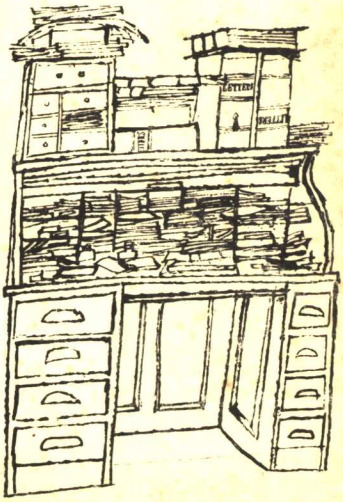
SAUL BELLOW

WINNER OF THE 1976 NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

MOSBY'S MEMOIRS

AND OTHER STORIES



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Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue,
New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 41 Steelcase Road West,
Markham, Ontario, Canada.
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First Published in Great Britain by Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1969
Published in Penguin Books 1971
Reprinted 1977

'Looking for Mr Green' originally appeared in
Commentary; 'The Gonzaga Manuscripts' in
Discovery No. 4; 'Leaving the Yellow House' in
Esquire; 'A Father-to-Be' and 'Mosby's Memoirs'
in the *New Yorker*; and 'The Old System'
in *Playboy*.

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd,
London, Reading and Fakenham
Set in Linotype Pilgrim

Penguin Books
Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories

Saul Bellow was born in Canada in 1915 and grew up in Chicago. He attended Chicago, Northwestern, and Wisconsin Universities and has a B.Sc. in anthropology. He has been a visiting lecturer at Princeton and New York Universities and associate professor at the University of Minnesota, and has also lived in Paris and travelled extensively in Europe. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948 and has received a grant from the Ford Foundation; he is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1965 he was awarded the International Publishers' Prize.

In addition to stories and reviews contributed to many leading American magazines and quarterlies, Saul Bellow has also published *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1948), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which, like *Herzog* (1964), won the National Book Award, *Seize the Day* (1957), *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *The Last Analysis* and *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1969). Several of these are available in Penguins.

Saul Bellow, who is married and has three sons, now lives in Chicago, where he is a member of the Committee on Social Thought.

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Leaving the Yellow House

The neighbours – there were in all six white people who lived at Sego Desert Lake – told one another that old Hattie could no longer make it alone. The desert life, even with a forced-air furnace in the house and butane gas brought from town in a truck, was still too difficult for her. There were women even older than Hattie in the county. Twenty miles away was Amy Walters, the gold-miner's widow. But she was a hardier old girl. Every day of the year she took a bath in the icy lake. And Amy was crazy about money and knew how to manage it, as Hattie did not. Hattie was not exactly a drunkard, but she hit the bottle pretty hard, and now she was in trouble and there was a limit to the help she could expect from even the best of neighbours.

They were fond of her, though. You couldn't help being fond of Hattie. She was big and cheerful, puffy, comic, boastful, with a big round back and stiff, rather long legs. Before the century began she had graduated from finishing school and studied the organ in Paris. But now she didn't know a note from a skillet. She had tantrums when she played canasta. And all that remained of her fine fair hair was frizzled along her forehead in small grey curls. Her forehead was not much wrinkled, but the skin was bluish, the colour of skim milk. She walked with long strides in spite of the heaviness of her hips, pushing on, round-backed, with her shoulders and showing the flat rubber bottoms of her shoes.

Once a week, in the same cheerful, plugging but absent way, she took off her short skirt and the dirty aviator's jacket with the wool collar and put on a girdle, a dress, and high-heeled shoes. When she stood on these heels her fat old body trembled.

