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# PETER DEVRIES



# PECKHAM'S MARBLES

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# PECKHAM'S MARBLES



PETER DE VRIES

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY

New York St. Louis San Francisco

Toronto Hamburg Mexico

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Reprinted by arrangement with G. P. Putnam's Sons

First McGraw-Hill Paperback edition, 1987

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 A R G A R G 8 7

ISBN 0-07-016650-1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

De Vries, Peter.  
Peckham's marbles.

I. Title.

[PS3507.E8673P4 1987b] 813'.52 87-2730  
ISBN 0-07-016650-1 (pbk.)

*The public does not make exquisite distinctions.*

—G. B. SHAW  
in a letter to G. K. Chesterton





I





# ONE

“The last place to have a ball, my dear Mrs. DelBelly, is at a formal dance. Or such I myself have found to be the case.”

The chief obstacle to Peckham's progress with Mrs. DelBelly lay undoubtedly in his inability to chew the rag, or fat. He could never seem to get the hang of it. Or having got it, he'd lose it, succumbing in the end to his besetting vice, the “art of conversation” as practiced by a few and feared and resented by the rest of us. He and Mrs. DelBelly would be chatting cozily, say, about the passing of the flyswatter from the American scene, when he would dilate on “a nostalgic artifact once a staple of every household.” Who needs it? Blooey would go their momentary rapport. Or they would be chewing the fat about the peculiar waddle Mrs. Peptide had developed since going to her podiatrist, when Peckham would explain walking as a regulated fall and recovery of the locomoting biped, bringing *that* subject to grief. Once, God knows how, they got on the topic of shoofly pie, where and when they had eaten or at least seen it, etc., and Peckham began a dis-

course on references to the dessert in American literature, and from there it was a learned little tangent on foodstuffs as they figured in the work of Wolfe, Proust and Joyce, till the breakdown in communications was again complete. There is nothing wrong with wanting somebody else's money if erudition through no fault of your own has left you broke and friendless, or fluency in retailing it has stood you in as much social stead as ring around the collar. A girl had once broken an engagement with him because he couldn't talk United States. Now here he was at Dappled Shade, trying to make a socially acceptable sow's ear out of the silk purse that was Earl Peckham, long enough to win Mrs. DelBelly's heart—and, yes, her money. She had wanted it herself when it had been young Frank DelBelly's; it had become her own when they married, and even more so when he died and left her a widow; and now it was to be safeguarded from fortune hunters who hadn't two nickels to rub together but could work their mouth pretty good.

His very first day as a patient at Dappled Shade, convalescing from a bad case of hepatitis, Peckham had spotted Mrs. DelBelly as a woman not radically his senior—say fifty to his forty-odd—who, though inescapably large of frame, carried herself with something like regal style. In fact a debate raged within himself whether he should tell her she reminded him of a Wagnerian *Heldinsoprano*, about to give out with the *Liebestod* after each deep-bosomed breath. And casing her in further detail, he learned that she wasn't really an inmate of the sanitarium but its principal owner, taking a few weeks' lodging here while her nearby house was done over from stem to stern, and

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also to root out certain financial irregularities she had heard were undermining the profits. Thus one could not say she was as ample as her means without by the same token saying her means were as ample as she. Discreet inquiries revealed they were of divergent faiths. She was an Episcopalian, Peckham a Dadaist. But who could say that in this era of ecumenism the two denominations might not soon one day merge? Meanwhile, seventeen rooms (according to rumors) and five baths admit of the most elastic conceivable definition of compatibility. With that much space, two people could drift apart and hardly notice it.

Meals at Dappled Shade were not taken at rigidly assigned tables. You got your eats cafeteria-style and then sat down wherever you wished or could. Not exempting herself from this participatory democracy left Mrs. DelBelly's society prey to anyone, but few presumed on it, least of all Peckham. Not appearing to hog her company was at least half the impression he tried to create of deserving it. He did slip into the last remaining empty chair of her table-for-eight at dinner two days after their abortive little shoofly-pie chat, held on the grounds on a warm July afternoon. The occasion was not auspicious for his resolve to commit no flights into the abstruse.

