THE HORSE'S MOUTH

JOYCE CARY

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Born in Donegal, Ireland, of a Devonshire family long settled in that part, Joyce Cary was given for first name, according to a common Anglo-Irish practice, his mother's surname of Joyce. He was educated at Clifton and Trinity, Oxford, and he also studied art in Edinburgh and Paris. Afterwards he went to the Near East for the war of 1912–13.

Subsequently he studied Irish Cooperation under Sir Horace Plunkett, and in 1913 joined the Nigerian Political Service. He fought in the Nigerian Regiment during the First World War and was wounded at Mora Mountain. On returning to political duty, as magistrate and executive officer, he was sent to Borgu, then a very remote district, where he made close acquaintance with primitive native life. His health, however, had never recovered from war service and he was advised to retire from tropical Africa. He then began to write, and his first novel, *Aissa Saved*, was published in 1932. His other books are *The Captive and the Free*, *Herself Surprised*, *A Fearful Joy*, *To be a Pilgrim*, *Mister Johnson*, and *Spring Song and Other Stories*.

He died in March 1957.

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PENGUIN BOOKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
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To
HENEAGE OGILVIE

I

I WAS walking by the Thames. Half-past morning on an autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried fish shop. All bright below. Low tide, dusty water and a crooked bar of straw, chicken-boxes, dirt and oil from mud to mud. Like a viper swimming in skim milk. The old serpent, symbol of nature and love.

Five windows light the caverned man; through one he breathes the air
Through one hears music of the spheres; through one can look
And see small portions of the eternal world.

Such as Thames mud turned into a bank of nine carat gold rough from the fire. They say a chap just out of prison runs into the nearest cover; into some dark little room, like a rabbit put up by a stoat. The sky feels too big for him. But I liked it. I swam in it. I couldn't take my eyes off the clouds, the water, the mud. And I must have been hopping up and down Greenbank Hard for half an hour grinning like a gargoyle, until the wind began to get up my trousers and down my back, and to bring me to myself, as they say. Meaning my liver and lights.

And I perceived that I hadn't time to waste on pleasure. A man of my age has to get on with the job.

I had two and six left from my prison money. I reckoned that five pounds would set me up with bed, board and working capital. That left four pounds seventeen and six to be won. From friends. But when I went over my friends, I seemed to owe them more than that; more than they could afford.

The sun had crackled into flames at the top; the mist was getting thin in places, you could see crooked lines of grey, like old cracks under spring ice. Tide on the turn. Snake broken up.

Emeralds and sapphires. Water like varnish with bits of gold leaf floating thick and heavy. Gold is the metal of intellect. And all at once the sun burned through in a new place, at the side, and shot out a ray that hit the Eagle and Child, next the motor boat factory, right on the new signboard.

A sign, I thought. I'll try my old friend Coker. Must start somewhere. Coker, so I heard, was in trouble. But I was in trouble and people in trouble, they say, are more likely to give help to each other than those who aren't. After all, it's not surprising, for people who help other people in trouble are likely soon to be in trouble themselves. And then, they are generally people too who enjoy the consolation of each other's troubles. Sympathetic people. Who'd rather see each other's tears, boo-hoo, than the smile of a millionaire, painted in butter on a barber's shave.

Coker kept the public bar at the Eagle. About five foot high and three foot broad. Face like a mule, except the eyes, which are small and blue. Methylated. The Eagle is down on Thames-side and gets some rough ones. But see little Coker run a six-foot pug through the door, by the scruff and the seat, his ears throwing off sparks like new horseshoes. Coker has a small hand, but it feels like hot marbles. Coker has had a hard life. Long-bodied and short-tempered.

There were three chaps hanging round the door for the bar to open, and I asked 'em, 'Is it true about Coker?' But they were strangers. Come up on an empty gravel barge. They didn't know Coker. Just then I saw her coming along with a string-bag full of knitting and her slippers. Snugs for the snug. I smiled and raised my hat, took it right off.

'Hullo, Coker. So here we are again.'

'So you're out, are you? Thought it was to-morrow.'

'I'm out, Coker. And glad to see you. I suppose there aren't any letters for me?'

'Have you come to pay me my money?' said Coker, with a look that made me step back a pace. 'That's all right,' I said quickly, 'I'll pay you, Coker, I couldn't do anything about it while I was inside, could I?'

'As if you ever did. But you won't get any more.'

'I wouldn't think of it, Coker.'

