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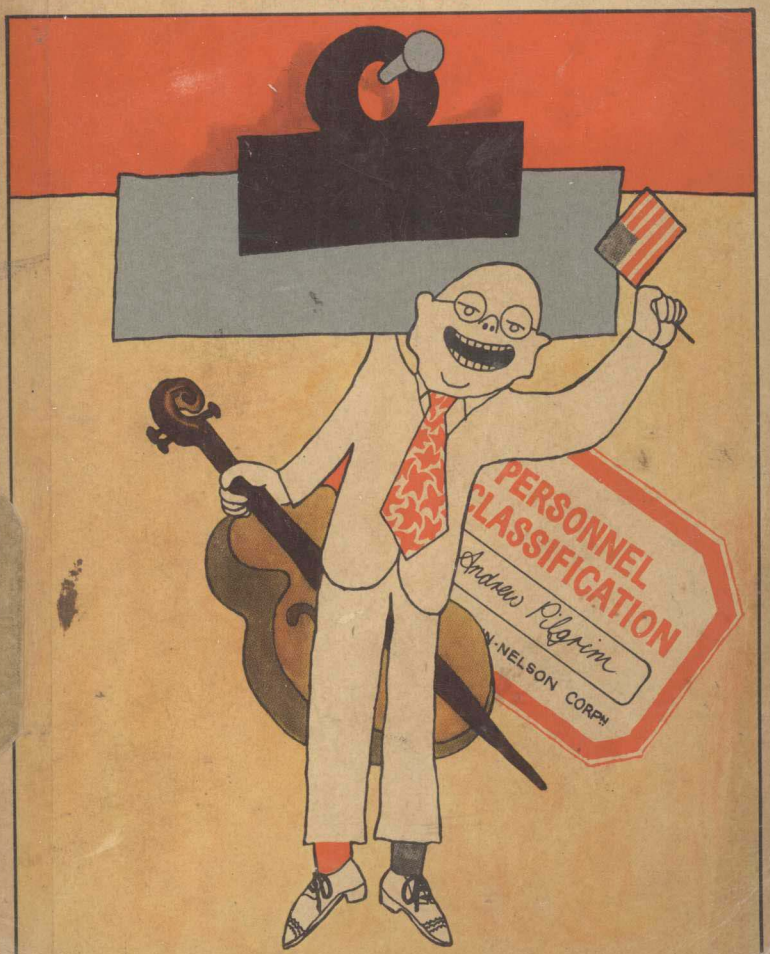

The Absence of a Cello

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Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

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First published in the U.S.A. 1960
Published in Great Britain by Gollancz 1961
Published in Penguin Books 1965

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Made and printed in Great Britain
by Cox and Wyman Ltd
London, Reading, and Fakenham
Set in Monotype Fournier

ANDREW PILGRIM awaited the inquisition of Otis Clifton.

Why? Who was this Otis Clifton, what was the source of his power to probe into a man's life without delicacy or forbearance? Who gave this quidnunc a dignity and respectability he could never achieve in a sane society?

The situation arose in part from Andrew Pilgrim's inability to apply his theoretical precision to problems of living for which no formulae existed. At the age of nine he had been adept at calculus and had played with little boys and girls. At the age of forty-four he knew as much as anyone about atomic structure and he played with big boys and girls.

For many years before he had even heard the name of Otis Clifton, Andrew had been reasonably happy teaching post-graduate physics in various universities. After the publication of *Thermonuclear Problems*, and a basic work on cosmic radiation, he strutted modestly, preening his intellectual feathers for visitors from afar who came to admire his plumage. Vanity rules the vain man, but Andrew was not vain. He ruled his vanity, tenderly to be sure, and in such a way as never to wound it.

More patience would have made him a better teacher. His mind was always wandering to unknown problems he wanted to solve, and he grew restless among known problems whose solutions he revealed to his students. Yet his post-graduate seminars could never accommodate all the applicants.

As the years passed he began to feel the need for a break in the routine, an escape from ritualistic afternoon teas and that mother-of-all, the Dean's wife. Andrew had begun work on a series of experiments and calculations designed to challenge the

concept of Conservation of Parity. This work absorbed him and he soon resented the hours he spent in teaching.