She wore a big brown Rembrandt-like tam with a ten-cent-store brooch, eyelike, carefully centred. She drew a straight line with lipstick on her mouth, leaving part of the upper lip pale. At the wheel of her old turret-shaped car, she drove, seemingly methodical but speeding dangerously, across forty miles of mountainous desert to buy frozen meat pies and whisky. She went to the Laundromat and the hairdresser, and then had lunch with two martinis at the Arlington. Afterwards she would often visit Marian Nabot's Silvermine Hotel at Miller Street near skid row and pass the rest of the day gossiping and drinking with her cronies, old divorcees like herself who had settled in the West. Hattie never gambled any more and she didn't care for the movies. And at five o'clock she drove back at the same speed, calmly, partly blinded by the smoke of her cigarette. The fixed cigarette gave her a watering eye.

The Rolfes and the Paces were her only white neighbours at Sego Desert Lake. There was Sam Jervis too, but he was only an old gandy-walker who did odd jobs in her garden, and she did not count him. Nor did she count among her neighbours Darly, the dudes' cowboy who worked for the Paces, nor Swede, the telegrapher. Pace had a guest ranch, and Rolfe and his wife were rich and had retired. Thus there were three good houses at the lake, Hattie's yellow house, Pace's, and the Rolfes'. All the rest of the population – Sam, Swede, Watchtah the section foreman, and the Mexicans and Indians and Negroes – lived in shacks and box-cars. There were very few trees, cottonwoods, and box-elders. Everything else, down to the shores, was sagebrush and juniper. The lake was what remained of an old sea that had covered the volcanic mountains. To the north there were some tungsten mines; to the south, fifteen miles, was an Indian village – shacks built of plywood or railroad ties.

In this barren place Hattie had lived for more than twenty years. Her first summer was spent not in a house but in an Indian wickiup on the shore. She used to say that she had watched the stars from this almost roofless shelter. After her divorce she took up with a cowboy named Wicks. Neither of them had any money – it was the Depression – and they had

lived on the range, trapping coyotes for a living. Once a month they would come into town and rent a room and go on a bender. Hattie told this sadly, but also gloatingly, and with many trimmings. A thing no sooner happened to her than it was transformed into something else. 'We were caught in a storm,' she said, 'and we rode hard, down to the lake and knocked on the door of the yellow house' – now her house. 'Alice Parmenter took us in and let us sleep on the floor.' What had actually happened was that the wind was blowing – there had been no storm – and they were not far from the house anyway; and Alice Parmenter, who knew that Hattie and Wicks were not married, offered them separate beds; but Hattie, swaggering, had said in a loud voice, 'Why get two sets of sheets dirty?' And she and her cowboy had slept in Alice's bed while Alice had taken the sofa.

Then Wicks went away. There was never anybody like him in the sack; he was brought up in a whorehouse and the girls had taught him everything, said Hattie. She didn't really understand what she was saying but believed that she was being Western. More than anything else she wanted to be thought of as a rough, experienced woman of the West. Still, she was a lady, too. She had good silver and good china and engraved stationery, but she kept canned beans and A-1 sauce and tuna fish and bottles of catsup and fruit salad on the library shelves of her living-room. On her night table was the Bible her pious brother Angus – the other brother was a heller – had given her; but behind the little door of the commode was a bottle of bourbon. When she awoke in the night she tippled herself back to sleep. In the glove compartment of her old car she kept little sample bottles for emergencies on the road. Old Darly found them after her accident.

The accident did not happen far out in the desert as she had always feared, but very near home. She had had a few martinis with the Rolfes one evening, and as she was driving home over the railroad crossing she lost control of the car and veered off the crossing on to the tracks. The explanation she gave was that she had sneezed, and the sneeze had blinded her and made her twist

the wheel. The motor was killed and all four wheels of the car sat smack on the rails. Hattie crept down from the door, high off the roadbed. A great fear took hold of her – for the car, for the future, and not only for the future but spreading back into the past – and she began to hurry on stiff legs through the sagebrush to Pace's ranch.

Now the Paces were away on a hunting trip and had left Darly in charge; he was tending bar in the old cabin that went back to the days of the pony express, when Hattie burst in. There were two customers, a tungsten miner and his girl.

