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and Other Stories*



# Indecision

## 1

**T**HIS ONE WAS DRESSED in a horizon-blue Swiss skiing suit with, however, the unmistakable touch of a Paris shears about it. Above it shone her snow-warm cheeks and her eyes that were less confident than brave. With his hat, Tommy McLane slapped snow from his dark, convict-like costume. He was already reflecting that he might have been out with Rosemary, dancing around Rosemary and the two “ickle durls” down at the other hotel, amid the gleam of patent Argentine hair, to the soothing whispers of ‘I’m Getting Myself Ready for You’.\* When he was with Emily he felt always a faint nostalgia for young Rosemary and for the sort of dance that seemed to go on inside and all around Rosemary and the two “ickle durls”. He knew just how much happened there – not much; just a limited amount of things, just a pleasant lot of little things strung into hours, moving to little melodies hither and thither. But he missed it; it was new to him again after four years, and he missed it. Likewise when he was with Rosemary, making life fun with jokes for her, he thought of Emily, who was twenty-five and carried space around with her into which he could step and be alone with their two selves, mature and complicated and trusting, and almost in love.

Out the window, the snow on the pine trees was turning lilac in the first dusk; and because the world was round, or for some such reason, there was rosy light still on that big mountain, the Dent de Something. Bundled-up children were splattering back to their hotels for tea as if the outdoors were tired of them and wanted to change its dress in quiet dignity. Down in the valley there were already bright windows and misty glows from the houses and hotels of the town.

He left Emily at her hotel door. She had never seemed so attractive, so good, so tranquil a person, given a half-decent chance. He was annoyed that he was already thinking of Rosemary.

“We’ll meet in the bar down there at 7.30,” he said, “and don’t dress.”

Putting on his jacket and flat cap, Tommy stepped out into the storm. It was a welcome blizzard and he inhaled damp snowflakes that he could no longer see against the darkening sky. Three flying kids on a sledge startled him with a warning in some strange language, and he just managed to jump out of their path. He heard them yell at the next bend, and then, a little farther on, he heard sleigh bells coming up the hill in the dark. It was all very pleasant and familiar, yet it did not remind him of Minneapolis, where he was born, because the automobile had spoilt all that side of north-western life while he was still a baby. It was pleasant and familiar, because these last five days here among alien mountains held some of the happiest moments of his life.

He was twenty-seven; he was assistant manager and slated for manager of a New York bank in Paris, or else he would be offered the option of Chicago next spring at a larger salary. He had come up here to one of the gayest places in Switzerland with the idea that if he had nothing else to think of for ten days he might fall in love. He could afford to fall in love, but in Paris the people he saw all knew it, and he had instinctively become analytical and cagey. Here he felt free; the first night had seen at least a dozen girls and women, “any one of whom”; on the second night, there had still been half a dozen; the third night there were three, with one new addition – Emily Elliot from the other hotel. Now, on the day after Christmas, it had narrowed down to two – Emily and Rosemary Merriweather. He had actually written all this down on a blotter as if he were in his office in the Place Vendôme, added and subtracted them, listed points.

“Two really remarkable girls,” he said to himself in a tone not unlike the clumping squeak of his big shoes on the snow. “Two absolutely good ones.”

Emily Elliot was divorced and twenty-five. Rosemary was eighteen.

He saw her immediately as he went into his hotel – a blonde, ravishing, southern beauty like so many that had come before her and so many yet to be born. She was from “N’Awlins ’rigin’ly”, but now from “Athens, Joja”. He had first spoken to her on Christmas Eve, after an unavailing search for someone to introduce him, some means to pierce the wall of vacationing boys within which she seemed hermetically sealed. Sitting with another man, he stared at her across the room, admiring her with his eyes, frankly and tauntingly. Presently she spoke to her escort; they crossed the room and sat down at the table next to him, with Rosemary’s back just one inch from him. She sent her young man for something; Tommy spoke. The next day, at the risk of both their lives, he took her down the big bob run.

