LOUISA, holding a dishcloth in her hand, stepped out of the kitchen door at the back of the house into the cool October sunshine.

“Edward!” she called. “Ed-ward! Lunch is ready!”

She paused a moment, listening; then she strolled out on to the lawn and continued across it-a little shadow attending her-skirting the rose bed and touching the sundial lightly with one finger as she went by. She moved rather gracefully for a woman who was small and plump, with a lilt in her walk and a gentle swinging of the shoulders and the arms. She passed under the mulberry tree on to the brick path, then went all the way along the path until she came to the place where she could look down into the dip at the end of this large garden.

“Edward! Lunch!”

She could see him now, about eighty yards away, down in the dip on the edge of the wood the tallish narrow figure in khaki slacks and dark-green sweater, working beside a big bonfire with a fork in his hands, pitching brambles on to the top of the fire. It was blazing fiercely, with orange flames and clouds of milky smoke, and the smoke was drifting back over the garden with a wonderful scent of autumn and burning leaves.

Louisa went down the slope towards her husband. Had she wanted, she could easily have called again and made herself heard, but there was something about a first-class bonfire that impelled her towards it, right up close so she could feel the heat and listen to it burn.

“Lunch,” she said, approaching.

“Oh, hello. All right-yes. I’m coming.”

“What a good fire.”

“I’ve decided to clear this place right out,” her husband said. “I’m sick and tired of all these brambles.” His long face was wet with perspiration. There were small beads of it clinging all over his moustache like dew, and two little rivers were running down his throat on to the turtleneck of the sweater.

“You better be careful you don’t overdo it, Edward.”

“Louisa, I do wish you’d stop treating me as though I were eighty. A bit of exercise never did anyone any harm.”

“Yes, dear, I know. Oh, Edward! Look! Look!”

The man turned and looked at Louisa, who was pointing now to the far side of the bonfire.

“Look, Edward! The cat!”

Sitting on the ground, so close to the fire that the flames sometimes seemed actually to be touching it, was a large cat of a most unusual colour. It stayed quite still, with its head on one side and its nose in the air, watching the man and woman with a cool yellow eye.

“It’ll get burnt!” Louisa cried, and she dropped the dishcloth and darted swiftly in and grabbed it with both hands, whisking it away and putting it on the grass well clear of the flames.

“You crazy cat,” she said, dusting off her hands. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Cats know what they’re doing,” the husband said. “You’ll never find a cat doing something it doesn’t want. Not cats.”

“Whose is it? You ever seen it before?”

“No, I never have. Damn peculiar colour.”

The cat had seated itself on the grass and was regarding them with a sidewise look. There was a veiled inward expression about the eyes, something curiously omniscient and pensive, and around the nose a most delicate air of contempt, as though the sight of these two middle-aged persons-the one small, plump, and rosy, the other lean and extremely sweaty-were a matter of some surprise but very little importance. For a cat, it certainly had an unusual colour-a pure silvery grey with no blue in it at all-and the hair was very long and silky.

Louisa bent down and stroked its head. “You must go home,” she said. “Be a good cat now and go on home to where you belong.”

The man and wife started to stroll back up the hill towards the house. The cat got up and followed, at a distance first, but edging closer and closer as they went along. Soon it was alongside them, then it was ahead, leading the way across the lawn to the

house, walking as though it owned the whole place, holding its tail straight up in the air, like a mast.

“Go home,” the man said. “Go on home. We don’t want you.”

But when they reached the house, it came in with them, and Louisa gave it some milk in the kitchen. During lunch, it hopped up on to the spare chair between them and sat through the meal with its head just above the level of the table watching the proceedings with those dark-yellow eyes which kept moving slowly from the woman to the man and back again.

“I don’t like this cat,” Edward said.

“Oh, I think it’s a beautiful cat. I do hope it stays a little while.”

“Now, listen to me, Louisa. The creature can’t possibly stay here. It belongs to someone else. It’s lost. And if it’s still trying to hang around this afternoon, you’d better take it to the police. They’ll see it gets home.”

