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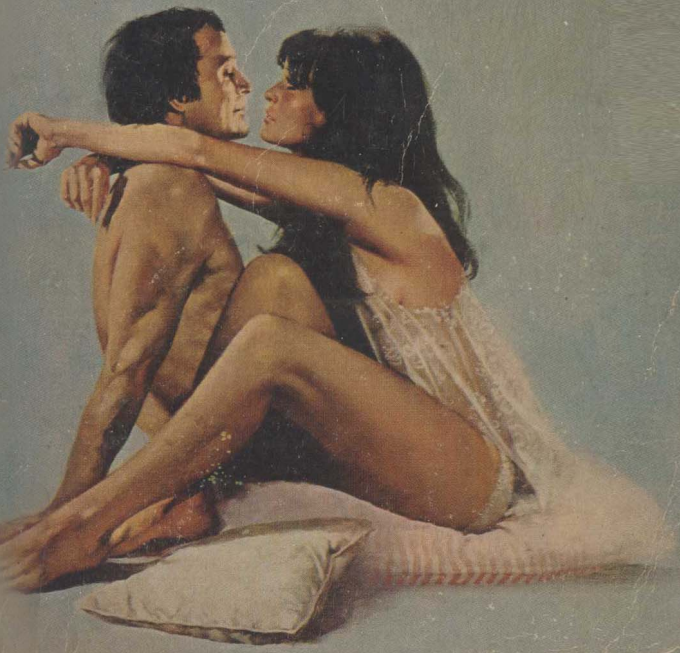

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# SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING

*by Alan Sillitoe*



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# Saturday Night

*PART ONE*

## 1

THE ROWDY gang of singers who sat at the scattered tables saw Arthur walk unsteadily to the head of the stairs, and though they must all have known that he was dead drunk, and seen the danger he would soon be in, no one attempted to talk to him and lead him back to his seat. With eleven pints of beer and seven small gins playing hide-and-seek inside his stomach, he fell from the top-most stair to the bottom.

It was Benefit Night for the White Horse Club, and the pub had burst its contribution box and spread a riot through its rooms and between its four walls. Floors shook and windows rattled, and leaves of aspidistras wilted in the fumes of beer and smoke. Notts County had beaten the visiting team, and the members of the White Horse supporters club were quartered upstairs to receive a flow of victory. Arthur was not a member of the club, but Brenda was, and so he was drinking the share of her absent husband—as far as it would go—and when the club went bust and the shrewd publican put on the towels for those that couldn't pay, he laid eight half-crowns on the table, intending to fork out for his own.

For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostrate Sabbath. Piled-up passions were exploded on Saturday night, and the effect of a week's monotonous graft in the factory was swilled out of your system in a burst of goodwill. You followed the motto of "be drunk and be happy," kept your

crafty arms around female waists, and felt the beer going beneficially down into the elastic capacity of your guts.

Brenda and two other women sitting at Arthur's table saw him push back his chair and stand up with a clatter, his grey eyes filmed over so that he looked like a tall, thin Druid about to begin a maniacal dance. Instead, he muttered something that they were too tight or far away to understand, and walked unsteadily to the top stair. Many people looked at him as he held on to the rail. He turned his head in a slow stare around the packed room, as if he did not know which foot to move first in order to start his body on the descent, or even know why he wanted to go down the stairs at that particular moment.

He felt electric light bulbs shining and burning into the back of his head, and sensed in the opening and closing flash of a second that his mind and body were entirely separate entities inconsiderately intent on going their different ways. For some reason, the loud, cracked voice singing in the room behind seemed like a signal that he should begin descending at once, so he put one foot forward, watched it turn towards the next step in a hazy fashion, and felt the weight of his body bending towards it until pressure from above became so great that he started rolling down the stairs.

A high-octane fuel of seven gins and eleven pints had set him into motion like a machine, and had found its way into him because of a man's boast. A big, loud-mouthed bastard who said he had been a sailor—so Arthur later summed him up—was throwing his weight about and holding dominion over several tables, telling his listeners of all the places he had been to in the world, each anecdote pointing to the fact that he was a champion boozer and the palliest bloke in the pub. He was forty and in his prime, with a gut not too much gone to fat, wearing a brown waist-coated suit and a shirt with matching stripes whose cuffs came down to the hairs of self-assurance on the back of his beefy hand.