But Coker was getting fiercer and fiercer. Working herself up. She squared at me as if she meant to give me a knock. And I took another step back.

'What about that lawyer of yours who was bringing a case? You told a lot of people. I should think they'll all want their money back now you're out again.'

'You'll get your money back, Coker, with interest.'

'Yes, I'm going to,' and she put the key in the door. 'Four pounds fourteen. I'm going to see about it Wednesday. And you're coming with me; to see that woman who's giving the evidence. And if you're having us on, it looks like another police job.'

The three chaps were looking, but what did Coker care. I like Coker. She doesn't give a curse.

'Why, Coker, I'll come with you. Yes, it's quite true we got the evidence. And the money.'

Coker opened the door and went through. When I tried to follow she shut it quick to about six inches and said, 'We're not open.'

'I'll sit in the passage.'

'Haven't you got any socks?'

'No, I don't need 'em.'

'I'm not going to get you any. So you can take 'em out of your pocket.'

'Search me, Coker.'

Coker thought a bit with her nose out of the door. Like a tit looking through a fence. Then she said, 'You made a nice fool of yourself. What did you go and utter menaces for?'

'I got in a state, Coker. I got thinking how I'd been done. And that always makes me mad.'

'You were lucky to get off with a month.'

'Yes, it did me good. It cooled me down. Come on, Coker, I'll sit in the passage. I don't want any tea.'

'And what about our licence? Wednesday morning at nine. Don't you forget, and keep off that telephone.' She shut the

door. She was gone. I was surprised. I was surprised, too, that Coker was so keen on the money all at once. Bad sign. The three chaps were now about seven. Getting near opening time. I said to one, 'It looks like it's true about Coker. She's different.' 'I bubbeg your pardon.' 'Nunnever mind,' I said, catching it. I recognized him. Green eyes. Hay hair. Big flat nose like a calf. Schoolboy. One of the lot that went to the bun-shop just opposite where I used to live. Scholarship class. Talk about Ruskin and Marx. He had his satchel and I wondered what he was doing outside the pub when his nose turned pink and he said, 'Mr. Jijimson.'

'Yes', I said, 'Mr Jijimson, that's me.' 'I sspoke to you once last Christmas.' 'Oh yes, of course,' though I didn't remember. 'Yes, of course, very interesting. How's school?' and I moved off. 'You said that William Bubblake was the greatest artist who ever lived.' 'Did I?' For I didn't want to talk to the boy. He wouldn't know anything about anything except a lot of words. Ask you a lot of questions, and when you answer, it's like shooting peas into a can.

'Sorry I can't stay,' I said. 'Busy.' And I made off. Sun all in a blaze. Lost its shape. Tide pouring up from London as bright as bottled ale. Full of bubbles and every bubble flashing its own electric torch. Mist breaking into round fat shapes, china white on Dresden blue. Dutch angels by Rubens della Robbia. Big one on top curled up with her knees to her nose like the little marble woman Dobson did for Courtauld. A beauty. Made me jump to think of it. You could have turned it round in your hand. Smooth and neat as a cricket ball. A Classic Event.

2

I COULD see my studio from where I stood, an old boathouse down by the water wall. A bit rotten in places, but I had been glad to get it. My trouble is I get big ideas. My last one was the Fall, twelve by fifteen, and you can't get room for an idea like

that in a brick studio under two hundred pounds a year. So I was glad to get the boathouse. It had a loft. I took the planks off the beams at one end and got a very nice wall, seventeen foot high. When I had my canvas up, it was two foot off the floor, which just suited me. I like to keep my pictures above dog level.

Well, I thought, the walls and roof are there still. They haven't got blown away yet. No one has leant up against 'em. I was pleased. But I didn't go along in a hurry. One thing at a time. Last time I was locked up, in 'thirty-seven, I left a regular establishment behind. Nice little wife, two kids, flat and a studio with a tin roof. Watertight all round. North light. Half-finished picture, eight by twelve. The Living God. Cartoons, drawings, studies, two painters' ladders, two chairs, kettle, frypan and an oil stove. All you could want.

When I came back, there was nothing. Wife and kids had gone back to her mama. Flat let to people who didn't even know my name. And the studio was a coal store. As for the Living God, my drawings, cartoons, ladders, they'd just melted. I hadn't expected to see the frypan and kettle again. You can't leave things like that about for a month in any friendly neighbourhood and expect to find them in the same place. But the Living God with his stretchers and stiffeners weighed a couple of hundredweight. When I came back from gaol even the smell had gone. Coker said that someone said the landlord took it for the rent. The landlord swore he had never seen it. I daresay he had hidden it somewhere in an attic, telling himself that it might be worth thousands as soon as I was dead, and the more I was worried, the sooner that would be.