After lunch, Edward returned to his gardening. Louisa, as usual, went to the piano. She was a competent pianist and a genuine music-lover, and almost every afternoon she spent an hour or so playing for herself. The cat was now lying on the sofa, and she paused to stroke it as she went by. It opened its eyes, looked at her a moment, then closed them again and wet-it back to sleep.

“You’re an awfully nice cat,” she said. “And such a beautiful colour. I wish I could keep you.” Then her fingers, moving over the fur on the cat’s head, came into contact with a small lump, a little growth just above the right eye.

Poor cat,” she said. “You’ve got bumps on your beautiful face. You must be getting old.”

She went over and sat down on the long piano stool but she didn’t immediately start to play. One of her special little pleasures was to make every day a kind of concert day, with a carefully arranged programme which she worked out in detail before she began. She never liked to break her enjoyment by having to stop while she wondered what to play next. All she wanted was a brief pause after each piece while the audience clapped enthusiastically and called for more. It was so much nicer to imagine an audience, and now and again while she was playing-on the lucky days, that is-the room would begin to swim and fade and darken, and she would see nothing but row upon row of seats and a sea of white faces upturned towards her, listening with a rapt and adoring concentration.

Sometimes she played from memory, sometimes from music. Today she would play

from memory; that was the way she felt. And what should the programme be? She sat before the piano with her small hands clasped on her lap, a plump rosy little person with a round and still quite pretty face, her hair done up in a neat bun at the back of her head. By looking slightly to the right, she could see the cat curled up asleep on the sofa, and its silvery-grey coat was beautiful against the purple of the cushion. How about some Bach to begin with? Or, better still, Vivaldi. The Bach adaptation for organ of the D minor Concerto Grosso. Yes-that first. Then perhaps a little Schumann. Carnaval? That would be fun. And after that-well, a touch of Liszt for a change. One of the Petrarch Sonnets.

The second one-that was the loveliest the F major. Then another Schumann, another of his gay ones-Kindcrsccncn. And lastly, for the encore, a Brahms waltz, or maybe two of them if she felt like it.

Vivaldi, Schumann, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms. A very nice programme, one that she could play easily without the music. She moved herself a little closer to the piano and paused a moment while someone in the audience-already she could feel that this was one of the lucky days-while someone in the audience had his last cough; then, with the slow grace that accompanied nearly all her movements, she lifted her hands to the keyboard and began to play.

She wasn’t, at that particular moment, watching the cat at all-as a matter of fact she had forgotten its presence-but as the first deep notes of the Vivaldi sounded softly in the room, she became aware, out of the corner of one eye, of a sudden flurry, a flash of movement on the sofa to her right. She stopped playing at once. “What is it?” she said, turning to the cat. “What’s the matter?”

The animal, who a few seconds before had been sleeping peacefully, was now sitting bolt upright on the sofa, very tense, the whole body aquiver, ears up and eyes wide open, staring at the piano “Did I frighten you?” she asked gently. Perhaps you’ve never heard music before.”

No, she told herself. I don’t think that’s what is. On second thoughts, it seemed to her that the cat’s attitude was not one of fear. There was no shrinking or backing away. If anything, there was a leaning forward, a kind of eagerness about the creature, and the face-well, there was rather an odd expression on the face, something of a mixture between surprise and shock. Of course, the face of a cat is a small and fairly expressionless thing, but if you watch carefully the eyes and ears working together, and particularly that little area of mobile skin below the ears and slightly to one side, you can occasionally see the reflection of very powerful emotions. Louisa was watching the face closely now, and because she was curious to see what would happen a second time, she reached out her hands to the keyboard and began again to play the Vivaldi.

This time the cat was ready for it, and all that happened to begin with was a small extra tensing of the body. But as the music swelled and quickened into that first exciting rhythm of the introduction to the fugue, a strange look that mounted almost to ecstasy began to settle upon the creature's face. The ears, which up to then had been pricked up straight, were gradually drawn back, the eyelids drooped, the head went over to one side, and at that moment Louisa could have sworn that the animal was actually appreciating the work.

What she saw (or thought she saw) was something she had noticed many times on the faces of people listening very closely to a piece of music. When the sound takes complete hold of them and drowns them in itself, a peculiar, intensely ecstatic look comes over them that you can recognize as easily as a smile. So far as Louisa could see, the cat was now wearing almost exactly this kind of look.

