

The Caterpillar

Parties, even the best of them, oppressed him and New Year's Eve festivities still more, particularly when, along with the small talk, the tedious sameness of the company and the forced camaraderie, he was compelled to pretend to a cheer he did not feel – had not felt since being acutely cudgelled by the revelation that at thirty-seven he had achieved little, was achieving little and would never achieve more than little.

His first response to the invitation to the Silvers' fancy dress party had been to fume, 'No way am I going to sink to their goddamned infantile level!' but Jennifer, touching him here, fondling there, had always prevailed, and he did dress up, all in shriekingly garish green – shoes, socks, slacks, pullover, hat – over which he petulantly pulled a coarse tawny potato sack, snapping, 'Well, if I have to be ridiculous, then let me damned well be original!'

'Original, Henry, that it certainly is, I must say,' Jennifer had said. 'A caterpillar in a cocoon. If they were to give prizes . . .'

She had been putting the finishing touches to herself – heavy mascara, smouldering rouge, and fiery scarlet to sweeping eyelashes, to smoothly marbled cheeks, to lips. Her gown a plush violent red, herself lavishly beringed, bangled and brooched in glinting gold, her hair fringed and black and boyish, the Carmen in her was hungrily emerging. Looking at her, Henry acknowledged that she could still make herself sensuously beautiful, but he clenched his teeth, bridling at the pleasure she seemed to take in such frivolity.

'A pox on their prizes!' he had huffed. 'A pox on the whole insipid lot of them, the Silvers, the Cullens, Landmans, Elli-sons! . . .'

'Henry, it's New Year's Eve,' Jennifer had tried to placate. 'The evening's scarcely under way and already you're sucking lemons.'

'New Year's Eve!' Henry snorted. 'And from tomorrow on things will be better, I suppose?'

'We haven't done badly so far. A home, two children, secure jobs, friends . . .'

'And mortgages, overdrafts, school bills, the kids becoming impossible, clients who can't wait to see the back of me, who make me despise myself for peddling life insurance, and no way out of it, to do something else . . . something . . . to achieve something, make something of myself that will stay on . . .'

'One's children stay on, Henry,' Jennifer had said, draping herself in a white satin shawl. 'They're anyone's most lasting achievement.'

Henry had opened the door with rank scorn.

'Give a mule the right pestle,' he said, 'and it too will be able to do the same.'

That rancour only mounted as their hosts – Martin Silver in the leather breeches and feathered cap of an Austrian yokel, Hilda in the artless white red-bordered cotton outfit of a peasant girl complete with plaits – gaily opened the door upon the party within.

'Wow!' Martin Silver whooped as his gaze tumbled helter-skelter down Jennifer's full length. 'Ma bella senorina, how ravishing!'

'And look, Martin, at Henry,' Hilda laughed, her blonde plait dancing as she tossed her head. 'How cute! Jiminy Cricket, Henry? A pea-pod? I know, a vine!'

'No,' said Martin, plucking at the leather straps of his breeches. 'Something more exotic. A zucchini with a jacket on, right out of old Pietro Pietruzelli's garden!'

'Wrong each time,' Henry heard Jennifer squeal with a

triumph that might have been of her own making. 'My darling husband is a caterpillar in a cocoon.'

Hilda clapped her hands. 'How ingenious!' she sizzled. 'I was sure you'd come as an insurance salesman.'

'Just as well you didn't crawl in,' Martin bubbled. 'Someone might have stepped on you.'

Henry wished he could have torn down every streamer and burst every balloon hanging from the ceiling and Martin into the bargain.

'Well, come in, come in!' Martin gushed. 'There's drinks to put you under the table, savouries till next year and a sumptuous feast to follow. But no leaves, Henry, no grass. And what about a fandango later, Jenny, or a bolero?'

Deeper inside the house with its richly-carpeted, richly-patterned walls, Henry became detached from Jennifer.

