

MOOSE-HEAD, DOE-EYES, SHREW

Clive Montague never liked me particularly. I certainly never liked him. Loud, boorish, with floppy fair hair, there was — there is — nothing to like about him. This gives rise to two questions:

First. Why, some twenty years ago, did I receive an invitation to the house-party he was hosting at his parents' country residence in Dorset?

Second. Why did I go?

The second question isn't difficult to answer. Curiosity. Plain and simple. Clive and his public school 'chums' inhabited a universe I'd read about in Edwardian novels but thought had long since ceased to exist. It was a world I neither envied nor despised but one which I felt I should witness before its final expiry.

The first question will be answered in due course and I will add a third. I still dislike Clive. Meanwhile, in the years that have passed since that first invitation, Clive's indifference to me has mutated into loathing. Why, then, are there several occasions every year when we find ourselves in each other's company?

The house-party proved a cliché. There's no need to dwell on the kedgeriee and kidneys at breakfast, the pink champagne and vintage port at night, the afternoon tennis, the morning croquet, the games of charades and sardines or the drunken, naked séance in the library. It was so much what I had expected that it was impossible not to be disappointed and, very rapidly, bored. I might have gone home after the third game of sardines on Saturday night — my absence would not have been noticed by Clive or any of his braying, whinnying companions — had it not been for the late arrival of a charming house-guest: the doe-eyed girl.

At this distance in time I can't recall exactly what passed between us but I can only suppose that there must have been some exchange of looks or words that led me to believe she might be my reward for staying the course until Monday morning. It has to

be admitted that Araminta was — and she still is —disconcertingly lovely to look at. But let me take you back to where we were.

Sometimes things seem so obvious from the outset. You see so clearly what's going to happen. You make it known to other people. You are ignored. You make it known again. You are ignored again. It duly happens. And, well ... To appreciate the story — if so trivial an episode can be characterised as such — let me invite you to be me; to step into my shoes; to become, if you like, the protagonist.

On the first evening you notice that there is a loose wooden floorboard at the top of the main staircase. You notice this because, in the gloom, you trip over it and would have tumbled down onto the cold, grey, stone slabs of the hall floor if you hadn't been quick enough to grab hold of the banister. Fortunately, you were which meant that you didn't. But you resolve to say something in the morning.

A different, perhaps more dramatic incident occurs later that night. Returning from a journey to a distant bathroom with a towel round your waist — unlike your fellow guests you do not, at that time, possess a silk dressing-gown — you are surprised to find that the door to your bedroom is open. You are still more surprised to find a shadowy figure bending over the chair on which hang your trousers and jacket.

Confidence, cunning, effrontery. Are these the lessons that are learnt in the dormitories and cloisters of public schools?

—What the hell are you doing here? says the shadowy figure.

Is it because you are wearing a towel round your waist that it takes you a moment to realise that this should be your line? By the time you do and the question is on your lips, the shadowy figure has departed with a snort and a vigorous oath. A consequence of this is that you feel in future it may be prudent to lock your bedroom door. This prudence seems justified when, some time after the rest of house is still, you hear the door-handle turning. You switch on the dim bedside light and watch in fascination as the handle turns again. It turns once more, rattles briefly, then silence. You wait. Nothing happens. You switch off the light and sleep soundly for the rest of the night.

At breakfast, over the kidneys and kedgeriee, you mention the floorboard to your host, Clive, who sits beside his younger brother, Rodney. Although you have not previously been introduced to Rodney, there is — you are almost certain — something very familiar about him.

—The loose floorboard at the top of the stairs, you say. Someone might trip over it.

You omit to add that you already have.

—I'll have it fixed, Clive replies airily.

But, by the evening, he hasn't.

Later, returning from the distant bathroom, you pass Rodney who, for reasons that will never be explained, is wearing a deerstalker hat and carrying a wooden tennis racquet.

—Last night, you say. Was it you who ... ?

—That was my cousin, he says, and walks on.