Rosemary saw him now as he came in. She was revolving slowly through the last of the tea hour with a young Levantine whom he disliked. She wore white and her face lighted up white, like an angel under an arc lamp. “Where you been?” her big eyes said.

But Tommy was shrewd, and he merely nodded to her and to the two “ickle durls” who danced by, and found a seat in a far corner. He knew that a surfeit of admiration such as Rosemary’s breeds an appreciation of indifference. And presently she came over to him, dragging her bridling partner by an interlaced little finger.

“Where you been?” she demanded.

“Tell that spic to go count his piastres and I’ll talk turkey with you.”

She bestowed upon the puzzled darkling a healing smile.

“You don’t mind, honey, if I sit this out? See you later.”

When he had departed, Tommy protested, “‘Honey’! Do you call him ‘honey’? Why don’t you call him ‘greasy’?”

She laughed sweetly.

“Where you been?”

“Skiing. But every time I go away, that doesn’t mean you can go dance with a whole lot of gigolo numbers from Cairo. Why does he hold his hand parallel to the floor when he dances? Does he think

he's stilling the waves? Does he think the floor's going to swing up and crack him?"

"He's a Greek, honey."

"That's no reason. And you better get that word 'honey' cleaned and pressed before you use it on me again." He felt very witty. "Let's go to my boudoir," he suggested.

He had a bedroom and bath and a tiny *salon*. Once inside the door of the latter, he shot the bolt and took her in his arms, but she drew away from him.

"You been up at that other hotel," she said.

"I had to invite a girl to dinner. Did you know you're having dinner with me tonight?... You're beautiful."

It was true. Her face, flushed with cold and then warmed again with the dance, was a riot of lovely, delicate pinks, like many carnations, rising in many shades from the white of her nose to the high spot of her cheeks. Her breathing was very young as she came close to him – young and eager and exciting. Her lips were faintly chapped, but soft in the corners.

After a moment she sat with him in a single chair. And just for a second words formed on his lips that it was hard not to utter. He knew she was in love with him and would probably marry him, but the old terror of being held rose in him. He would have to tell this girl so many things. He looked closely at her, holding her face under his, and if she had said one wise or witty thing he might have spoken, but she only looked up with a glaze of childish passion in her eyes and said: "What are you thinking, honey?"

The moment passed. She fell back smoothly into being only a part of the day's pleasure, the day's excitement. She was desirable here, but she was desirable downstairs too. The mountains were bewitching his determinations out of him.

Drawing her close to him, lightly he said: "So you like the spics, eh? I suppose the boys are all spics down in New Orleans?"

As she squeezed his face furiously between thumb and finger, his mind was already back with Emily at the other hotel a quarter of a mile away.

TOMMY'S DINNER WAS NOT to be at his hotel. After meeting in the bar they sledged down into the village to a large old-fashioned Swiss taproom, a thing of woodwork, clocks, steins, kegs and antlers. There were other parties like their own, bound together by the common plan of eating fondue – a peculiarly indigestible form of Welsh rabbit – and drinking spiced wine, and then hitching on the backs of sleighs to Doldorp several miles away, where there was a townspeople's ball.

His own party included Emily; her cousin, young Frank Forrester; young Count de Caros Moros, a friend of Rosemary's – she played ping-pong with him and harked to his guitar and to his tales of machine-gunning his discontented fellow countrymen in Andalusia – a Cambridge University hockey hero named Harry Whitby, and lastly the two "ickle durls" – Californians who were up from a Montreux school for the holidays and very anxious to be swept off their feet. Six Americans, two Europeans.

It was a good party. Some grey-haired men of the golden Nineties sang ancient glees at the piano, the fondue was fun, the wine was pert and heady, and smoke swirled out of the brown walls and toned the bright costumes into the room. They were all on a ship going somewhere, with the port just ahead; the faces of girls and young men bore the same innocent and unlined expectations of the great possibilities inherent in the situation and the night. The Latins became Americans easily, the English with more effort. Then it was over and one hundred five-pound boots stamped towards the sleighs that waited at the door.