'Darly, I'm in trouble. Help me. I've had an accident,' said Hattie.

How the face of a man will alter when a woman has bad news to tell him! It happened now to lean old Darly; his eyes went flat and looked unwilling, his jaw moved in and out, his wrinkled cheeks began to flush, and he said, 'What's the matter – what's happened to you now?'

'I'm stuck on the tracks. I sneezed. I lost control of the car. Tow me off, Darly. With the pickup. Before the train comes.'

Darly threw down his towel and stamped his high-heeled boots. 'Now what have you gone and done?' he said. 'I told you to stay home after dark.'

'Where's Pace? Ring the fire bell and fetch Pace.'

'There's nobody on the property except me,' said the lean old man. 'And I'm not supposed to close the bar and you know it as well as I do.'

'Please, Darly. I can't leave my car on the tracks.'

'Too bad!' he said. Nevertheless he moved from behind the bar. 'How did you say it happened?'

'I told you, I sneezed,' said Hattie.

Everyone, as she later told it, was as drunk as sixteen thousand dollars: Darly, the miner, and the miner's girl.

Darly was limping as he locked the door of the bar. A year before, a kick from one of Pace's mares had broken his ribs as he was loading her into the trailer, and he hadn't recovered from

it. He was too old. But he dissembled the pain. The high-heeled narrow boots helped, and his painful bending looked like the ordinary stooping posture of a cowboy. However, Darly was not a genuine cowboy, like Pace who had grown up in the saddle. He was a late-comer from the East and until the age of forty had never been on horseback. In this respect he and Hattie were alike. They were not genuine Westerners.

Hattie hurried after him through the ranch yard.

'Damn you!' he said to her. 'I got thirty bucks out of that sucker and I would have skinned him out of his whole pay cheque if you minded your business. Pace is going to be sore as hell.'

'You've got to help me. We're neighbours,' said Hattie.

'You're not fit to be living out here. You can't do it any more. Besides, you're swacked all the time.'

Hattie couldn't afford to talk back. The thought of her car on the tracks made her frantic. If a freight came now and smashed it, her life at Sego Desert Lake would be finished. And where would she go then? She was not fit to live in this place. She had never made the grade at all, only seemed to have made it. And Darly – why did he say such hurtful things to her? Because he himself was sixty-eight years old, and he had no other place to go, either; he took bad treatment from Pace besides. Darly stayed because his only alternative was to go to the soldiers' home. Moreover, the dude women would still crawl into his sack. They wanted a cowboy and they thought he was one. Why, he couldn't even raise himself out of his bunk in the morning. And where else would he get women? 'After the dude season,' she wanted to say to him, 'you always have to go to the Veterans' Hospital to get fixed up again.' But she didn't dare offend him now.

The moon was due to rise. It appeared as they drove over the ungraded dirt road towards the crossing where Hattie's turret-shaped car was sitting on the rails. Driving very fast, Darly wheeled the pickup around, spraying dirt on the miner and his girl, who had followed in their car.

'You get behind the wheel and steer,' Darly told Hattie.

She climbed into the seat. Waiting at the wheel, she lifted up her face and said, 'Please God, I didn't bend the axle or crack the oil pan.'

When Darly crawled under the bumper of Hattie's car the pain in his ribs suddenly cut off his breath, so instead of doubling the tow chain he fastened it at full length. He rose and trotted back to the truck on the tight boots. Motion seemed the only remedy for the pain; not even booze did the trick any more. He put the pickup into towing gear and began to pull. One side of Hattie's car dropped into the roadbed with a heave of springs. She sat with a stormy, frightened, conscience-stricken face, racing the motor until she flooded it.

The tungsten miner yelled, 'Your chain's too long.'

Hattie was raised high in the air by the pitch of the wheels. She had to roll down the window to let herself out because the door handle had been jammed from inside for years. Hattie struggled out on the uplifted side crying, 'I better call the Swede. I better have him signal. There's a train due.'