'Hello, Henry!' he heard himself being called. 'Henry, good'ay.' 'That's a flashy outfit!' 'You really let yourself go, good on you.'

He smiled weakly, waved back languidly at the Hausers, the Havins, the Grays who beamed at him theatrically through the guises of a Chaplinesque tramp, a Hawaiian girl, an astronaut, a buccaneer. They were drinking, rolling their misted glasses of white wine and red between eager palms, and tattled merrily as between their repartee they nibbled nuts and savouries and potato crisps. Henry moved on, weaved his way between Indian chiefs and can-can girls, between bull-fighters and impresarios, taking in at every turn the heady pungency of perfume, greasepaint and talcum, touching in his passage the cool warp of ruffled cotton, silk, velvet and lace. Above the clatter, shrill raucous music boomed and reverberated from two large mahogany-encased loudspeakers attached to an elaborate tape recorder that flashed with a succession of green dancing chassis lights.

'My latest baby,' said Martin Silver, passing by.

The host had money and flitted from one expensive pastime to another. Twelve months before, it had been yachting; six months later, he had taken lessons in flying. Henry was

about to say 'Nice' but Martin in his loud green and brown Austrian outfit was already gone, preparing now to laugh with his customary abandoned laughter at a lurid joke told piquantly by a towering black-robed Mephistopheles.

'The devil himself,' Henry murmured, approaching close, then retreating far, almost drunkenly, as though he were catapulted mightily by the group's shock wave of prurient laughter, his fists and chin locked in the throes of seething tension.

How he hated them! Little people all, small-minded, dwarfs – professionally-accomplished to be sure, with solicitors among them, and surgeons, teachers, accountants, and an engineer, a psychologist, a social worker – but, outside their domain, so shallow, so narrow, so blinkered into a tunnel vision that saw as most deserving of exertion the immediate gratification of capricious wants, that *failed to see* those heights of art and brilliance and eminence – even fame – to which they could attain. And the worst of it was that they dragged him down, made *him* second-rate, made him, too, expendable and threatened with an oblivion he despised and spurned. What he could have been if not for them!

But, then, what *could* he have been? What could he still be?

Smiling, nodding, answering banalities, he strayed glumly about the rooms. All in green with a potato sack over his shoulders, he felt more ridiculous than ever. He listened wearily to snatches of conversation.

'And the judge, as full as a boot, barely raised his eye-lids and drawled to the plaintiff . . .'

'And when the nurses came to count the swabs . . .'

'Reckon half my class will end up in jail, the other half in reform school . . .'

'The money's in land at the moment, with property values rising ten, fifteen, in places twenty percent per annum . . .'

In their multi-coloured motley, they were dressed for flight, yet, spurning liberation, they remained trapped, anchored to the pedestrian mindlessness of their everyday

selves. Around him they moved, gorgeously prodigal in their pageant of crimson and scarlet, yet even against their luxuriance of turquoise and jade, of silver and gold, they could not help but betray the dreary tedium of every shade of grey.

Asked questions, he answered; offered drinks, he drank; called to the smorgasbord, he ate. Awkwardly he stood, plate in one hand, with the other scooping salad, fishballs, cold cuts and chicken, for occupation alone hovering about the tables returning for seconds, for thirds, for any leftovers that wooed his palate. And then, sated but oppressed, he sat down in a lounge-chair and drew his legs beneath him.

From there, he watched. Jennifer in her hungry burning scarlet swept up to him and said, 'Henry, it's not really as bad as all that,' and drifted away again, bubbling like the bubbles in her champagne glass. Then a false-moustachioed colonel sat upon him inadvertently, a tipsy jockey showered him with crisps while a dunce-capped jester sounded a fog horn in his ear. He longed for midnight, for the passing of Auld Lang Syne when, duty done, he could fetch his Carmen and flee, flee . . .