Some years before, his old friend, Grant Littlewood, who had taught engineering, suddenly ended his academic career to go into business. It took Grant only a few years to make an excellent living as an electrical contractor. Grant's talent for business was more substantial than his talent for teaching. In a field where years of work usually preceded success, he had managed to start more or less at the top and remain there. Grant explained it by saying that people like to have professors wire their buildings. This was the explanation of a genial conniver, an experienced briber, and a gifted corner-cutter. Grant was a large cat and the world was his mouse.

With Grant's example before him, Andrew Pilgrim was ready for revolt when a colleague, Peter Knowles, suggested that they go into partnership, open an experimental laboratory, and offer to solve the minor technical problems of industrial corporations. This would leave them free, mentally and financially, to pursue their own work. Peter Knowles was convinced of the existence of a discrepancy in the orbit of one of the moons of Jupiter, while Andrew was still gunning for the theory of Conservation of Parity.

Grant Littlewood, being an apostate professor himself, had the proselytizing urge. When he heard that Andrew was contemplating this drastic move, he phoned him to say that he had an apartment for him in Central Park West, on the same floor as his own, and had already put down a deposit on it. 'This,' Grant had proclaimed, 'is the age of the triumph of the professor!' Since he was paying for his enthusiasm on the lower long-distance rates prevalent after six o'clock, he added, 'For the first time in history industry is yelling for professors. We're socially acceptable, Andrew! Get Peter Knowles and go to work!'

This was the beginning of Andrew's laboratory and of his bankruptcy.

Palmer Yates, the accountant, was capable of placidity in the face of flood, plague, famine, and fire. He remained placid when he faced Andrew and Peter Knowles, ledger books in hand, and asked, 'How did you possibly manage it?'

'Manage what?' asked Andrew, vaguely aware that chickens had come home to roost in every nook and cranny of the laboratory.

'Well, I see it like this,' said Yates. 'In the past few years it was next to impossible for a laboratory like yours to lose money.' Andrew and Peter exchanged wistful glances. 'And yet,' continued Yates, 'you both seemed determined to get into a mess.'

'Never mind the mess,' said Andrew. 'Tell us how we get out of it.'

Palmer Yates's placid smile remained even as he said, 'You've paid me for three years, and God only knows why. I always give you good advice and you always ignore it. Now the chickens have come home to roost.'

Damn, thought Andrew. He had hoped the chickens would escape Mr Yates's attention, but how could they? Even now they were fighting for floor space, and more were coming through the windows every moment.

'Your total indebtedness,' continued Mr Yates, 'is now a hundred and thirty-three thousand dollars plus some small change. You are about to be dispossessed. Your equipment will be repossessed. Whatever possessed you?' He grinned at what he considered his successful foray into semantics and then plunged on. 'I was going to say that your failure to incorporate was your master stroke. Of course, you know that this leaves you both with personal liability for your debts. Ah, but I underestimated you! I am told that you have international reputations as physicists. I suppose that means you have questing minds. The ordinary troubles of ordinary mortals aren't enough for you.' He examined the expressionless faces of

Andrew and Peter who were fishing in an empty barrel for a reply. 'Men,' said Mr Yates, 'will you tell me why the hell you never paid the withholding taxes for your employees?' No answer. 'Do you realize that Uncle Sam is going to hunt you down?' No answer. 'Do you know that as soon as you go to work again the government's going to attach your earnings?'

'We were both engaged in important personal projects,' said Andrew, attempting a tone of gruff dignity. Peter, backing him up at once, mumbled something about a possible discrepancy in the orbit of one of the moons of Jupiter. Not only did Mr Yates consider this a *non sequitur*, but he was vulgar enough to say so.

'I had to have some experimental equipment made,' Andrew mumbled more diffidently. 'It had to be machine-tooled to order. That runs into money.'

'I suppose you needed a private cyclotron,' said Mr Yates, still warm of voice and smile. 'Next I guess you'll be buying a small one for your wife to run around in.'

'I did not buy a cyclotron!' cried Andrew.

Palmer Yates shrugged. 'Let's not get angry at each other. You've paid me regularly anyway, so I'm giving you my last report as a free bonus.'

'Are you leaving us?' asked Peter.

'There's nothing left to leave.' He tossed the books down. 'Look them over. The situation's perfectly clear. You have no choice. You've got to file a voluntary bankruptcy.'

'Then what?' asked Andrew.