"Drink?" Brenda's friend exclaimed. "I'll bet you can't drink like young Arthur Seaton there"—nodding to Arthur's end of the table. "He's on'y twenty-one and 'e can tek it in like a fish. I don't know where 'e puts it all. It just goes in and in and you wonder when 'is guts are goin' ter go bust all over the room, but 'e duzn't even get fatter!"

Loudmouth grunted and tried to ignore her eulogy, but at the end of a fiery and vivid description of a brothel in Alex-

andria he called over to Arthur: "I hear you drink a lot, matey?"

Arthur didn't like being called "matey." It put his back up straight away. "Middlin'," he answered modestly. "Why?"

"What's the most you've ever drunk, then?" Loudmouth wanted to know. "We used to have boozing matches on shore-leave," he added with a wide, knowing smile to the aroused group of spectators. He reminded Arthur of a sergeant-major who once put him on a charge.

"I don't know," Arthur told him. "I can't count, you see."

"Well," Loudmouth rejoined, "let's see how much you can drink now. Loser pays the bill."

Arthur did not hesitate. Free booze was free booze. Anyway, he begrudged big talkers their unearned glory, and hoped to show him up and take him down to his right size.

Loudmouth's tactics were skilful and sound, he had to admit that. Having won the toss-up for choice, he led off on gins, and after the seventh gin he switched to beer, pints. Arthur enjoyed the gins, and relished the beer. It seemed an even contest for a long time, as if they would sit there swilling it back for ever, until Loudmouth suddenly went green halfway through the tenth pint and had to rush outside. He must have paid the bill downstairs, because he didn't come back. Arthur, as if nothing had happened, went back to his beer.

He was laughing to himself as he rolled down the stairs, at the dull bumping going on behind his head and along his spine, as if it were happening miles away, like a vibration on another part of the earth's surface, and he an earthquake-machine on which it was faintly recorded. This rolling motion was so restful and soporific, in fact, that when he stopped travelling—having arrived at the bottom of the stairs—he kept his eyes closed and went to sleep. It was a pleasant and faraway feeling, and he wanted to stay in exactly the same position for the rest of his life.

Someone was poking him in the ribs: he recognized it not as the vicious poke of someone who had beaten him in a fight, or the gentle and playful poke of a woman whom he had taken to bed, but the tentative poke of a man who did not know whether he was poking the ribs of someone who might suddenly spring up and give him a bigger poke back. It seemed to Arthur that the man was endeavouring to tell him something as well, so he tried very hard, but unsuccessfully,

to make an answer, though he did not yet know what the man was saying. Even had he been able to make his lips move the man would not have understood him, because Arthur's face was pulled down into his stomach, so that for all the world he looked like a fully-dressed and giant foetus curled up at at the bottom of the stairs on a plush-red carpet, hiding in the shadow of two aspidistras that curved out over him like arms of jungle foliage.

The man's pokes became more persistent, and Arthur dimly realised that the fingers must belong either to one of the waiters or to the publican himself. It was a waiter, towel in one hand and tray in the other, white jacket open from overwork, a face normally blank but now expressing some character because he had begun to worry about this tall, iron-faced, crop-haired youth lying senseless at his feet.

"He's had a drop too much, poor bloke," said an elderly man, stepping over Arthur's body and humming a hymn tune as he went up the stairs, thinking how jolly yet sinful it would be if he possessed the weakness yet strength of character to get so drunk and roll down the stairs in such a knocked-out state.

"Come on, Jack," the waiter pleaded with Arthur. "We don't want the pleece to come in and find you like that or we shall get summonsed. We had trubble wi' a man last week who had a fit and had to be taken to 't General Hospital in an amb'lance. We don't want any more trubble, or the pub'll get a bad name."

As Arthur rolled over to consolidate and deepen his sleep a glaring overhead light caught his eyes and he opened them to see the waiter's white coat and pink face.

"Christ!" he mumbled.

"He won't help you," the waiter said dispassionately. "Come on, get up and go out for some fresh air, then you'll feel better."