And midnight came, the second-hand ticked into another year, and Martin Silver sounded a gong, striking a wooden ladle against a saucepan. From his position, Henry did not move. He watched the circle as it formed, watched the eager cross-linking of hands, of sailor to ostrich, ballerina to wizard, and tried to shut out the passage that ushered in the new year that promised only more waste, more emptiness, more destitution.

The song over, he made moves to rise, but Martin Silver, flushed from wine and merrymaking, with Hilda in her peasant-dress smiling artlessly by his side, was booming,

'Right, the time has come, the walrus said, for everyone to perform!'

There followed laughter, squealing, applause.

'Jennifer, a bolero, Richard a piece of wizardry, Isobel, the can-can, and make sure you kick those legs high!'

He watched with distaste as Jennifer in flaring fiery red

stamped her feet and clicked her fingers to the animated clapping of the guests around her. He gritted his teeth at the giggling tutued ballerina who gracelessly rose to an exaggerated arabesque; and felt deepening nausea at the rolling jerking eye and hand play of the Chaplinesque tramp, at the suggestive gyrations of the Hawaiian girl, and at the poker-faced, flat-palmed salute of the Indian chief. One after another, each guest took the centre, the buccaneer and the devil, the peasant girl and the impresario, in singles, in pairs, running on, running off, with silliness tittering to claps on the back, to jocular laughter and to the raucous riot of scatter-brained inanities.

Then he had enough. He had enough! The noise, the vacuousness, the levity, the ache of his insignificance, the prospect of a future without future – these tore at him, seared his awareness, pricked as if with a thousand needles every silently screaming pore in his protesting flesh. Enough now! Enough! He drew up his legs still higher, tighter, sank more heavily into the upholstery beneath him, curled chin to knee with the torment of it all, and shrinking further from the milling circle, hoisted the potato sack over his head, if not to shut out hearing, then to blot out vision, gaudiness and foolery.

‘A pox on them all, a pox on them, a pox!’ he swore into the darkness of his hollow warren. How he hated them! Detested them! Loathed them!

Still he heard their laughter, their whoops and their squealing. But these did not touch him now. They were outside of him, unthreatening, innocuous, even when suddenly, physically close, he recognised Hilda’s voice as she shouted ‘Hey everybody, look!’ and Martin’s as he boomed ‘It’s Henry! It’s good old Henry!’ and Gerry Hauser’s as, near his ear, he bellowed ‘The devil!’ While we’re performing, he’s gone off on an act of his own!’ the whole company bursting into a riot of abandon, approval and delight.

‘Henry?!’ he heard. ‘Who would have thought it of him?’

'He's a fine sport, after all.'

'How ingenious, the caterpillar inside his cocoon.'

And he felt hands over him now, soft solicitous hands, probing, seeking out his shoulder, his own hands, his face, and heard Jennifer's voice happily caressing, 'That was cunning of you, Henry, that was very clever. You can come out now, they've all seen you now, you really do deserve a prize.'

But he stayed. Tossing his shoulder, he shook off her touch. He jerked a hip and kicked a foot. More actively now, more firmly, he felt Jennifer tug at the sack, but with tightened fingers, tightened feet, he clung to its ends. And then other hands fell upon him and other voices rose as laughter swelled to a delirious crescendo, then abruptly faded, fizzled into puzzlement as question tumbled over question in baffled confusion.

'What's the matter, Henry?'

'Are you all right?'

'Jennifer, is he sick?'

'It's over now, darling, why don't you come out? ... Henry? ... Darling? ... Henry? ...'

Henry did not come out. He held on to his dark enclosure. He felt safe there. There, there was nothing to dread; there, there was no burlesque, no impossible children, no debts. Oblivion did not matter there, nor immutable sameness, nor unrelieved stagnation. In that very incarceration, there was freedom; in that very darkness, there was light; and even as he felt the probing and the pummelling and the tugging of hands and more hands at his every part and heard about him the clamour of voices cross-firing in confusion, he clung to his freedom and clung to his light, hoping, praying, entreating never - oh Lord, oh God - never to be born again.