Unlocking your bedroom door, you find that a sheet of paper has been slipped under it. The note, written in a bold but elegant hand, reads: 'I have something of yours. You might like it back.' You think about this for a moment before dismissing it as childish nonsense. There has been a great deal of childish nonsense throughout the day.

The next morning, on the croquet lawn, you mention it once more to Clive and Rodney.

—Is there a loose floorboard? says Rodney.

—Yes, you say. I told you about it yesterday. You said you were going to have it fixed.

—Well, that's exactly what we'll do, says Clive. No need to fret, old man.

But nothing is done.

Later that day, beside the tennis court, you are about to remind them again when, in chorus, Clive and Rodney forestall you.

—Are you still fussing about that floorboard?

They regard you with an expression of lofty tolerance, very similar to that worn by the moose whose head hangs on the wall at the top of the stairs. At this point you could

easily become testy but you resist. You resist because the party has now been joined by the charming late-arriving house-guest — the doe-eyed girl — whose good opinion you wish to merit. You resolve to say nothing and the evening passes in raucous merriment, rowdy port-fuelled antics involving a one-legged teddy bear, a lacrosse stick and torrential tears in the library.

In the middle of the night, there is a toppling commotion and bedroom doors are thrown open. There, at the bottom of the stairs, is the charming house-guest in a most becoming arrangement of tangled nightclothes. Beside her rests the moose-head which she must have seized in an effort to slow her descent.

—What happened? ask those about her. Can you stand?

—No, she says. I'm afraid I can't.

She has twisted her delightfully delicate ankle.

—I tripped, she says, apologetically.

There are outpourings of loud astonishment and sympathetic regret as she is helped to her feet.

—Ah, you say. The loose floorboard.

—The loose floorboard? What loose floorboard?

Everyone turns to look at you.

—There's a floorboard, you say. It's loose.

—There's a loose floorboard and you knew about it? they say, their eyebrows raised.

They would like to add but don't: 'What a great pity you didn't say anything before now. If you had, this calamity could have been avoided.' Indeed, they might have wished to say a great deal more but they don't because you are still, they suppose, a house-guest and must be treated civilly although it's most unlikely that you will be invited again.

You start to say ... But then you stop. There isn't any point. Opinions have been formed. Conclusions reached. Judgements settled. The moose looks up at you with undisguised contempt, while in the eyes of the charming house-guest — who is trying to

take a first tentative step — you see a blend of injury and disappointment playing in equal measure across her sweet features.

It is then that you find yourself being led away by a girl with an amused smile and green eyes who you haven't quite noticed before.

—Come with me, she says. You need rescuing. I'll look after you.

She's right.

You do.

She does.

She leads you into your bedroom and closes the door behind her.

—Yours, she says, handing you a wallet.

It certainly looks like yours.

—My brother 'borrows' things, she says.

Your wallet now contains five twenty-pound notes which you're sure weren't there before.

—Interest, she says. Compensation. Don't ask any questions.

—All right, you say.

She locks the door.

It will come as no surprise to learn that Clive and Rodney have nothing in common with their sister, Estelle. (Rodney, by the way, died some time ago from an overdose of heroin in a small hotel in Tangier.) Estelle is ... No, now is not the time to tell you about my remarkable wife. It seems we'd met earlier that summer — I have no memory of it myself — and that it was she who had arranged my invitation to the house-party.

What has followed since then is another story altogether with little bearing on the present tale. But there are occasions — birthdays, christenings, confirmations and Rodney's funeral — when we are obliged to assemble with the rest of the family in Dorset. Here I may sometimes exchange a word or two with Araminta, the doe-eyed girl, who, as I have said, is as lovely as ever. Clive, though, never speaks to me. I don't know why but he seems to hold me somehow responsible for his falling head-over-heels

in love with Araminta and — in a state of priapic infatuation — instantly marrying her.

Did I say that Araminta is as lovely as ever? I think I did. She is. She is also — or so I am told — an unappeasable shrew who has made Clive's life an utter misery.

The moose-head was restored long ago to its position at the top of the stairs. The loose wooden floorboard has yet to be fixed.