Louisa finished the fugue, then played the siciliana, and all the way through she kept watching the cat on the sofa. The final proof for her that the animal was listening came at the end, when the music stopped. It blinked, stirred itself a little, stretched a leg, settled into a more comfortable position, took a quick glance round the room, then looked expectantly in her direction. It was precisely the way a concert-goer reacts when the music momentarily releases him in the pause between two movements of a symphony. The behaviour was so thoroughly human it gave her a queer agitated feeling in the chest.

"You like that?" she asked. "You like Vivaldi?"

The moment she'd spoken, she felt ridiculous, but not-and this to her was a trifle sinister-not quite so ridiculous as she knew she should have felt.

Well, there was nothing for it now except to go straight ahead with the next number on the Programme, which was Carnaval. As soon as she began to play, the cat again stiffened and sat up straighter; then, as it became slowly and blissfully saturated with the sound, it relapsed into the queer melting mood of ecstasy that seemed to have something to do with drowning and with dreaming. It was really an extravagant sight-quite a comical one, too-to see this silvery cat sitting on the sofa and being carried away like this. And what made it more screwy than ever, Louisa thought, was the fact that this music, which the animal seemed to be enjoying so much, was manifestly too difficult, too classical, to be appreciated by the majority of humans in the world.

Maybe, she thought, the creature's not really enjoying it at all. Maybe it's a sort of hypnotic reaction, like with snakes. After all, if you can charm a snake with music, then why not a cat? Except that millions of cats hear the stuff every day of their lives, on radio and gramophone and piano, and, as far as she knew, there'd never yet been a case of one behaving like this. This one was acting as though it were following every

single note. It was certainly a fantastic thing.

But was it not also a wonderful thing? Indeed it was. In fact, unless she was much mistaken, it was a kind of miracle, one of those animal miracles that happen about once every hundred years.

“I could see you loved that one,” she said when the piece was over. “Although I’m sorry I didn’t play it any too well today. Which did you like best-the Vivaldi or the Schumann?”

The cat made no reply, so Louisa, fearing she might lose the attention of her listener, went straight into the next part of the programme-Liszt’s second Petrarch Sonnet.

And now an extraordinary thing happened. She hadn’t played more than three or four bars when the animal’s whiskers began perceptibly to twitch. Slowly it drew itself up to an extra height, laid its head on one side, then on the other, and stared into space with a kind of frowning concentrated look that seemed to say, “What’s this? Don’t tell me. I know it so well, but just for the moment I don’t seem to be able to place it.” Louisa was fascinated, and with her little mouth half open and half smiling, she continued to play, waiting to see what on earth was going to happen next.

The cat stood up, walked to one end of the sofa, sat down again, listened some more; then all at once it bounded to the floor and leaped up on to the piano stool beside her. There it sat, listening intently to the lovely sonnet, not dreamily this time, but very erect, the large yellow eyes fixed upon Louisa’s fingers.

“Well!” she said as she struck the last chord. “So you came up to sit beside me, did you? You like this better than the sofa? All right, I’ll let you stay, but you must keep still and not jump about.” She put out a hand and stroked the cat softly along the back, from head to tail. “That was Liszt,” she went on. “Mind you, he can sometimes be quite horribly vulgar, but in things like this he’s really charming.”

She was beginning to enjoy this odd animal pantomime, so she went straight on into the next item on the programme, Schumann’s Kinderscenen.

She hadn’t been playing for more than a minute two when she realized that the cat had again moved, and was now back in its old place on the sofa. She’d been watching her hands at the time, and presumably that was why she hadn’t even noticed its going; all the same, it must have been an extremely swift and silent move. The cat was still staring at her, still apparently attending closely to the music, and yet it seemed to Louisa that there was not now the same rapturous enthusiasm there’d been during the previous piece, the Liszt. In addition, the act of leaving the stool and returning to the sofa appeared in itself to be a mild but positive gesture of disappointment.

“What’s the matter?” she asked when it was over. “What’s wrong with Schumann? What’s so marvellous about Liszt?” The cat looked straight back at her with those yellow eyes that had small jet-black bars lying vertically in their centres.