Arthur felt happy yet unco-operative when the waiter tried to get him to his feet: like being in hospital and having a nurse do everything for you with great exertion, and all the time warning you that you mustn't try to help yourself in any way or else it would result in you being kept in bed for another week. Like after he had been knocked down by a lorry riding to Derby two years ago. But the waiter had a different point of view, and after pulling him into a sitting position cried, his heavy breath whistling against the aspidistra

leaves: "All right. That's enough. You aren't lifeless. Come on, get up yoursen now."

When another man's legs opened and closed over Arthur—the retreating shoe knocked his shoulder—he shouted in a belligerent and fully-awake voice: "Hey, mate, watch what yer doin', can't yer? Yo' an' yer bloody grett clod-'oppers." He turned to the waiter: "Some people love comin' out on a Saturday night in their pit-boots."

The man turned from halfway up the stairs: "You shouldn't go to sleep in everybody's way. Can't tek the drink, that's what's the matter wi' yo' young 'uns."

"That's what yo' think," Arthur retaliated, pulling himself up by the stair-rail and holding firmly on to it.

"You'll have to go out, you know," the waiter said sadly, as if he had donned a black cap to pronounce sentence. "We can't serve you any more ale in that condition."

"There's nowt wrong wi' me," Arthur exclaimed, recognising a situation of extreme peril.

"No," the waiter retorted, coolly sarcastic, "I know there ain't, but it's a bit thick, you know, getting drunk like this."

Arthur denied that he was drunk, speaking so clearly that the waiter was inclined to believe him.

"Have a fag, mate," he said, and lit both cigarettes with a perfectly calm hand. "You must be busy tonight," he suggested, so sanely that he might just have walked in off the street and not yet sipped a shandy.

His remark touched the waiter's grievance. "Not much we aren't. I'm so tired I can't feel my feet. These Saturday nights'll be the death o' me."

"It ain't what yer might call a good job," Arthur said with sympathy.

"Well, it's not that exactly," the waiter began to complain, friendly and confiding all of a sudden. "It's because we're short of staff. Nobody'll take on a job like this, you know, and . . ."

The publican came out of the saloon door, a small wiry man in a pin-striped suit whom no one would know as a publican unless they recognised the slight cast of authority and teetotalness in his right eye. "Come on, Jim," he said sharply. "I don't pay my waiters to talk to their pals. You know it's a busy night. Get back upstairs and keep 'em happy."

Jim nodded towards Arthur: "This bloke here"—but the publican was already carrying his fanatic stare to another de-

partment, and so the waiter saw no point in going on. He shrugged his shoulders and obeyed the order, leaving Arthur free to walk into the saloon bar.

Fixing an iron-grip on the brass rail, he shouted for a pint, the only sufficient liquid measure that could begin to swill away the tasteless ash-like thirst at the back of his mouth. After the rapid disposal of the pint, so long in coming, he would bluff his way back upstairs, dodge the waiter, and rejoin Brenda, the woman he had been sitting with before his fall. He could not believe that the descending frolic of the stairs had happened to him. His memory acted at first like a beneficial propaganda machine, a retainer and builder of morale, saying that he could not have been so drunk and rolled down the stairs in that way, and that what had really happened, yes, this was it for sure, was that he must have *walked* down and fallen asleep on the bottom step. It could happen to anybody, especially if they had been at work all day, standing near a capstan lathe in the dull roar of the turnery department. Yet this explanation was too tame. Perhaps he really had tripped down a few of the stairs; yes, he distinctly remembered bumping a few steps.

For the third time he demanded a pint. His eyes were glazed with fatigue, and he would have let go of the bar-rail had not an ever-ready instinct of self-preservation leapt into his fist at the weakest moment and forced him to tighten his grip. He was beginning to feel sick, and in fighting this temptation his tiredness increased. He did not know whether he would go back upstairs to Brenda afterwards, or have his pint and get home to bed, the best place when you feel done-in, he muttered to himself.

The bartender placed a pint before him. He paid one-and-eightpence and drank it almost in a single gulp. His strength magically returned, and he shouted out for another, thinking: the thirteenth. Unlucky for some, but we'll see how it turns out. He received the pint and drank a little more slowly, but half-way through it, the temptation to be sick became a necessity that beat insistently against the back of his throat. He fought it off and struggled to light a cigarette.