'Then run like hell.' Palmer Yates tucked his papers into his briefcase and zipped it up, a gesture that also zipped up the front door of the laboratory. He reached for his coat and as he slipped into it he said, 'As for me, I'm getting out of here while I'm still solvent.'

Mr Yates drove away in his solvent Oldsmobile while Andrew, Peter, and the chickens brooded in silence.

The need for money was only half of Andrew's story. He needed it desperately, but lack of money alone could not have driven him to apply to Baldwin-Nelson. Something more corrosive had happened in the years he had devoted to the laboratory under the self-evident delusion that the laboratory's mere existence would finance his own work.

His own work had been three fruitful years of thinking and experimenting, his mind tuned to hair-breadth tolerances, and functioning equally well in the realm of the simple or the complex. Andrew had been convinced that the theory of Conservation of Parity was invalid. He had talked it out with Celia Pilgrim who understood nothing but the bold outlines. He did this for the sake of thinking aloud since he had no way of communicating the real depth of his purpose to someone without his training. He had once even written to his sister Marian, whose understanding was technically superior to Celia's, giving her the details of his work, and what was most precious of all, his certainty of success.

Andrew succeeded two weeks too late. He was in the process of preparing his papers, struggling with the proper English to describe his experiments, checking and re-checking his mathematical symbols, when two young Chinese physicists made the announcement that they had proved the theory of Conservation of Parity invalid. Their conclusion freed a thousand minds to pursue new physical concepts, and plunged one mind – Andrew Pilgrim's – into despondency.

It galled Andrew. Non-scientists usually believe that scientists are mailed against the slings and arrows of subjectivity, their souls composed of an angelic amalgam that repels such human responses as envy, jealousy, and bitter disappointment. Even Andrew was amazed at his inability to react with more self-effacement. A sense of duty rather than magnanimity inspired his telegram of congratulations to the two young Chinese. After three years of work, study, experiment, and tossing at night, Andrew had achieved the same results by almost the

same methods. Yet his signature did not appear beneath the results. The signature was somehow important.

Even Celia Pilgrim's aptitude for personal philosophy proved inadequate the day he came home with the news. The man who is totally devoid of vanity is also totally devoid of personality.

Simultaneous discoveries crowd the history of science. More than one man pursues a single chain of thought through the labyrinth, and luck alone determines who may arrive first. Darwin barely anticipated Wallace. Newton and Leibnitz discovered the calculus together although they worked apart. By contemplating these and other parallels in history Andrew finally succeeded in achieving no comfort whatsoever. It was then that he turned to Baldwin-Nelson, determined never again to gamble so much of himself at so cruel a price. It was too late to be cavalier with another few years of his life.

During the process of filing the voluntary bankruptcy an attorney had added a few clauses to the bottom of the abyss. Only Grant Littlewood, the light of acquisition in his eyes, refused to consider Andrew's world at an end. Far from it. He was even outrageous enough to remark that this was the best thing that could have happened to Andrew, a sentiment that outranks jealousy as a motive for murder.

But Grant also gave advice that made sense. He opened the Sunday *New York Times* to pages of advertisements. Corporations all over the country were holding out every enticement short of the sexual to attract engineers, chemists, and physicists. Industry obviously needed scientists and needed them badly. And corporations were willing to pay, if not munificently, certainly on terms that no university could match. 'Sop up some of the gravy!' Grant advised, reiterating his old battle cry.

Andrew took Grant's advice, not with enthusiasm, but because he had no choice. But once having taken it, he began to manufacture the enthusiasm. Wasn't Peter Knowles already

on his way to California where he was to work on problems connected with flight control in a vacuum? Other corporations were treating scientists to a season in the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies, careful all the while not to let them slip the corporate leash. It was not a question of dignity or purpose for Andrew. Common sense, that's all, plain common sense. And when the wee voice whispered, 'Oh, how very common is common sense,' he told it to shut up.

After consultation with Celia and Grant, a long distance call to Peter Knowles, and a brief colloquy with his soul, Andrew applied to Baldwin-Nelson, a giant in the electronics field. Baldwin-Nelson was seeking a special man for a special top secret project.

One morning Andrew faced a Baldwin-Nelson underling, a three-buttoned link in the chain of command. 'Naturally we are aware of your qualifications,' said Underling, enunciating carefully to prove that Big Business can talk good English (speechwise), 'and it would be presumptuous of me to question them.'

'Yes' Andrew agreed. The slight pursing of Underling's lips surprised him. Had 'Yes' been the wrong answer?