The top of my boathouse suddenly nodded its head at me, as if saying, 'That's it, old man.' Then I saw that a couple of kids were taking a plank off the roof. More patrons, I thought. When they saw me coming, they slid off the roof and ran. But not far. Crouching round like a couple of wolves waiting for the old horse to drop. I didn't need to unlock the door. Somebody had done it for me by knocking off the hasp of the padlock. And when I opened it, two more kids got out of the window on their

heads. 'Don't hurry,' I said, 'there's plenty of time before dinner.'

There was nothing inside except a lot of pools on the floor from last night's rain. And the picture. I got another surprise. A big one. It was still there. Why, I thought, it's not bad in places. It might be a good thing. The serpent wants to be a bit thicker, and I could bring his tail round to make a nice curl over the tree. Adam is a bit too blue, and Eve could be redder – to bring up the blues. Yes, yes, I thought, getting a bit excited, as I always do when I come back to work after a holiday, I've got something there. Adam's right leg is a gift, whatever you may say. Nobody has done that before with a leg. What a shape. I must have been tight or walking in my sleep when I knocked that off. And yet it's leggy all right. If that limb could speak, it would say, 'I walk for you, I run for you, I kneel for you. But I have my self-respect.'

Just then a stone came and knocked out the last window-pane that wasn't broken already. And I heard a voice, 'Ya, mister, how did you like chokey?' Those kids had had a fright and they were getting their own back.

Next minute I heard a different kind of yell, and when I went to the window I saw them making for the street with young Nosy on their tails.

He came in two minutes later, blowing, with the sweat on his nose and his cap falling off the back of the head. 'It's a shushame, Mr Jimson. I hope they haven't done any damage.'

'Not to speak of. There's quite a lot left. And it's an expensive canvas. Make a good floorcloth for any scullery.' 'Why, it's all f-full of holes, and they've cut a piece out.'

For somebody had been shooting at the birds with an air-gun and there was a piece about a foot square cut out of Adam's middle with a blunt knife. 'What a shushame,' said Nosy, and his nose turned pink. 'You ought to tell the po-police.' 'Well,' I said, 'Adam hadn't got a bathing-dress.' 'It's disgusting.' 'So he was, and somebody has made him respectable. Some mother, I expect. Anxious about her children. There's a lot of very good mothers in this district. You'd be surprised.' 'But the p-picture's

ruined.' 'Oh no, I can easily put in a patch. It's the little holes are the nuisance. Are you going to school yet?' for I wanted to get rid of him. I wanted to get on with my work. 'Nunno,' he said, 'it's dinner-time.' 'Don't you do any work in your dinner-time?' 'S-s-sometimes.' 'If you want to get that scholarship and go to Oxford and get into the Civil Service and be a great man and have two thousand pounds a year and a nice clean wife with hot and cold and a kid with real eyes that open and close and a garage for two cars and a savings book, you'll have to work in your dinner-time. All the good boys round here work in their dinner-time.'

'They've been writing names all over Eve, Mr Jijimson. It's b'beastly, b'beastly.' 'Yes, they seem to have appreciated my picture a whole lot.' 'I wonder you can go on pa-painting, Mr Jijimson, for such people.' 'I like painting. That's been my trouble all my life.' 'I wuwish I could paint.' 'Now, young chap, you go home quick; before you catch anything.' And I chased him out.

3

YES, I thought, but the trouble about a leg like that, it sticks out.

It's like a trumpet in the violins and a trumpet doesn't mean anything by itself. Any more than a sneeze under the stage. And if I work any brass into the top left-hand corner, it will have to go into the right bottom corner as well, into Eve, in fact, and she'll come right out of the canvas into the stalls. Only way to hold her down would be to make the serpent's head scarlet.

Carbuncle. Blood colour. And about twice the size. But that's all wrong. The serpent has got to have a white head and sky-blue eyes. That's the feeling, anyhow. That's how I feel it. Let's see. And I went to open the locker where I kept my tubes and brushes. The padlock was all right. But when I opened the lid I got another surprise. Somebody had taken out a bit of plank from the outside and cleared the lot. There was nothing there,

but a cigarette tin. Well, I thought, it's natural. You can't leave brushes and paint around where kids can get them. They all love art. Born to it.