For a moment Tommy lingered, engrossed in conversation with Emily, yet with sudden twinges of conscience about Rosemary. She had been on his left; he had last seen her listening to young Caros Moros perform upon his extremely portable guitar. Outside in the crisp moonlight he saw her tying her sledge to one of the sleighs ahead. The sleighs were moving off; he and Emily caught one, and at the crisp-cracking whips the horses pulled, breasting the dark air. Past them figures ran and scrambled, the younger people pushing one another off, landing in a cloud of soft

snow, then panting after the horses, to fling themselves exhausted on a sledge, or else wail that they were being left behind. On either side the fields were tranquil; the space through which the cavalcade moved was high and limitless. After they were in the country there was less noise; perhaps ears were listening atavistically for wolves howling in the clumps of trees far across the snow.

At Doldorp he stood with Emily in the doorway, watching the others go in.

“Everybody’s first husband with everybody’s first wife,” she remarked. “Who believes in marriage? I do. A plucky girl – takes the count of nine and comes up for more. But not for two years; I’m over here to do some straight thinking.”

It occurred to Tommy that two years was a long time, but he knew that girls so frequently didn’t mean what they said. He and Emily watched the entrance of Mr Cola; nicknamed Capone, with his harem, consisting of wife, daughters, wife’s friend and three Siamese. Then they went inside.

The crowd was enormous – peasants, servants from the hotels, shopkeepers, guides, outlanders, cow herders, ski teachers and tourists. They all got seats where they could, and Tommy saw Rosemary with a crowd of young people across the room; she seemed a little tired and pale, sitting back with her lips apart and her eyes fixed and sleepy. When someone waltzed off with Emily, he went over and asked her to dance.

“I don’t want to dance. I’m tired.”

“Let’s go sit where we can hear the yodelling.”

“I can hear it here.”

“What am I accused of?” he demanded.

“Nothing. I haven’t even seen you.”

Her current partner smiled at him ingratiatingly, but Tommy was growing annoyed:

“Didn’t I explain that this dinner was for a girl who’d been particularly nice to me? I told you I’d have to devote a lot of the evening to her.”

“Go on devote it, then. I’m leaving soon.”

“Who with?”

“Capone has a sleigh.”

“Yes, you’re leaving with him. He’ll take you for a ride; you’ll be on the spot if you don’t look out.”

He felt a touch of uneasiness. The mystery she had lacked this afternoon was strong in her now. Before he should be so weak as to grant her another advantage, he turned and asked one of the “ickle durls” to dance.

The “ickle durl” bored him. She admired him; she was used to clasping her hands together in his wake and heaving audible sighs. When the music stopped he gave her an outrageous compliment to atone for his preoccupation and left her at her table. The night was ruined. He realized that it was Rosemary who moved him most deeply, and his eyes wandered to her across the room. He told himself that she was playing him jealously, but he hated the way she was fooling with young Caros Moros; and he liked it still less when he glanced over a little later and found that the two of them were gone.

He sprang up and dashed out of the door; there was the snow, lightly falling, there were the waiting sleighs, the horses patient in their frozen harness, and there was a small, excited crowd of Swiss gathered around Mr Cola’s sleigh.

“*Salaud!*” he heard. “*Salaud français!*”\*

It appeared that the French courier, long accepted as a member of the Cola *ménage*, had spent the afternoon tipping with his master; the courier had not survived. Cola had been compelled to assist him outdoors, where he promptly gave tongue to a series of insults directed at the Swiss. They were all Boches. Why hadn’t they come in the war? A crowd gathered, and as it included several Swiss who were in the same state as the Frenchman, the matter was growing complicated; the women were uncomfortable, the Siamese were smiling diplomatically among themselves. One of the Swiss was on the runner of the sleigh, leaning over Mrs Cola and shaking his fist in the courier’s face. Mr Cola stood up in the sleigh and addressed them in hoarse American as to “the big idea?”