'The field has narrowed down,' continued Underling. (Evidently some thoroughbreds had been scratched.) 'Our Mr Clifton – he's the head of personnel – would like to visit you.'

'Visit me?'

'Yes. In your home. He likes to see applicants in their homes. Mr Clifton believes that a man's home is what he is.'

'What happens if he moves?' asked Andrew. He was immediately aware that this was the second incorrect response and he resolved to constrain himself.

'Do you object to a visit next Sunday afternoon?' asked Underling, ducking under Andrew's question.

'Not at all,' said Andrew. He had a curious feeling in his

stomach, and he began to wonder if he could tolerate the pavonine antics of a personnel director.

Sunday, he recalled as he left Underling, was the day his sister Marian was to arrive from Chicago. He would probably have to hide her in the closet.

The day before Otis Clifton's visit, Grant Littlewood's wife Emma found in the morning mail a five-dollar refund from a plant nursery. The garden page of the previous week's Sunday *Herald-Tribune* had advertised a plant guaranteed to grow twelve inches in two days, whether planted in the closet, the bathtub, or the left ear. The company backed this revolt against nature with a money-back offer. Although Emma had never bought the plant, she had written an angry letter demanding her money back, and the company was as good as its word.

After lunch, still glowing from her morning mail, Emma wandered to Woolworth's to buy odds and ends. Bitterly she recalled that this store's boast had once been that all its merchandise sold for either five or ten cents. She made random purchases of anything that caught her eye. In one hand she held a bag of newly acquired kitchen gadgets, in the other a handbag. Then she passed a deserted counter – an inevitability in Woolworth's. There she deftly picked up a few packages of Venida hair-nets and slipped them into her handbag.

Emma Littlewood had no need of hair-nets, but her record of petty larcency, all at the expense of Woolworth's, was so fine that it was worth upholding. Always one for the *beau geste*, Emma did not walk right out of the store. She stopped first at the jewellery counter where she sneered at some scatter pins. Then she fingered a few trinkets, smiled at a salesgirl, clutched her handbag possessively, and walked out.

She had not taken more than a few steps when she felt a tap on the shoulder. She turned to look into the face of a man who had neglected to brush his teeth – obviously a store

detective. Emma's heart raced, not in fear, but in joy and anticipation. 'Yes?' she inquired sweetly, facing the titillating crisis she had so often prayed for.

'Come inside, lady,' he said, his voice like a brook running over kidney stones. 'We'll settle this whole thing without any trouble.'

'We will settle *what* thing without any trouble?' asked Emma, who was then Queen Marie of Rumania carefully picking her way among the peasants.

'Those few little hair-nets you picked up, lady.'

Emma looked at him for a long time, then favoured him with a smile of upper-class nausea. 'Unless you leave immediately,' she intoned, 'I am going to call a policeman.'

He shrugged. 'Well, lady, maybe I made a mistake and you can prove it by just letting me look in your handbag.'

'Look in my handbag!' Her face turned smoky with a wrath so righteous that she herself began to feel righteous. Emma had long since discovered that she developed whatever emotion she imitated. In ten seconds the utter gall of that oaf so outraged her that she was ready to have him arrested. She took one step backward, cleared her throat, lifted her head, and then yelled, 'Police! Police!'

The store dick staggered as though she had struck him a blow. 'Police!' she yelled again. A number of sympathetic bystanders, all innocent, gathered around.

'Please, lady, please don't yell,' urged the store dick. 'If you'd just let me – '

A large hairy man thrust his way between them to inquire, 'Lady, is this guy annoying you?'

Emma surveyed the comforting bulk of the kindly stranger, then said, 'Indeed he is. He put his hand on – '

The outraged detective, close to tears, did a little yelling himself. 'That's a lie! I never laid a hand on her!'

'And not only that,' continued Emma, 'but he actually

accused me of shoplifting! He wants to look in my purse. Can you imagine that?'

'All right, lady, all right,' the dick pleaded. 'If you'd just – '

'Police!' shrieked Emma while the hairy benefactor advanced on the detective. The detective stood his ground for a moment, then turned and ran inside Woolworth's. The stranger smiled and said, 'He won't bother you no more, lady.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Emma. Then she dropped a cherry on top of the sundae. 'You know,' she added cheerfully, 'as a matter of fact I did swipe a few small things.'