All the same, the situation had its comic side. Here am I, I said, Gulley Jimson, whose pictures have been bought by the nation, or sold at Christie's by millionaires for hundreds of pounds, pictures which were practically stolen from me, and I haven't a brush or a tube of colour. Not to speak of a meal or a pair of good boots. I am simply forbidden to work. It's enough to make an undertaker smile.

But then, I said again, as I walked up and down Ellam Street, to keep warm, I mustn't get up a grievance. Plays the deuce. I must keep calm. For the fact is, IT'S WISE TO BE WISE, especially for a born fool. I mustn't exaggerate. The nation has only got one of my pictures which was left it by will and which quite likely it didn't want; and only one millionaire has ever bought my stuff. Also he took a big risk of losing his money. Also he is probably far from being a millionaire. So I have no reason to feel aggrieved and ought in fact to thank God I haven't got corns and bunions.

Just then I found myself in a telephone box. Habit, I suppose. I never pass an empty telephone box without going in to press button B. Button B has often been kind to me. It didn't give out anything this time, except an idea. I had some coppers, so I rang up Portland Place. Put a pencil between my teeth, and asked for Mr Hickson. The young butler answered in his voice like a capon's crow, 'Who shall I say?' 'The President of the Royal Academy.' 'Certainly, sir, please hold the line.' Then Hickson droned at me like a bankrupt dentist with toothache, 'Mr Hickson speaking.' I kept the pencil well in front and gobbled, 'Mr Hickson, I understand you possess nineteen canvasses and about three hundred drawings by the celebrated Gulley Jimson.'

'I have a collection of early Jimsons.'

'Of which one small canvas was sold last year at Christie's for two hundred and seventy guineas.'

'Seventy guineas, and it wasn't mine. It belonged to a Bond Street dealer.'

'Even at that rate your nineteen canvasses are worth at least two thousand pounds, while the drawings and sketches would amount to about two thousand more.'

'Excuse me, but what name did you mention?'

'I am the President of the Academy. I understand that Mr Jimson is now destitute. And I was informed on the best legal advice that you have no right to his pictures. I understand that you conspired with a drunken model to rob him of this valuable property.'

'Is that you, Jimson?'

'Certainly not,' I said, 'I wouldn't touch the bastard with a dung fork. But I have to inform you that he means trouble, and he's a dangerous man when he thinks he's got a grievance. He is in touch with your accomplice Sarah Monday, and he has powerful friends who mean to bring the case to law.'

'Then they will lose their money, as they have no case.'

'No doubt, Mr Hickson, you've got tip-top lawyers who could do down Magna Charta and George Washington. And you have my full sympathy. Such dangerous blackguards as Jimson oughtn't to be allowed to live. But I'm speaking as a friend. If Jimson doesn't get his rightful due in the next week, he fully intends to burn your house down, and cut your tripes out afterwards. He means it too. I have it from a mutual acquaintance. So I thought I'd better give you a straight tip.'

'If you're a friend of Jimson's, perhaps you'd better make him understand that he won't do himself any good by this sort of behaviour. He will only get himself another spell of prison, a very much longer one. As for his being destitute, if he is so, it is entirely his own fault. Good evening.' And he hung up. But he took the receiver off again. Because when I rang him again five minutes later, in a female voice, as the Duchess of Middlesex, the number was engaged. And it went on being engaged for half an hour.

This made me a bit impatient, and I began to be rough with the instrument. Till I saw a copper looking in at me. Then I pretended to take a call. And made my getaway.

In fact, I realized that I had been getting upset. I hadn't meant

to say anything about burning Hickson's house down. Now, when I say anything like that, about shooting a man or cutting his tripes out, even in joke, I often get angry with him. And anything like bad temper is bad for me. It spoils my equanimity. It blocks up my imagination. It makes me stupid so that I can't see straight. But luckily, I noticed it in time. Cool off, I said to myself. Don't get rattled off your centre. Remember that Hickson is an old man. He's nervous and tired of worry. That's his trouble, worry. Poor old chap, it's ruining any happiness he's got left. He simply don't know what to do. He sends you to jug and it makes him miserable, and as soon as you come out you start on him again. And he's afraid that if he gives you any money, you'll come after him more than ever and fairly worry him to death. Simply daren't trust you. He's wrong, but there it is. That's his point of view. He daren't do the right thing and the wrong thing gives him no peace. Poor old chap. It's an awful problem for a poor old bastard that let down his guts about forty years ago, and has rolled in comfort all his life.