This, she told herself, is really beginning to get interesting-a trifle spooky, too, when she came to think of it. But one look at the cat sitting there on the sofa, so bright and attentive, so obviously waiting for more music, quickly reassured her.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to alter my programme specially for you. You seem to like Liszt so much, I’ll give you another.”

She hesitated, searching her memory for a good Liszt; then softly she began to play one of the twelve little pieces from Der Wethnachtsbaum. She was now watching the cat very closely, and the first thing she noticed was that the whiskers again began to twitch. It jumped down to the carpet, stood still a moment, inclining its head, quivering with excitement, and then, with a slow, silky stride, it walked around the piano, hopped up on the stool, and sat down beside her.

They were in the middle of all this when Edward came in from the garden.

“Edward!” Louisa cried, jumping up. “Oh, Edward, darling! Listen to this! Listen what’s happened!”

“What is it now?” he said. “I’d like some tea.” He had one of those narrow, sharp-nosed, faintly magenta faces, and the sweat was making it shine as though it were a long wet grape.

“It’s the cat!” Louisa cried, pointing to it sitting quietly on the piano stool. “Just wait till you hear what’s happened!”

“I thought I told you to take it to the police.”

“But, Edward, listen to me. This is terribly exciting. This is a musical cat.”

“Oh, yes?”

“This cat can appreciate music, and it can understand it too.”

“Now stop this nonsense, Louisa, and for God’s sake let’s have some tea. I’m hot and tired from cutting brambles and building bonfires.” He sat down in an armchair, took a cigarette from a box beside him, and lit it with an immense patent lighter that stood near the box.

“What you don’t understand,” Louisa said, is that something extremely exciting has

been happening here in our house while you were out, something that may even be…well…almost momentous.” quite sure of that.”

“Edward, please!”

Louisa was standing by the piano, her little pink face pinker than ever, a scarlet rose high up on each cheek. “If you want to know,” she said, “I’ll tell you what I think.”

“I’m listening, dear.”

“I think it might be possible that we are at this moment sitting in the presence of-” She stopped, as though suddenly sensing the absurdity of the thought.

“Yes?”

“You may think it silly, Edward, but it’s honestly what I think.”

“In the presence of whom, for heaven’s sake?”

“Of Franz Liszt himself!”

Her husband took a long slow pull at his cigarette and blew the smoke up at the ceiling. He had the tight-skinned, concave cheeks of a man who has worn a full set of dentures for many years, and every time he sucked at a cigarette, the cheeks went in even more, and the bones of his face stood out like a skeleton’s. “I don’t get you,” he said.

“Edward, listen to me. From what I’ve seen this afternoon with my own eyes, it really looks as though this might be some sort of a reincarnation.”

“You mean this lousy cat?”

“Don’t talk like that, dear, please.”

“You’re not ill, are you, Louisa?”

“I’m perfectly all right, thank you very much. I’m a bit confused I don’t mind admitting it, but who wouldn’t be after what’s just happened?

Edward, I swear to you.”

“What did happen, if I may ask?”

Louisa told him, and all the while she was speaking, her husband lay sprawled in the

chair with his legs stretched out in front of him, sucking at his cigarette and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling. There was a thin cynical smile on his mouth.

“I don’t see anything very unusual about that,” he said when it was over. “All it is it’s a trick cat. It’s been taught tricks, that’s all.”

“Don’t be so silly, Edward. Every time I play Liszt, he gets all excited and comes running over to sit on the stool beside me. But only for Liszt, and nobody can teach a cat the difference between Liszt and Schumann. You don’t even know it yourself. But this one can do it every single time. Quite obscure Liszt, too.”

“Twice,” the husband said. “He’s only done it twice.”

“Twice is enough.”

“Let’s see him do it again. Come on.”

“No,” Louisa said. “Definitely not. Because if this is Liszt, as I believe it is, or anyway the soul of Liszt or whatever it is that comes back, then it’s certainly not right or even very kind to put him through a lot of silly undignified tests.”

“My dear woman! This is a cat-a rather stupid grey cat that nearly got its coat singed by the bonfire this morning in the garden. And anyway, what do you know about reincarnation?”

