

COUNTER LUNCH



A Short Story by SYDNEY BROOKES

I AM in a pub. At least, I was in a pub a little while ago, until I met you. We'll say "I am in a pub," because it is a good beginning, and because I remember from my schooldays that it is more powerful to use the present tense. Well, then—I am in a pub. I am playing for time with the last quarter-inch of beer in my mug. The first half pint I have drunk quickly. One gulp and it has gone. I have the knack, you see—much practice. I have never quite been able to put it down without swallowing; partly because my throat mechanism has never adjusted itself to a talent bestowed only upon a favoured few, and partly because it has always seemed to me that this method of drinking is a waste of the sweet bitter flavour of the hops and the rest of the fine stuff they put into beer.

However, the first half glass I drank quickly, because I had been thirsty for a long time, and when I had it heavy and re-assuring in my hand with my elbow crooked I could not resist the temptation to put it quickly where it belonged.

I HAD been walking in the sun, you understand, and I was thirsty as a result of this. Not that it was very pleasant in the sun—there was also a wind that caught me at every corner and everywhere, indeed, where it could rush out at me between the buildings and houses.

There was not much pleasure in the walking, either. Walking, I would have you know, is something you do because there is something else you should be doing, like lying in bed in the morning. In other circumstances walking is a poor way of spending time, especially when there is so little of it left to spend, as in my case.

For me there is no longer any delight in what is forbidden. I may walk as long as I please. Sun myself as long as there is sunshine. Lie on my bed as long as there is someone and some place which will suffer my presence. For you those are rare joys. For me they have become frequent penances.

Because I am old.

I CAN still in my walks appreciate such matters as the pattern of shadow made by the concrete facings the city engineers build against the loose banks of your hillside roads. Only this morning I was taking particular interest in one running along beside the footpath that goes from behind Parliament Buildings up into Hill Street. It was very fine, although someone had broken a bottle in the water channel at its base, and someone, probably the same person, had been sick, promiscuously and very carelessly, a few yards further on.

Those are among the small things to be noticed on a walk. There are many others. One is the peculiar formation of the branches of a tree, an oak tree, that grows in a place I know. One limb has grown into another and the result is almost human in the ugliness of its malformation. When you are as old as I am you will understand this: that there is a beauty in the grotesque just as there is a beauty in what is perfect.

Then there is the kitten that meets people on Terrace Gardens. It is a very friendly kitten and does not seem to be growing up at all. It welcomes stroking and it purrs responsively. It is a very good little cat, that one. It has much more faith in human nature than I have, which is probably why I love it so much, and take such great pains to justify its affection, lightly bestowed as it may be. One day I took it some milk which I had managed to get, but the kitten was full and uninterested. To-day it was not there, and I am beginning to wonder whether its faith in human nature was justified.

But in spite of these things walking remains for me just so many steps, so much effort, so much time before the bar in the evening. Because I am old and there is nothing else I can do.

I break my day, of course, with something to eat at noon. To-day I managed three pieces of toast, buttered, and three bananas, a meal which I estimated cost me fourpence halfpenny. More than this I could have eaten but less than this would have suited my pocket better because it, too, is empty, and the extra penny and a halfpenny broke into a sixpence I had been saving for the purpose

to which sixpences are most usually put. In the City I find it a substantial problem to decide between the attractions of a well-lined stomach, a well-lubricated throat, and a well-lined living place.

BUT you must not let me speak like that. There are moments when I am tempted to regard you as an audience and myself as an orator declaiming about the magnificent futility of living.

There I go again. That sort of stuff is too dramatic. The trouble is, when I see your flying fingers over the paper with your pencil and the precision of the symbols you are making, I see also the firm curve of your neck as your head bends over the work and the ease of your body and limbs as they grace themselves half on the chair and half against the table. And I see your hair, full and glossy, and with a little wave in it, and your hands where there are no callouses except where you hold the pencil. These things make me think of you as a human being. Old as I am, I have not yet learned that sympathy follows only where there is sorrow, and if I find myself talking to you in words that pretend there should be some response I must remember that your business is only the story, and not the man the story has made. That is not dramatic at all, and I must be more simple telling you about it.

Therefore we shall forget those small things and return to our business, which must concern itself with the truth of the matter.

This is: that I am old, and that I am in a pub, and that the last of my beer is pale and poverty-stricken in the bottom of the glass. You must write down that it is nearly five-thirty p.m. and that I have the freedom of this place until six p.m. In other days it is possible that I might at six o'clock have moved away into the lounge, where I could buy the deference of a porter for an extra sixpence a round.

Now, it is not so, and at six I must go. But I still have that quarter-inch in the glass. It looks poor enough. After those first two draughts it will have no taste at all. Still, it entitles me to stay here and, as long as I stay, I have hopes that to-night, as they usually do at this

time, they will again bring out the plates of food, well salted, hot, shining with grease, not attractive to the eye — but still food.

IT is nearly five-thirty now, and I am gazing around the bar and putting one hand in my pocket and putting on an air that everyone about me will recognise as the air of a man who stays in the bar because he is about to buy another beer. I look around and place myself first beside this group and next beside that. This, you see, will make it clear to the others that I am drinking with friends. Actually I am drinking by myself. A good joke that? What do you say?

Close beside me three people are drinking respectively, beer, portergaff, and gin an' quash. They are arguing about the advisability of hanging several politicians, whom they name. I am close to them. I nod and shake my head and move my lips. Everyone can see that I am following the argument closely, and that I am wise in my years and regard the controversy as the plaything of immature minds which, when the final point must be made, will pay deference to my age and experience.

On the other arm are two young men who are discussing various young ladies. For them I put on a patronising air which everyone will understand comes from a long knowledge of such matters. It can be seen that I am enjoying myself immensely.

BUT now, at the end of the bar a door opens and a laden tray comes in. I affect not to notice this dramatic entrance, but out of the corner of my eye I can see that the barman has seized some plates and is distributing them among the customers. I hope our corner will get roast potatoes. Potatoes do not soak up the grease so much. Well roasted they are crisp outside and firm and well flavoured inside. They are also good and filling.

To-night I am fortunate. At the right moment I turn in to the bar just as the plate comes down.

I am not very quick these days, but my fingers pick up two at once and I hurry to eat them so that it will not be thought bad manners if I reach for another.

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