And I was so calm, that when I felt my pulse, it barely touched seventy-eight. Pretty good for a man of sixty-seven.

4

All at once I remembered the oilman. I owed too much at my colour-shop to get anything on tick, but I had often seen paint and brushes at the oilshop. So I went along and asked, 'How much for those little sample tins, interior decorator's stuff?' The oilman was a nice old chap. Bald head. Pince-nez. Looked at me and said, 'Mr Gulley Jimson.' 'The same,' I said. 'The penalty of fame, so far as it goes.' 'Excuse me, Mr Jimson,' he said, 'I think we've got something of yours.' And he went into a glass dock where he kept his desk. 'I'd be glad of that,' I said, 'whatever it is.' 'Yes,' he said, 'I thought so,' looking in the desk. 'A little account.' 'Thank you very much,' I said, 'I'll send you a cheque.' And I went off quickly. But he came on nearly

as quick. He was at the door sooner than I had expected.

Lucky thing there was a coal-cart at the kerb. I nipped under the horse and round the back of the cart. Stood there with my legs by the front wheel. Got a nice view of the oilman in the shop window opposite. He was a bit surprised. Looked up and down. Came out at last to have a look under the cart. So did I, the opposite way, and when he came back to the horse's head, I was round by the tail-board. He went in then and I went home top speed. I'd got an idea. That red cloud ought to be scarlet. Have a clash in the reds–pillar box and crimson lake. Get them moving. I'd only had time to borrow four pots from the oilman. He kept his books too well; didn't give me time to choose. But I had two reds, as well as a blue and a white. No brushes. All wired to cards. It's five years since I borrowed a brush from one of these shops round here. Too many young Raphaels on the grab.

But I made a pretty good stump brush out of a bit of rope and knocked out the idea for the two reds on the wall. Touch of scarlet in the clouds. Crimson apples. Eve terracotta with a scarlet reflection. Pretty good idea it seemed to me and kept that leg quiet. But I didn't look at it long It had come up too quick. Ideas that shoot up like that won't bear the sun. They need time to make a root. I cut for the Eagle. To see if Coker was in a better temper. And know if anyone could lend me a bed, a kettle, and a frypan. Or at least a frypan.

5

No one in the bar but Coker. 'Is it Willy again?' I asked her.

Willy was Coker's young man. A warehouse clerk shaped like a soda-water bottle. Face like a bird. All eyes and beak. Bass in the choir. Glider club. Sporty boy. A sparrowhawk. Terror to the girls. Coker was church, teetotal and no smoke. Willy her only weakness.

Coker drew me a can and waited till I'd paid for it. My last bob. But she threw me a pair of socks across the altar. 'And they

aren't Woolworth's,' she said. 'Don't you pop them or I'll cut your liver out.'

'Thank you, miss, I was wondering where I was going to put up. They've knocked out all my windows at home.'

'You're not going to stop with me again. I've no room. You'd better try a Rowton.' 'Rowton's all full,' I said.

Coker said nothing. But she was absentminded. When she's got that look, as if she isn't sure if a suspender hasn't given way somewhere, she's usually friendly. I was just going to ask her for an advance of five bob on the fortune that was coming to me, when she said, 'I got them socks for Willy.'

'Not had an accident, has he?'

Coker thought a bit and her face was as blank as a sanitary brick. Then she said, 'He's gone off with a Blondie.'

'He'll come back if you want him.'

'Not him. She's a widow too. Five years older.'

'You'll soon get a better than Willy. The dogs leave sweeter bones on any doorstep.'

'Not me,' she said. 'Willy was a piece of luck. Due to the carols last Christmas – in the bad light.'

'You're still in the choir.'

'Never again, Mr Jimson. No more religion for me. I hate God. It isn't fair to make a girl and give her a face like mine.'

'Don't let it get you down, Coke. Don't get in a state. That was my trouble, getting in a state.'

'I shall if I like,' said Coker. 'That's the only advantage I've got. I don't give a damn for myself. Why, even when I was a kid, and I got my earache, I used to say, go on, ache; go on, you bloody flap. Give me hell. That's what I'm for.'

'Don't you believe it, Coker,' I said. 'You're young. You don't know. Things are never so bad they can't be worse. Don't you let anything get hold of you. You got to keep your independence. When I was a kid my father died and I went to live with an uncle who used to try which was harder, his boot or my bottom. And when my poor mother saw me cry, she would take me in her arms and say, "Don't hate him, Gull, or it will poison your life. You don't want that man to spoil your life."