“If the soul is there, that’s enough for me,” Louisa said firmly. “That’s all that counts.”

“Come on, then. Let’s see him perform. Let’s see him tell the difference between his own stuff and someone else’s.”

“No, Edward. I’ve told you before, I refuse to put him through any more silly circus tests. He’s had quite enough of that for one day. But I’ll tell you what I will do. I’ll play him a little more of his own music.”

“A fat lot that’ll prove.”

“You watch. And one thing is certain-as soon as he recognizes it, he’ll refuse to budge off that stool where he’s sitting now.”

Louisa went to the music shelf, took down a book of Liszt, thumbed through it quickly, and chose another of his finer compositions-the B minor Sonata. She had meant to play only the first part of the work, but once she got started and saw how the cat was sitting there literally quivering with pleasure and watching her hands with that rapturous concentrated look, she didn’t have the heart to stop. She played it all the

way through. When it was finished, she glanced up at her husband and smiled. “There you are,” she said. “You can’t tell me he wasn’t absolutely loving it.”

“He just likes the noise, that’s all.”

“He was loving it. Weren’t you, darling?” she said, lifting the cat in her arms. “Oh, my goodness, if only he could talk. Just think of it, dear-he met Beethoven in his youth! He knew Schubert and Mendelssohn and Schumann and Berlioz and Grieg and Delacroix and Ingres and Heine and Balzac. And let me see…My heavens, he was Wagner’s father-in-law! I’m holding Wagner’s father-in-law in my arms!”

“Louisa!” her husband said sharply, sitting up straight. “Pull yourself together.” There was a new edge to his voice now, and he spoke louder.

Louisa glanced up quickly. “Edward, I do believe you’re jealous!”

“Of a miserable grey cat!”

“Then don’t be so grumpy and cynical about it all. If you’re going to behave like this, the best thing you can do is to go back to your gardening and leave the two of us together in peace. That will be best for all of us, won’t it, darling?” she said, addressing the cat, stroking its head. “And later on this evening, we shall have some more music together, you and I, some more of your own work. Oh, yes,” she said, kissing the creature several times on the neck, “and we might have a little Chopin, too. You needn’t tell me-I happen to know you adore Chopin. You used to be great friends with him, didn’t you, darling? As a matter of fact if I remember rightly-it was in Chopin’s apartment that you met the great love of your life, Madame Something-or-Other. Had three illegitimate children by her, too, didn’t you? Yes, you did, you naughty thing, and don’t go trying to deny it. So you shall have some Chopin,” she said, kissing the cat again, “and that’ll probably bring back all sorts of lovely memories to you, won’t it?”

“Louisa, stop this at once!” don’t be so stuffy, Edward.”

“You’re behaving like a perfect idiot, woman.

And anyway, you forget we’re going out this evening, to Bill and Betty’s for canasta.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t possibly go out now. There’s no question of that.”

Edward got up slowly from his chair, then bent down and stubbed his cigarette hard into the ashtray. “Tell me something,” he said quietly. “You don’t really believe this-this twaddle you’re talking, do you?”

“But of course I do. I don’t think there’s any question about it now. And, what’s more, I consider that it puts a tremendous responsibility upon us, Edward-upon both of us. You as well.”

“You know what I think,” he said. “I think you ought to see a doctor. And damn quick, too.”

With that, he turned and stalked out of the room, through the french windows, back into the garden.

Louisa watched him striding across the lawn towards his bonfire and his brambles, and she waited until he was out of sight before she turned and ran to the front door, still carrying the cat.

Soon she was in the car, driving to town.

She parked in front of the library, locked the cat in the car, hurried up the steps into the building, and headed straight for the reference room. There she began searching the cards for books on two subjects-REINCARNATION and LISZT.

Under REINCARNATION she found something called Recurring Earth-Lives-How and Why, by a man called F. Milton Willis, published in 1921. Under LISZT she found two biographical volumes. She took out all three books, returned to the car, and drove home.

Back in the house, she placed the cat on the sofa, sat herself down beside it with her books, and prepared to do some serious reading. She would begin, she decided, with Mr F. Milton Willis’s work. The volume was thin and a trifle soiled, but it had a good heavy feel to it, and the author’s name had an authoritative ring.