“Dirty Frenchmen!” cried the Swiss. “Yes, and during your Revolution did you not cut the Swiss Guards down to the last man?”

“Get out of here!” shouted Cola. “Hey, coachman, drive right over ’em! You guys go easy there! Take your hands off the sleigh... Shut up, you!” – this to the courier, who was still muttering wildly. Cola looked at him as if he contemplated throwing him to the crowd. In a moment Tommy edged himself between the outraged Swiss patriot and the sleigh.

“Ne’mine what they say! Drive on!” cried Cola again. “We got to get these girls out of here!”

Conscious of Rosemary’s eyes staring at him out of a bearskin robe, and of Caros Moros next to her, Tommy raised his voice:

*“Ce sont des dames américaines; il n’y a qu’un Français. Voyons! Qu’est-ce que vous voulez?”\**

But the massacre of the Swiss Guards was not to be disposed of so lightly.

Tommy had an inspiration. “But who tried to save the Swiss Guards? Answer me that!” he shouted. “An American – Benjamin Franklin! He almost saved them!”

His preposterous statement rang out strong and true upon the electric air. The protagonist of the martyrs was momentarily baffled.

“An American saved them!” Tommy cried. “Hurray for America and Switzerland!” And he added quickly, to the coachman, “Drive on now – and fast!”

The sleigh started with a lurch. Two men clung to it for a moment and then let go, and the conveyance slid free behind the swiftly trotting horses.

*“Vive l’Amérique! Vive la Suisse!”\** Tommy shouted.

*“Vive la Fra—”* began the courier, but Cola put his fur glove in the man’s mouth. They drove rapidly for a few minutes.

“Drop me here,” Tommy said. “I have to go back to the dance.” He looked at Rosemary, but she would not meet his eye. She was a bundle of fur next to Caros Moros, and he saw the latter drop his arm around her till they were one mass of fur together. The sight was horrible; of all the people in the world she had become the most desirable, and he wanted every bit of her youth and freshness. He wanted to jerk Caros Moros to his feet and pull him from the sleigh. He saw how stupid it

had been to play so long with her innocence and sincerity, until now she scarcely saw him any more, scarcely knew he was there.

As he swung himself off the sleigh, Rosemary and Caros Moros were singing softly:

“...I wouldn’t stoop  
To onion soup;  
With corn-beef hash I’m all  
through—”

and the Spaniard winked at Tommy as if to say, “We know how to handle this little girl, don’t we?”

The courier struggled and then cried in a blurred voice: “Beeb wa Fwance.”

“Keep your glove in his mouth,” said Tommy savagely. “Choke him to death.”

He walked off down the road, utterly miserable.

### 3

**H**IS FIRST INSTINCT NEXT MORNING was to phone her immediately; his second was to sulk proudly in his room, hoping against hope that his own phone would ring. After luncheon he went downstairs, where he was addressed by the objectionable Greek who had danced with her at tea yesterday afternoon – ages ago.

“Tell me; you like to play the ping-pong?”

“It depends who with,” Tommy answered rudely. Immediately he was so sorry that he went downstairs with the man and batted the white puffballs for half an hour.

At four he skied over to Emily’s hotel, resolving to drive the other and more vivid image from his mind. The lobby was filled with children in fancy dress, who had gathered there from many hotels for the children’s Christmas ball.

Emily was a long time coming down, and when she did she was hurried and distracted.

"I'm so sorry. I've been costuming my children, and now I've got to get them launched into this orgy, because they're both very shy."

"Sit and get your breath a minute. We'll talk about love."

"Honestly, I can't, Tommy. I'll see you later." And she added quickly, "Can't you get your little southern girl? She seemed to worry you a lot last night."