Present with them was a local music critic in for a nervous breakdown following a traumatic failure to understand a noted musicologist's widely circulated judgment of a new Czech composer. He called him "the Stravinsky of music." Try as the critic might to grasp this arcane mot, its meaning eluded him; nor did the quantities of friends

and acquaintances who shared his bafflement assuage his crisis—after all, he was supposedly an authority and should be dispensing exegesis, not asking it, sometimes from people buttonholed in public; once, in fact, on the street, such was his extremity. He had accosted an old man with wild-flying gray hair, seen hurrying out of Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center. The old man had shaken his head in the negative on hearing the query. “‘Karpaty Talcum is the Stravinsky of music.’ No, I have no idea what it means,” he’d said, and gone his way, possibly troubled in spirit himself, to telephone and buttonhole acquaintances of his own in a chain reaction of bewilderment. Some intimates of the critic, whose name was Bruno Sweltering, professed to understand the oft-quoted paradox, but their elucidations proved kinkier than the original and only left Sweltering worse off than before. Now and then as he flogged his brains to understand it he thought he had its meaning, but then it would slip from his grasp like a bar of bath soap from your fist. Doubts that he was a fit member of his profession vexed nights already insomniac enough. His fixed idea was diagnosed as an *idée fixe*. A period of rest was prescribed, and so here he was at Dappled Shade, in the particular care of Dr. Auslese, whose prognosis was “fair for a return to normal life, poor for a resumption of his vocation.”

In spite of it all, he laughed a lot with steadfast teeth, probably to keep his spirits up while his guts rotted in self-doubt. The eight at Mrs. DelBelly’s table talked about an upcoming concert at the nearby Westchester Bowl. It would be an all-Delius program, which gave Sweltering a chance



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to get off a few zingers of his own. "At least the mosquitoes will fit right into, hmm hmm, his peculiar brand of tonality, mmbahahaha," he said. Peckham nodded brisk agreement, holding a finger aloft to indicate that a concurring comment would be forthcoming, directly he had swallowed a wad of lasagna. He touched his napkin to his lips and said, "I find Delius rather mucilaginous, and of a certain lachrymosity." Sweltering bobbed his head in assent, but Mrs. DelBelly rolled her eyes at the rest as if to ask how anybody capable of such inhuman literacy was allowed to run around loose. Of course Peckham wasn't doing that exactly, was he, running around loose? Still, in a few weeks he would be at large in society again, free to spread pain and consternation on a plane with the Talcum business, given his story that he was here only on a nursing-home basis after a bout of hepatitis, which she secretly doubted. That she had not consulted the files to which as proprietor she had free access was to her credit as a lady. "It's none of my beeswax" had been her honorable rejoinder to Mrs. Peptide's hint that she take a peek at Peckham's folder or press Dr. Hushnecker for details.

To change the subject, Mrs. DelBelly deplored her unbridled consumption of the lasagna even as she lifted a dexterously burdened fork to her lips, adding that anyone with a weight problem should avoid pasta of any kind, in a manner that invited demurrer. Which Peckham was more than ready to give. "Nonsense. There are people lean as myself with pots, while someone with the right skeletal frame for it can carry off any amount of weight. You came through that door like a galleon under full sail."



All of this led to his overhearing her remark later to Mrs. Peptide, with whom she was thick, "He has no small talk."

Well, they would see about that!

That Mrs. Peptide's own small talk was all she had, and that submicroscopic, a moment's eavesdropping behind a clump of rhododendrons the next morning sufficed to confirm. The two women sat on the lawn just beyond his protective screen, in a choice corner of the beautifully groomed grounds, holding a conversation that certainly qualified as chewing the fat. He listened carefully a moment to get a good fix on how it was done according to their lights, because he definitely planned to join them as a way of advancing his cause with Mrs. DelBelly. The cost of that might be a half hour or so of Mrs. Peptide's twaddle. He would show that he could descend to a level of easy colloquial familiarity without a sacrifice of such intellectual endowments as must, simultaneously, make him a good catch. That was the ticklish combination to be orchestrated here. Just as he squatted down so his head wouldn't be visible above the foliage, Mother Nature strolled by, expecting as usual to be complimented on the day, if not the season.

"Quite the most beautiful July I've seen in years," Peckham said. "One of your best."

"Oh, thank you," Mother Nature said, fluttering a blue chiffon hanky the same color as her dress, a very full-cut gown that fell in easy folds about her own ample body. "So glad you like it," she added, and continued on by. Peckham returned to his eavesdropping, cocking an ear sidewise against the broadleaf foliage, and even into it.

"I had an ingrown toenail on my left tootsie, this one