The doctrine of reincarnation, she read, states that spiritual souls pass from higher to higher forms of animals. “A man can, for instance, no more be reborn as an animal than an adult can rebecome a child.’

She read this again. But how did he know? How could he be so sure? He couldn’t. No one could possibly be certain about a thing like that. At the same time, the statement took a good deal of the wind out of her sails.

“Around the centre of consciousness of each of us, there are, besides the dense outer body, four other bodies, invisible to the eye of flesh, but perfectly visible to people whose faculties of perception of superphysical things have undergone the requisite development… She didn’t understand that one at all, but she read on, and soon she came to an interesting passage that told how long a soul usually stayed away from the earth before returning in someone else’s body. The time varied according to type, and

Mr Willis gave the following breakdown: Drunkards and the 40/50 YEARS unemployable Unskilled labourers 60/100 YEARS Skilled workers 100/200 YEARS The bourgeoisie 200/300 YEARS The upper-middle classes 500 YEARS The highest class of gentleman farmers 600/1,000 YEARS Those in the Path of Initiation.1,500/2,000 YEARS Quickly she referred to one of the other books, to find out how long Liszt had been dead. It said he died in Bayreuth in 1886. That was sixty-seven years ago. Therefore, according to Mr Willis, he'd have to have been an unskilled labourer to come back so soon. That didn't seem to fit at all. On the other hand, she didn't think much of the author's methods of grading. According to him, "the highest class of gentleman farmer' was just about the most superior being on the earth. Red jackets and stirrup cups and the bloody, sadistic murder of the fox. No, she thought, that isn't right. It was a pleasure to find herself beginning to doubt Mr Willis.

Later in the book, she came upon a list of some of the more famous reincarnations. Epictetus, she was told, returned to earth as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Cicero came back as Gladstone, Alfred the Great as Queen Victoria, William the Conqueror as Lord Kitchener. Ashoka Vardhana, King of India in 272 Bc, came back as Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, an esteemed American lawyer. Pythagoras returned as Master Koot Hoomi, the gentleman who founded the Theosophical Society with Mme Blacatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott (the esteemed American lawyer, alias Ashoka Vardhana, King of India). It didn't say who Mme Blavatsky had been. But "Theodore Roosevelt,' it said, "has for numbers of incarnations played great pans as a leader of men…From him descended the royal line of ancient Chaldea, he having been, about 30,000 BC, appointed Governor of Chaldea by the Ego we know as Caesar who was then ruler of Persia…Roosevelt and Caesar have been together time after time as military and administrative leaders; at one time, many thousands of years ago, they were husband and wife.

That was enough for Louisa. Mr F. Milton Willis was clearly nothing but a guesser. She was not impressed by his dogmatic assertions. The fellow was probably on the right track, but his pronouncements were extravagant, especially the first one of all, about animals. Soon she hoped to be able to confound the whole Theosophical Society with her proof that man could indeed reappear as a lower animal. Also that he did not have to be an unskilled labourer to come back within a hundred years.

She now turned to one of the Liszt biographies, and she was glancing through it casually when her husband came in again from the garden.

What are you doing now?" he asked.

"Oh just checking up a little here and there.

Listen, my dear, did you know that Theodore Roosevelt once was Caesar's wife?"

“Louisa,” he said, “look-why don’t we stop this nonsense? I don’t like to see you making a fool of yourself like this. Just give me that goddamn cat and I’ll take it to the police station myself.”

Louisa didn’t seem to hear him. She was staring open-mouthed at a picture of Liszt in the book that lay on her lap. “My God!” she cried. “Edward, look!”

“What?”

“Look! The warts on his face! I forgot all about them! He had these great warts on his face and it was a famous thing. Even his students used to cultivate little tufts of hair on their own faces in the same spots, just to be like him.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Nothing. I mean not the students. But the warts have.”

“Oh, Christ,” the man said. “Oh, Christ God Almighty.”

“The cat has them, too! Look, I’ll show you.”

She took the animal on to her lap and began examining his face. “There! There’s one! And there’s another! Wait a minute! I do believe they’re in the same places! Where’s that picture?”