'Go on, then,' said Darly. 'You're no good here.'

'Darly, be careful with my car. Be careful.'

The ancient sea bed at this place was flat and low, and the lights of her car and of the truck and of the tungsten miner's Chevrolet were bright and big at twenty miles. Hattie was too frightened to think of this. All she could think was that she was a procrastinating old woman, she had lived by delays; she had meant to stop drinking, she had put off the time, and now she had smashed her car – a terrible end, a terrible judgement on her. She got to the ground and, drawing up her skirt, she started to get over the tow chain. To prove that the chain didn't have to be shortened, and to get the whole thing over with, Darly threw the pickup forward again. The chain jerked up and struck Hattie in the knee and she fell forward and broke her arm.

She cried, 'Darly, Darly, I'm hurt. I fell.'

'The old lady tripped on the chain,' said the miner. 'Back up here and I'll double it for you. You're getting nowheres.'

Drunkenly the miner lay down on his back in the dark, soft red cinders of the roadbed. Darly had backed up to slacken the chain.

Darly hurt the miner, too. He tore some skin from his fingers by racing ahead before the chain was secure. Without complaining, the miner wrapped his hand in his shirt-tail saying, 'She'll do it now.' The old car came down from the tracks and stood on the shoulder of the road.

'There's your goddamn car,' said Darly to Hattie.

'Is it all right?' she said. Her left side was covered with dirt, but she managed to pick herself up and stand, round-backed and heavy, on her stiff legs. 'I'm hurt, Darly.' She tried to convince him of it.

'Hell if you are,' he said. He believed she was putting on an act to escape blame. The pain in his ribs made him especially impatient with her. 'Christ, if you can't look after yourself any more you've got no business out here.'

'You're old yourself,' she said. 'Look what you did to me. You can't hold your liquor.'

This offended him greatly. He said, 'I'll take you to the Rolfes. They let you booze it up in the first place, so let them worry about you. I'm tired of your bunk, Hattie.'

He raced uphill. Chains, spade, and crowbar clashed on the sides of the pickup. She was frightened and held her arm and cried. Rolfe's dogs jumped at her to lick her when she went through the gate. She shrank from them crying, 'Down, down.'

'Darly,' she cried in the darkness, 'take care of my car. Don't leave it standing there on the road Darly, take care of it, please.'

But Darly in his ten-gallon hat, his chin-bent face wrinkled, small and angry, a furious pain in his ribs, tore away at high speed.

'Oh, God, what will I do,' she said.

The Rolfes were having a last drink before dinner, sitting at their fire of pitchy railroad ties, when Hattie opened the door.

Her knee was bleeding, her eyes were tiny with shock, her face grey with dust.

'I'm hurt,' she said desperately. 'I had an accident. I sneezed and lost control of the wheel. Jerry, look after the car. It's on the road.'

They bandaged her knee and took her home and put her to bed. Helen Rolfe wrapped a heating pad around her arm.

'I can't have the pad,' Hattie complained. 'The switch goes on and off, and every time it does it starts my generator and uses up the gas.'

'Ah, now, Hattie,' Rolfe said, 'this is not the time to be stingy. We'll take you to town in the morning and have you looked over. Helen will phone Dr Stroud.'

Hattie wanted to say, 'Stingy! Why you're the stingy ones. I just haven't got anything. You and Helen are ready to hit each other over two bits in canasta.' But the Rolfes were good to her; they were her only real friends here. Darly would have let her lie in the yard all night, and Pace would have sold her to the bone man. He'd give her to the knacker for a buck.

