switch off my engine and say, 'Help me to get out, will you?' I shall make my voice sound ordinary and natural and none of them will take any notice. Then I shall say, 'Someone help me to get out. I can't do it alone because I've lost one of my legs.' They'll all laugh and think I'm joking and I shall say, 'All right, come and have a look.' Then Yorky will climb up on to the wing and look inside. He'll probably be sick because of all the blood and the mess. I shall laugh and say, 'For God's sake, help me get out.'

He glanced down again at his right leg. There was not much of it left. The bullets had hit him, just above the knee, and now there was nothing but a great mess and a lot of blood. But there was no pain. When he looked down, he felt as if he were seeing something that did not belong to him. It was just a mess which was there; something strange and unusual and rather interesting. It was like finding a dead cat on the sofa.

He still felt fine, and because he still felt fine, he felt excited and unafraid.

I won't even bother to radio for the ambulance, he thought. It isn't necessary. And when I land I'll sit there quite normally and

* Spitfire: a British aeroplane, flown in the Second World War.