After half an hour of diffident grand marches, Emily came back to him, but Tommy's patience was exhausted and he was on his feet to go. Even now she showed him that he was asking for time and attention out of turn, and, being unavailable, she had again grown as mysterious as Rosemary.

"It's been a hard day in lots of ways," she explained as she walked with him to the door. "Things I can't tell you about."

"Oh, yes?" People had so many affairs. You never knew how much space you actually occupied in their lives.

Outdoors he came across her young cousin, Frank Forrester, buckling on his skis. Pushing off together, they drifted slowly down a slushy hill.

"Let me tell you something," Frank burst out. "I'm never going to get married. I've seen too much of it. And if any girl asked my advice, I'd tell her to stay out." He was full of the idea: "There's my mother, for instance. She married a second husband, and what does he do but have her spied on and bribe her maids to open her mail? Then there's Emily. You know what happened to her; one night her husband came home and told her she was acting cold to him, but that he'd fix that up. So he built a bonfire under her bed, made up of shoes and things, and set fire to it. And if the leather hadn't smelt so terrible she'd have been burnt to death."

"That's just two marriages."

"Two!" said Frank resentfully. "Isn't that enough? Now we think Emily's husband is having her spied on. There's a man keeps watching us in the dining room."

As Tommy stemmed into the driveway of his hotel, he wondered if he was really attractive to women at all. Yesterday he had been sure of these two, holding them in the hollow of his hand. As he dressed for dinner he realized that he wanted them both. It was an outrage that he couldn't have them both. Wouldn't a girl rather have half of him than all of Harry Whitby, or a whole spic with a jar of pomade thrown in? Life was so badly arranged – better no women at all than only one woman.

He shouted, "Come in!" to a knock at his salon door and, leaning around the corner, his hand on his dress tie, found the two "ickle durls".

He started. Had they inherited him from Rosemary? Had he been theirs since the superior pair seemed to have relinquished their claims? Were they really presuming that he might escort them to the fancy-dress ball tonight?

Slipping on his coat, he went into his parlour. They were got up as Arlésienne peasant girls, with high black bonnets and starched aprons.

"We've come about Rosemary," they said directly. "We wanted to see if you won't do something about it. She's been in bed all day and she says she isn't coming to the party tonight. Couldn't you at least call her up?"

"Why should I call her up?"

"You know she's perfectly crazy about you, and last night was the most miserable she ever spent in her life. After she broke Caros Moros's guitar, we couldn't stop her crying."

A contented glow spread over Tommy. His instinct was to telephone at once, but, curiously enough, to telephone Emily, so that he could talk to her with his newborn confidence.

The "ickle durls" moved towards the door. "You will call her up," they urged him respectfully.

"Right now." He took them each in one arm, like a man in a musical comedy, and kissed the rouge on their cheeks. When they were gone, he telephoned Rosemary. Her "hello" was faint and frightened.

"Are you sorry you were so terrible to me last night, baby?" he demanded. "No real piccaninny would—"

"You were the terrible one."

“Are you coming to the party tonight?”

“Oh, I will if you’ll act differently. But I’ll be hours; I’m still in bed. I can’t get down till after dinner.”

With Rosemary safely locked up again in the tranquil cells of his mind, he rang up Emily.

“I’m sorry I was so short with you this afternoon,” she said immediately.

“Are you in love with me?”

“Why, no; I don’t think so.”

“Aren’t you a little bit in love with me?”

“I like you a lot.”

“Dear Emily. What’s this about being spied on?”

“Oh, there’s a man here who walked into my room – maybe by accident. But he always watches us.”

“I can’t stand having you annoyed,” he said. “Please call on me if anything definite happens. I’d be glad to come up and rub his face in the snow.”

There was a pregnant telephone silence.

“I wish I was with you now,” he said gently.

After a moment she whispered, “I do too.”

He had nothing to complain of; the situation was readjusted; things were back where they had been twenty-four hours ago. Eating dinner alone, he felt that in reality both girls were beside him, one on either hand. The dining room was shimmering with unreality for the fancy-dress party, for tonight was the last big event of the Christmas season. Most of the younger people who gave it its real colour would start back to school tomorrow.