So she didn't talk back to the Rolfes, but as soon as they left the yellow house and walked through the super-clear moonlight under the great skirt of box-elder shadows to their new station wagon, Hattie turned off the switch, and the heavy swirling and battering of the generator stopped. Presently she became aware of real pain, deeper pain, in her arm, and she sat rigid, warming the injured place with her hand. It seemed to her that she could feel the bone sticking out. Before leaving, Helen Rolfe had thrown over her a comforter that had belonged to Hattie's dead friend India, from whom she had inherited the small house and everything in it. Had the comforter lain on India's bed the night she died? Hattie tried to remember, but her thoughts were mixed up. She was fairly sure the deathbed pillow was in the loft, and she believed she had put the death bedding in a trunk. Then how had this comforter got out? She couldn't do anything about it now but draw it away from contact with her skin. It kept her legs warm. This she accepted, but she didn't want it any nearer.

More and more Hattie saw her own life as though, from birth to the present, every moment had been filmed. Her fancy was that when she died she would see the film shown. Then she would know how she had appeared from the back, watering the plants, in the bathroom, asleep, playing the organ, embracing – everything, even tonight, in pain, almost the last pain, perhaps, for she couldn't take much more. How many twists and angles had life to show her yet? There couldn't be much film left. To lie awake and think such thoughts was the worst thing in the world. Better death than insomnia. Hattie not only loved sleep, she believed in it.

The first attempt to set the bone was not successful. 'Look what they've done to me,' said Hattie and showed visitors the discoloured breast. After the second operation her mind wandered. The sides of her bed had to be raised, for in her delirium she roamed the wards. She cursed at the nurses when they shut her in. 'You can't make people prisoners in a democracy without a trial, you bitches.' She had learned from Wicks how to swear. *'He* was profane,' she used to say. 'I picked it up unconsciously.'

For several weeks her mind was not clear. Asleep, her face was lifeless; her cheeks were puffed out and her mouth, no longer wide and grinning, was drawn round and small. Helen sighed when she saw her.

'Shall we get in touch with her family?' Helen asked the doctor. His skin was white and thick. He had chestnut hair, abundant but very dry. He sometimes explained to his patients, *'I had a tropical disease during the war.'*

He asked, 'Is there a family?'

'Old brothers. Cousins' children,' said Helen. She tried to think who would be called to her own bedside (she was old enough for that). Rolfe would see that she was cared for. He would hire private nurses. Hattie could not afford that. She had already gone beyond her means. A trust company in Philadelphia paid her eighty dollars a month. She had a small savings account.

'I suppose it'll be up to us to get her out of hock,' said Rolfe. 'Unless the brother down in Mexico comes across. We may have to phone one of those old guys.'

In the end, no relations had to be called. Hattie began to recover. At last she could recognize visitors, though her mind was still in disorder. Much that had happened she couldn't recall.

'How many quarts of blood did they have to give me?' she kept asking. 'I seem to remember five, six, eight different transfusions. Daylight, electric light . . .' She tried to smile, but she couldn't make a pleasant face as yet. 'How am I going to pay?' she said. 'At twenty-five bucks a quart. My little bit of money is just about wiped out.'

Blood became her constant topic, her preoccupation. She told everyone who came to see her, '– have to replace all that blood. They poured gallons into me. Gallons. I hope it was all good.' And, though very weak, she began to grin and laugh again. There was more hissing in her laughter than formerly; the illness had affected her chest.

'No cigarettes, no booze,' the doctor told Helen.

'Doctor,' Helen asked him, 'do you expect her to change?'

'All the same, I am obliged to say it.'

'Life sober may not be much of a temptation to her,' said Helen.

Her husband laughed. When Rolfe's laughter was intense it blinded one of his eyes. His short Irish face turned red; on the bridge of his small, sharp nose the skin whitened. 'Hattie's like me,' he said. 'She'll be in business till she's cleaned out. And if Sego Lake turned to whisky she'd use her last strength to knock her old yellow house down to build a raft of it. She'd float away on whisky. So why talk temperance?'

Hattie recognized the similarity between them. When he came to see her she said, 'Jerry, you're the only one I can really talk to about my troubles. What am I going to do for money? I have Hotchkiss Insurance. I paid eight dollars a month.'

'That won't do you much good, Hat. No Blue Cross?'