The man made a deprecatory gesture. 'Hell, they can afford it,' he said.

'They sure can,' said Emma.

Five dollars refund and three hair-nets. The lark was in the meadow and the snail somewhat appropriate in Emma Littlewood's world.

After she returned home she spent an hour in her room, working on washers. She had discovered that a local hardware store carried metal washers only slightly larger than a United States minted twenty-five-cent piece. It was Emma's pleasure to file these washers down, slowly and carefully, weighing them on an apothecary's scale, until they were the exact size and weight of a quarter. For this endeavour, she had bought a small home vice.

Emma had a little hoard of hand-tooled washers. She used them in the washing-machine in the basement, and in telephone booths when she called out of town.

Emma didn't need the money. She simply worked on the theory that in this world those who carry on an incessant guerrilla warfare lead happier and fuller lives.

That evening Celia Pilgrim, Andrew's mate, gave one of a series of guest lectures to the American Philological Society. Her subject was 'Phonetic Keys to Old English', and she welcomed the lectures as a testing-ground for her forthcoming

book on the subject. The book represented a slight departure for her since her philological impulses had always been second to her work as a specialist in the Arthurian legend and Tristan and Iseult.

Following the lecture she stopped in Schrafft's for a chocolate frosted. She reached home by cab in time to meet her neighbour, Mrs Knapp, in the elevator. Mrs Knapp always referred to her peripatetic husband as a 'travelling man', although he was a trouble-shooter rather than a salesman for a large plastic corporation. (It was not really a plastic corporation. It was a rigid corporation that manufactured plastics.)

'Mr Knapp is in Washington,' said Mrs Knapp between the third and fourth floors. 'He dropped in to see Dwight.'

'Dwight who?' asked Celia.

'Eisenhower.'

By the sixth floor – the elevator was the leisurely sort – Mrs Knapp remarked that she had just enjoyed a walk in Central Park. 'There's nothing like it for sluggish intestines,' she said. All her intimacies were abdominal.

Celia escaped Mrs Knapp's viscera on the fourteenth floor, opened her door, and examined Andrew, who was then in the midst of doing his sit-ups. He grunted a greeting.

In the same park where Mrs Knapp had walked her sluggish intestines, Joanna Pilgrim, Andrew's very pretty nineteen-year-old daughter, sat beneath a tree in the crisp winter weather, holding hands with Perry Blewitt of the Wharton School of Finance in Philadelphia. Their young love had time for only limited manifestations because when Christmas vacation ended Joanna would return to Vassar and Perry to Wharton. Meanwhile they held hands and talked practically about their future because they were two very practical young people. In fact, their practicality overwhelmed them and they stood in awe of their own level-headedness.

It would have disturbed Joanna and Perry to know that

while they held hands, Elliot Littlewood, Grant's son, lay on the couch in apartment 14J, thinking erotic thoughts about young Miss Pilgrim. Elliot was twenty-seven, eight years older than Joanna, six years older than Perry. A veteran (by virtue of the draft) of the Army Air Force, he had just been accepted by Intercontinent Airlines to go into training as a student pilot. This meant moving to the West Coast and leaving Joanna.

Elliot was genuinely in love with Joanna. As he riffled the leaves of his imaginary erotica, all profusely illustrated with Joanna, he wondered at his love. Why was he not rescuing her from danger in his reveries, protecting her, nourishing her when hungry, comforting her when sick, offering her consolation in sorrow, wisdom in bewilderment? Why did he just keep on undressing her?

He really had no cause to worry because while he was mentally stripping her, Perry was mentally dressing her. He was discussing Joanna's clothes budget, to go into operation after marriage.

The night before the visit of Otis Clifton, Andrew took refuge in music. He gathered his string quartet, now augmented by a pianist, to work on the Schumann Piano Quintet.

When Andrew played, swaying slightly as he wrung music out of his cello, his face became vacant and abstract. He played well and with a nice sensitivity. The violist, a member of the New York Philharmonic, always assumed a slightly condescending air in the company of amateurs as though he didn't want anyone to know that he was enjoying himself. Of the two violinists one was an old friend of Celia and the other was Grant Littlewood. Grant played with flourishes. Although some of his notes were wrong, his flourishes were impeccable, and his face assumed a bovine calm except when the music drifted into *agitato* or *scherzando*. Then his brows contracted in fierce concentration and he chased every note, determined