And Tommy felt that in the evening somewhere – but in whose company he couldn’t say – there would come a moment; perhaps the moment. Probably very late, when the orchestra and what remained of the party – the youth and cream of it – would move into the bar, and Abdul, with oriental delight in obscurity, would manipulate the illumination in a sort of counterpoint whose other tone was the flashing moon from the ice rink, bouncing in the big windows. Tommy had danced with Rosemary

in that light a few hours after their first meeting; he remembered the mysterious darkness, with the cigarette points turning green or silver when the lights shone red, the sense of snow outside and the occasional band of white falling across the dancers as a door was opened and shut. He remembered her in his arms and the plaint of the orchestra playing:

“That’s why Mother made me  
Promise to be true  
and the other vague faces passing in the darkness.  
She knew I’d meet someone  
Exactly like you.”

He thought now of Emily. They would have a very long, serious conversation, sitting in the hall. Then they would slip away and talk even more seriously, but this time with her very close to him. Anything might happen – anything.

But he was thinking of the two apart; and tonight they would both be here in full view of each other. There must be no more complications like last evening; he must dovetail the affairs with skill and thought.

Emerging from dinner, he strolled down the corridor, already filled with graces and grotesques, conventional clouds of columbines, clowns, peasants, pirates and ladies of Spain. He never wore costume himself and the sight of a man in motley made him sad, but some of the girls were lovelier than in life, and his heart jumped as he caught sight of a snow-white ballet dancer at the end of the corridor, and recognized Rosemary. But almost as he started towards her, another party emerged from the cloakroom, and in it was Emily.

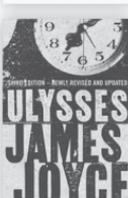
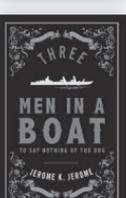
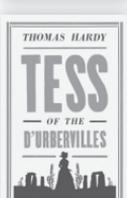
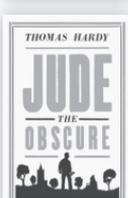
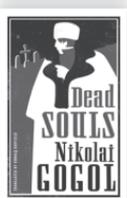
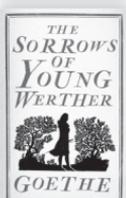
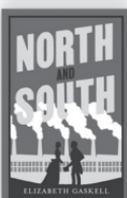
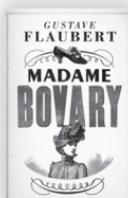
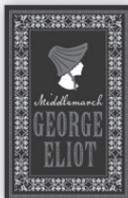
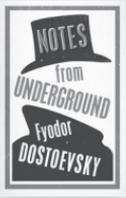
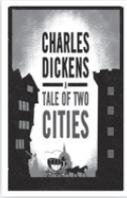
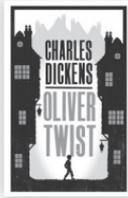
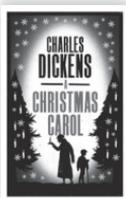
He thought quickly. Neither one had seen him, and to greet one with the other a few yards away was to get off on the wrong foot, for he had invented opening remarks for each one – remarks which must be made alone. With great presence of mind, he dove for the men’s washroom and stood there tensely.

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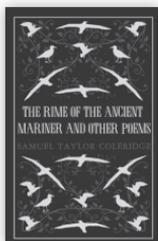
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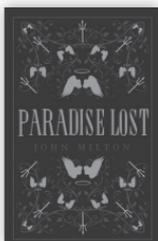
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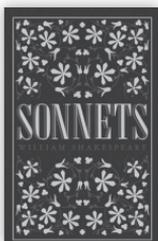
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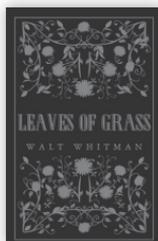
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