Smoke caught in his windpipe and he had just time enough to push his way back through the crush—nudging his elbow into standing people who unknowingly blocked his way, half choked by smoke now issuing from mouth and nostrils, feeling strangely taken up by a fierce power that he could not

control—before he gave way to the temptation that had stood by him since falling down the stairs, and emitted a belching roar over a middle-aged man sitting with a woman on one of the green leather seats.

"My God!" the man cried. "Look at this. Look at what the young bogger's gone and done. Would you believe it? My best suit. Only pressed and cleaned today. Who would credit such a thing? Oh dear. It cost me fifteen bob. As if money grows on trees. And suits as well. I wonder how I'll ever get the stains out? Oh dear."

His whining voice went on for several minutes, and those who turned to look expected him with every word to break down into piteous sobs.

Arthur was stupefied, unable to believe that the tragedy before him could by any means be connected with himself and the temptation to which he had just given way. Yet through the haze and smoke and shrill reproaches coming from the man's lady-friend, he gathered that he was to blame and that he should be feeling sorry for what had happened.

He stood up straight, rigid, swaying slightly, his eyes gleaming, his overcoat open. Automatically he felt for another cigarette, but remembering in time what his attempt to smoke the last one had caused, gave up the search and dropped his hands by his side.

"Look what yer've done, yer young bleeder," the woman was shouting at him. "Spewed all over Alf's bes' suit. And all you do is jus' stand there. Why don't yer do something? Eh? Why don't yer't least apologise for what yer've done?"

"Say summat, mate," an onlooker called, and by the tone of his voice Arthur sensed that the crowd was not on his side, though he was unable to speak and defend himself. He looked at the woman, who continued shouting directly at him, while the victim fumbled ineffectually with a handkerchief trying to clean his suit.

The woman stood a foot away from Arthur. "Look at him," she jeered into his face. "He's senseless. He can't say a word. He can't even apologise. Why don't yer apologise, eh? *Can't* yer apologise? Dragged-up, I should think, getting drunk like this. Looks like one of them Teddy boys, allus making trouble. Go on, apologise."

From her constant use of the word apologise it seemed as if she had either just learned its meaning—perhaps after a transmission breakdown on television—or as if she had

first learned to say it by spelling it out with coloured bricks at school forty years ago.

"Apologise," she cried, her maniacal face right against him. "Go on, apologise."

The beast inside Arthur's stomach gripped him again, and suddenly, mercilessly, before he could stop it or move out of the way, or warn anybody that it was coming, it leapt out of his mouth with an appalling growl.

She was astonished. Through the haze her face clarified. Arthur saw teeth between open lips, narrowed eyes, claws raised. She was a tigress.

He saw nothing else. Before she could spring he gathered all his strength and pushed through the crowd, impelled by a strong sense of survival towards the street-door, to take himself away from a scene of ridicule, disaster, and certain retribution.

He knocked softly on the front door of Brenda's house. No answer. He had expected that. The kids were asleep, her husband Jack was at Long Eaton for the races—dog, horse, motor-bike—and not due back until Sunday midday, and Brenda had stayed at the pub. Now sitting on her front doorstep he remembered his journey to the house: a vague memory of battles with lamp-posts and walls and kerb stones, of knocking into people who told him to watch his step and threatened to drop him one, voices of anger and the hard unsympathetic stones of houses and pavements.

It was a mild autumn night, a wind playing the occasional sharp sound of someone slamming a door or closing a window. He lay across the doorstep, trying to avoid the pavement. A man passed, singing a happy song to himself, noticing nothing. Arthur was half asleep, but opened his eyes now and again to make sure that the street was still there, to convince himself that he was not in bed, because the hard stone step was as round and as soft as a pillow. He was blissfully happy, for he did not have the uncomfortable feeling of wanting to be sick any more, though at the same time he had retained enough alcohol to stay both high-spirited and sleepy. He made the curious experiment of speaking out loud to see whether or not he could hear his own voice. "Couldn't care less, couldn't care less, couldn't care less"—in answer to questions that came into his mind regarding sleeping with a woman who had a husband and two kids, getting blind drunk on seven gins and umpteen pints, falling down a flight of stairs, and being sick over a man and a woman. Bliss and

guilt joined forces in such a way that they caused no trouble but merely sunk his mind into a welcome nonchalance. The next thing he knew was Brenda bending over him and digging her fingers sharply in his ribs.