It was a famous portrait of the musician in his old age, showing the fine powerful face framed in a mass of long grey hair that covered his ears and came half-way down his neck. On the face itself, each large wart had been faithfully reproduced, and there were five of them in all.

“Now, in the picture there’s one above the right eyebrow.” She looked above the right eyebrow of the cat. “Yes! It’s there! In exactly the same place! And another on the left, at the top of the nose. That one’s there, too! And one just below it on the cheek. And two fairly close together under the chin on the right side. Edward! Edward! Come and look! They’re exactly the same.”

“It doesn’t prove a thing.”

She looked up at her husband who was standing in the centre of the room in his green sweater and khaki slacks, still perspiring freely. “You’re scared, aren’t you, Edward? Scared of losing your precious dignity and having people think you might be making a fool of yourself just for once.”

“I refuse to get hysterical about it, that’s all.”

Louisa turned back to the book and began reading some more. “This is interesting,” she said. “It says here that Liszt loved all of Chopin’s work except one-the Scherzo in B flat, minor. Apparently he hated that. He called it the “Governess Scherzo’, and said that it ought to be reserved solely for people in that profession”

“So what?”

“Edward, listen. As you insist on being so horrid about all this, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to play this scherzo right now and you can stay here and see what happens.”

“And then maybe you will deign to get us some supper.”

Louisa got up and took from the shelf a large green volume containing all of Chopin’s works. “Here it is. Oh yes, I remember it. It is rather awful. Now, listen-or, rather, watch. Watch to see what he does.”

She placed the music on the piano and sat down. Her husband remained standing. He had his hands in his pockets and a cigarette in his mouth, and in spite of himself he was watching the cat, which was now dozing on the sofa. When Louisa began to play, the first effect was as dramatic as ever. The animal jumped up as though it had been stung, and it stood motionless for at least a minute, the ears pricked up, the whole body quivering. Then it became restless and began to walk back and forth along the length of the sofa. Finally, it hopped down on to the floor, and with its nose and tail held high in the air, it marched slowly, majestically, from the room.

“There!” Louisa cried, jumping up and running after it. “That does it! That really proves it!” She came back carrying the cat which she put down again on the sofa. Her whole face was shining with excitement now, her fists were clenched white, and the little bun on top of her head was loosening and going over to one side. “What about it, Edward? What d’you think?” She was laughing nervously as she spoke.

“I must say it was quite amusing.”

“Amusing! My dear Edward, it’s the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened! Oh, goodness me!” she cried, picking up the cat again and hugging it to her bosom. “Isn’t it marvellous to think we’ve got Franz Liszt staying in the house?”

“Now, Louisa. Don’t let’s get hysterical.”

“I can’t help t, I simply can’t. And to imagine that he’s actually going to live with us for always!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, Edward! I can hardly talk from excitement. And d’you know what I’m going to do next? Every musician in the whole world is going to want to meet him, that’s a fact, and ask him about the people he knew-about Beethoven and Chopin and Schubert- “He can’t talk,” her husband said.

“Well all right. But they’re going to want to meet him anyway, just to see him and touch him and to play their own music to him, modern music he’s never heard before.”

“He wasn’t that great. Now, if it had been Bach or Beethoven “Don’t interrupt, Edward, please. So what “in going to do is to notify all the important living composers everywhere. It’s my duty. I’ll tell them Liszt is here, and invite them to visit him. And you know what? They’ll come flying in from every corner of the earth!”

“To see a grey cat?”

“Darling, it’s the same thing. It’s him. No one cares what he looks like. Oh, Edward, it’ll be the most exciting thing there ever was!”

They’ll think you’re mad.”

You wait and see.” She was holding the cat in her arms and petting it tenderly but looking across at her husband, who now walked over to the french windows and stood there staring out into the garden. The evening was beginning, and the lawn was turning slowly from green to black, and in the distance he could see the smoke from his bonfire rising up in a white column.

“No,” he said, without turning round, “I’m not having it. Not in this house. It’ll make us both look perfect fools.”

“Edward, what do you mean?”

