IT WAS ONE July in the reign of Edward the Good, alias Edward the Peacemaker, and I went for the long week-end to Castle Balch -- fine place in Oxfordshire -- my cousin Tom's roost. Tom was a bit of a collector, not that I ever held that against Tom, and Eva must take the principal blame, if any: meaning that the people she invited for house-parties were excessively what the Yankees call (or called) 'high-toned' -- artist-fellows, M.P.s, celebrities of all sorts, not easy to compete against. On this particular occasion, Eva had flung her net wide and made a stupendous haul. To wit: Nixon-Blake, R.A., who had painted the picture of the year -- do they have pictures of the year nowadays? It's years since I visited Burlington House -- and Ratface Dingleby, who had taken his twenty-foot Ruby round the Horn that same February. Saw his obituary in The Times a couple of years ago: lived to ninety, not born to be drowned. And, what the devil was his name? the elephant-hunter who won the V.C. in the Transvaal? -- Captain Scrymgeour, of course! He got killed under Younghusband in Tibet a year or two later. And Charlie Batta, the actor-manager. None of whom I could count as cronies. Homines novi, in point of fact. Fortunately, Mungo Montserrat was there; my year at Eton. And Doris, his spouse, a bit stuffy, but a good sort: another cousin of mine. I teem with cousins.

This being described as a tennis week-end, we had all brought our flannels and rackets, prepared to emulate the Doherty brothers, then all the go. Both Castle Balch courts played admirably -- gardener a magician with turf -- but being July, of course it rained and rained ceaselessly from Friday afternoon to Monday afternoon and the tournament was literally washed out. We enjoyed pretty good sport none the less -- Tom had a squash court for fellows like Mungo and me who were too energetic to content themselves with baccarat and billiards. And Charlie Batta sent to Town for some pretty actresses who happened to be seasonally unemployed, or unemployable. Furthermore, Eva invented a lot of very humorous wheezes, as the current slang was, to embarrass us -- some of them pretty close to the knuckle. But no tennis tournament took place; though a beautiful silver rose-bowl was waiting on the smoking-room mantelpiece to reward the winner.

Forgot to mention the Bishop of Bangalore, who had been invited in error. The fun never started until he had turned in, but fortunately the bish loved his pillow even more than his neighbour. On Monday evening then, about 12.15 a.m. in mellow lamp light, don't you know, when the ladies had retired to their rest and the Bishop had joined them -- no allegation intended -- Tom spoke up and said forthrightly: 'Gentlemen, I'm as deeply grieved by this tennis fiasco as you are, and I don't want that jerry knocking around the Castle for ever afterwards to remind me of it. Tell you

what: I'll present same to the fellow who supplies the best answer to a question that Eva was too modest to propound with her own lips: "What were the most thrilling moments of your life?"'

We all drew numbers out of the Bishop's fascinatingly laced top hat, and spun our yarns in the order assigned by fate. Apart from Mungo and me, every personage present was a born raconteur. I assure you: to hear Charlie Batta, who tee'd off, tell us how he played Hamlet in dumb show to a cellarful of Corsican bandits who were holding him for ransom, and how, waiving the three thousand sov.s at which he had been priced, they afterwards escorted him in triumph to Ajaccio, firing feux-de-joie all the way in tribute to his art -- that was worth a gross of silver bowls. And doughty Scrymgeour on safari in German East, when he bagged the hippo and the rhino with a right and left; my word, Scrymgeour held us! Next, the R.A. (told you his name, forgotten it again -- had a small red imperial, eyes like ginger-ale, and claimed to have re-introduced the yellow hunting waistcoat, though that was an inexactitude). He recorded an encounter with a gipsy girl in a forest near Budapest -- the exact physical type he had envisaged for his picture The Sorceress -- whom he persuaded with coins and Hunnish endearments to pose in the nude; after which he painted those Junoesque curves and contours, those delicate flesh tints -- and so forth, don't you know -- with ecstatic inspiration and anatomic exactitude, careless though her jealous lover had by this time entered the grotto and was covering him with an inlaid fowling piece. At last the murderous weapon clattered to the ground and he heard a strangled voice exclaim: 'Gorgio, I cannot shoot you. I bow before your genius! Keep the girl -- leave me the picture -- go!'

Finally poor old Mungo, who had drawn No. 13, was prevailed upon to take the floor. My heart went out to him, me having made a damned mess of my own effort. These were Mungo's exact words: 'Gentlemen, I'm a simple chappy, never had any exciting adventures like you chappies. Sorry. However. If you want to know. The most thrilling moments of my life were when I married Doris -- you all know Doris -- and, well, when she and I... (Pause)... They still are, in fact.'

Mungo brought the house down. Tom thrust the rose-bowl into his unwilling hands, treated him to the stiffest whisky and soda on which I have ever clapped eyes, and sent him crookedly upstairs to the bedroom; where Doris was being kept awake, not by the sounds of revelry from the smoke-room, but by the frightful snores of the Bishop next door.

'What have you got there, Mungo?' she asked crossly.

'Rose-bowl,' Mungo mumbled. 'Tom offered it to the chappy who could best answer Eva's question about the most thrilling moments in his life. They all told such capital stories that, when it was my turn, I got into a mortal funk. But we had drawn lots from the Bishop's hat, and this inspired me. I said: "When Doris and I kneel side by side in

church giving thanks to Heaven for all the blessings that have been showered on us." And they gave me the prize!'

'How could you, Mungo! You know that was a dreadful lie. Oh, now I feel so ashamed! It's not as though prayers and Church are anything to joke about.' She enlarged on this aspect of the case for quite a while, and Mungo resignedly hung his head. Whisky always made him melancholy; I can't say why.

The next morning the party broke up: one and all were catching the 10.45 express to Town. Doris Montserrat noticed a lot of admiring or curious glances flung in her direction, and conscience pricked. She stood on the hall staircase and made a startling little speech.

'Gentlemen, I'm afraid that Mungo won that rose-bowl on false pretences last night. He has only done... what he said he did... three times. The first was before we married; I made him. The second was when we married; he could hardly have avoided it. The third was after we married, and then he fell asleep in the middle...'