"Ugh!" he grunted, noting the yeast and hop-like smell of her breath. "Yer've bin boozin'!"

" 'Ark at who's talkin'," she said, gesticulating as if she had brought an audience with her. "I had two pints and three orange-squashes, and he talks about boozing. I heard all about what happened to you though at the pub, falling downstairs and being sick over people."

He stood up, clear-headed and steady. "I'm all right now, duck. I'm sorry I couldn't get back upstairs to you in the pub, but I don't know what went on."

"I'll tell you some day," she laughed. "But let's be quiet as we go in, or we'll wake the kids."

Got to be careful, he said to himself. Nosy neighbours'll tell Jack. He lifted the band of hair from her coat collar and kissed her neck. She turned on him petulantly: "Can't you wait till we get upstairs?"

"No," he admitted, with a mock-gloating laugh.

"Well, you've got to wait," she said, pushing the door open for him to go in.

He stood in the parlour while she fastened the locks and bolts, smelling faint odours of rubber and oil coming from Jack's bicycle leaning against a big dresser that took up nearly one whole side of the room. It was a small dark area of isolation, long familiar, with another man's collection of worldly goods: old-fashioned chairs and a settee, fireplace, clock ticking on the mantelpiece, a smell of brown paper, soil from a plant-pot, ordinary aged dust, soot in the chimney left over from last winter's fires, and mustiness of rugs laid down under the table and by the fireplace. Brenda had known this room for seven married years, yet could not have become more intimate with it than did Arthur in the ten seconds while she fumbled with the key.

He knocked his leg on the bicycle pedal, swearing at the pain, complaining at Jack's barminess for leaving it in such an exposed position. "How does he think I'm going to get in with that thing stuck there?" he joked. "Tell him I said to leave it in the back-yard next week, out of 'arm's way."

Brenda hissed and told him to be quiet, and they crept like two thieves into the living-room, where the electric light showed the supper things—teacups, plates, jam-pot, bread—

still on the table. A howl of cats came from a neary-by yard, and a dustbin lid clattered onto cobblestones.

"Oh well," he said in a normal voice, standing up tall and straight, "it's no use whisperin' when all that racket's going on."

They stood between the table and firegrate, and Brenda put her arms around him. While kissing her he turned his head so that his own face stared back at him from an oval mirror above the shelf. His eyes grew large in looking at himself from such an angle, noticing his short disordered hair sticking out like the bristles of a blond porcupine, and the mark of an old pimple healing on his cheek.

"Don't let's stay down here long, Arthur," she said softly.

He released her and, knowing every corner of the house and acting as if it belonged to him, stripped off his coat and shirt and went into the scullery to wash the tiredness from his eyes. Once in bed, they would not to go to sleep at once: he wanted to be fresh for an hour before floating endlessly down into the warm bed beside Brenda's soft body.

It was ten o'clock, and she was still asleep. The sun came through the window, carrying street-noises on its beams, a Sunday morning clash of bottles from milkmen on their rounds, newspaper boys shouting to each other as they clattered along the pavement and pushed folded newspapers into letter-boxes, each bearing crossword puzzles, sports news, and forecasts, and interesting scandal that would be struggled through with a curious and salacious indolence over plates of bacon and tomatoes and mugs of strong sweet tea.

He turned to Brenda heaped beside him, sitting up to look at her. She was breathing gently; her hair straggled untidily over the pillow, her breasts bulged out of her slip, a thick smooth arm over them as if she were trying to protect herself from something that had frightened her in a dream. He heard the two children playing in their bedroom across the landing. One was saying: "It's my Teddy-bear, our Jacky. Gi' it me or else I's'll tell our mam." Then a low threat from the boy who would not hand back his plunder.

He sank down contentedly into bed. "Brenda," he said in a low voice. "Come on, duck, waken up."

She turned and pressed her face into his groin.

"Nice," he muttered.