“Just what I say. I absolutely refuse to have you stirring up a lot of publicity about a foolish thing like this. You happen to have found a trick cat. OK-that’s fine. Keep it, if it pleases you. I don’t mind. But I don’t wish you to go any further than that. Do you understand me, Louisa?”

“Further than what?”

“I don’t want to hear any more of this crazy talk. You’re acting like a lunatic.”

Louisa put the cat slowly down on the sofa. Then slowly she raised herself to her full small height and took one pace forward. “Damn you, Edward!” she shouted, stamping

her foot. “For the first time in our lives something really exciting comes along and you’re scared to death of having anything to do with it because someone may laugh at you! That’s right, isn’t it? You can’t deny it, can you?”

“Louisa,” her husband said. “That’s quite enough of that. Pull yourself together now and stop this at once.” He walked over and took a cigarette from the box on the table, then lit it with the enormous patent lighter. His wife stood watching him, and now the tears were beginning to trickle out of the inside corners of her eyes, making two little shiny rivers where they ran through the powder on her cheeks.

“We’ve been having too many of these scenes just lately, Louisa,” he was saying. “No no, don’t interrupt. Listen to me. I make full allowance for the fact that this may be an awkward time of life for you, and that “Oh, my God! You idiot! You pompous idiot! Can’t you see that this is different, this is-this is something miraculous? Can’t you see that?”

At that point, he came across the room and took her firmly by the shoulders. He had the freshly lit cigarette between his lips, and she could see faint contours on his skin where the heavy perspiration had dried up in patches. “Listen,” he said. “I’m hungry. I’ve given up my golf and I’ve been working all day in the garden, and I’m tired and hungry and I want some supper. So do you. Off you go now to the kitchen and get us both something good to eat.”

Louisa stepped back and put both hands to her mouth. “My heavens!” she cried. “I forgot all about it. He must be absolutely famished. Except for some milk, I haven’t given him a thing to eat since he arrived.”

“Who?”

“Why, him of course. I must go at once and cook something really special. I wish I knew what his favourite dishes used to be. What do You think he would like best, Edward?”

“Goddamn it, Louisa!”

“Now, Edward, please. I’m going to handle this my way just for once. You stay here,” she said, bending down and touching the cat gently with her fingers. “I won’t be long.”

Louisa went into the kitchen and stood for a moment, wondering what special dish she might prepare. How about a soufflŽ? A nice cheese soufflŽ? Yes, that would be rather special. Of course, Edward didn’t much care for them, but that couldn’t be helped.

She was only a fair cook, and she couldn’t be sure of always having a soufflŽ come out well, but she took extra trouble this time and waited a long while to make certain the

oven had heated fully to the correct temperature. While the soufflŽ was baking and she was searching around for something to go with it, it occurred to her that Liszt had probably never in his life tasted either avocado pears or grapefruit, so she decided to give him both of them at once in a salad. It would be fun to watch his reaction. It really would.

When it was all ready, she put it on a tray and carried it into the living-room. At the exact moment she entered, she saw her husband coming in through the french windows from the garden.

“Here’s his supper,” she said, putting it on the table and turning towards the sofa. “Where is he?”

Her husband closed the garden door behind him and walked across the room to get himself a cigarette.

“Edward, where is he?”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“Al’, yes. Yes, that’s right. Well-I’ll tell you.” He was bending forward to light the cigarette, and his hands were cupped around the enormous patent lighter. He glanced up and saw Louisa looking at him-at his shoes and the bottoms of his khaki slacks, which were damp from walking in long grass.

“I just went out to see how the bonfire was going,” he said.

Her eyes travelled slowly upward and rested on his hands.

“It’s still burning fine,” he went on. “I think it’ll keep going all night.”

But the way she was staring made him uncomfortable.

“What is it?” he said, lowering the lighter. Then he looked down and noticed for the first time the long thin scratch that ran diagonally clear across the back of one hand, from the knuckle to the wrist.

“Edward!”

“Yes,” he said, “I know. Those brambles are terrible. They tear you to pieces. Now, just a minute, Louisa. What’s the matter?”

“Edward!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, woman, sit down and keep calm. There’s nothing to get worked up about, Louisa! Louisa, sit down!”