

# Harpies' Bazaar

BY "AUGUSTUS"

"GEORGE?" But George is pretty low in the morning first thing, and the shot plugs unnoticed across his bows. His wife lowers her sights.

"George, dear?" She is bringing him into range now for George is surfacing. "George, it says here that Ferguson's Nitwear are holding their one-day Sacrifice Sale today. Nothing over thirty shillings."

His mind is like a lead weight—the weight on a doll's eyes. Any moment before ten in the morning his mind may drop back inside him somewhere and shut him asleep with a click.

"George, if you could mind the children at lunch time I might just dash in and see if there's a white cardigan. Of course, the doors open at nine, so there probably won't be much left."

He sways to his feet, goes off to complete his dressing by remote control, inspects his tongue unhappily and finally stands before his wife.

"What size?" he asks, appalled at himself.

"Oh, George, you don't mean it? Will you really go in on your way to work and have a look? Just a plain white cardigan, buttoning up to the neck—you know the sort I like."

"What size?"

"Ask for S.W."

"Who's S.W.?"

"No, darling, Small Women's. Here, tell you what. Take in this old fawn cardigan to measure by. I want the new one about an inch bigger all over."

George wanly admits this estimate of himself.

St. George strays as though by chance to the end of the queue, which consists of about twenty people, all female. With his long gaunt frame gangling at the end of the line he has the sense of dreadful otherness that you have in those dreams where you're on parade and have suddenly got no trousers on.

Moving back a pace he studies the transfixed bridal smiles in a photographer's window next door. He is a Visiting Expert on Lenses. A brisk S.W. clicks past him and snaps into place at the end of the queue, filling the gap that George has left. He moves back a little again.

Two matrons, X.O.S. fitted with steam turbines, suddenly stuff up the gap with bulges that vibrate after their quick sprint from the bus. They straighten their hats with hands still sodden from the breakfast wash up, and George is levered further back to a photo of a debutante with asters and thick ankles.

"George," says George, "if you're going to be in this queue you've got to own up to it." Covering up with a cigarette-rolling play, he remains therefore with his vest recording the animated conversation which is quivering all up and down the back of the woman in front of him. This embarrassing proximity is now being insisted upon by the rapid extension of the queue behind him. He is aware of women arriving at speed from every direction. The pressure behind mounts and he is receiving now on high fidelity.

"I think I'll have a look for a new jumper for Gwynnda while I'm here."

"Oh, will you? She's got her quince, hasn't she? I always think it suits her colouring."

"Yes, it is nice. Still, she could do with a cherry to go with her new lemon."

"Not cherry with lemon, surely, do you think? Apricot and lemon go nicer, I think. Still, please yourself."

George is aghast. He couldn't feel more horrified if they were talking about their corsets. Lowering their voices they glance back at George. They are talking about corsets. He reaches for his rolling stock, finds he is already smoking, coughs, reads a Christmas card he has had stuffed in his pocket, purposefully takes out a pencil and fills in all the o's. He is a Sales Statistician working on a Government Survey.

All around him there is the excited, pleased chatter of dutiful housewives and adolescent typists not markedly delinquent. Many, of course, have come solo, and these stand in decent composure, one or two knitting from under their armpits or into a shopping basket. All are patient and courteous.

There is a sudden surge and George is propelled along as ineluctably as a fly goes down the sink. The door has opened. He is squeezed sharply round the bend, hugging the rails, and sees before him the open shop from the mouth of which women are being ejaculated out towards the loaded counters. It is an explosion. Or an implosion.

Each of these women has been over the combat course before. She knows which counter holds the article she has come to buy. All night long she has lain awake with a magenta slip-on burning before her eyes like the sun at the end of a cave. She has planned this raid, examined the track from the door to the counter, noted obstacles, memorised short-cuts. She has worked it all out on rice paper and then swallowed the paper to keep it from the eyes of the enemy.

The instantaneous eruption outwards of all these bodies has produced an area of low pressure right in the middle of the shop, and into this George is sucked, for he has no momentum of his own. It is still only seconds since the lid came off, but by now the whole queue has debouched into the shop and George has lost all the advantage he seemed to hold at the starting tapes. He eddies gently in the centre of the shop with a turmoil all round him rising in frenzy as it lashes the display counters at the perimeter.

He is not really at the sale at all. He might as well have sent a postcard from Te Kuiti.



"He eddies gently in the centre of the shop with a turmoil all round him"

Dumbly watching a cataclysm of forces in one corner he sees a whole mass split off and spin away to new firmaments. Through the rift he catches sight of a counter and plunges towards it. He is at the counter, and there miraculously a white cardigan descends. He claps his chest upon it, spreading his arms along its arms and rests so for a while.

His nose is pressed against a little tab or label stitched inside the neck of the garment, and he cautiously lifts back his head to bring the label into focus. It reads Kozyware cursively in red silk, being presumably of Polish origin. There is a small square postscript dependent from the main announcement. It doesn't play with such subjective estimates as S.W., but comes out scientifically with 34. There is no longer any rapture in Poland. George is shaken. In what relation does the alleged fact of 34 stand to the impalpable idea of S.W.?

He remembers his control gauge, the old fawn cardigan stuffed shyly into his trouser tops. He fishes it out, keeping his chest planted on the white cardigan. Then with a gymnast's movement he flexes back from the counter and spreadeagles the fawn upon the white. But there is no white cardigan there. He has been too slow, attended the wrong gym.

He finds himself once more at the still centre of the maelstrom.

"Hello, George!" It is a friend of his wife's. "Isn't this terrible?" George is

ready to cry on anybody's shoulder. "I'm trying to get a white cardigan for Joan, but I've only seen one," he whimpers. "It was a 34."

"Oh, S.W.," translates the friend. George is too sad to care.

"You see, I was going to use this old fawn one to measure by, allowing a bit extra, you know, because this one's too small."

"Too small?" cries a shrill, passing voice. "What size is it?" And the fawn cardigan is torn out of his hands. It is grappled from hand to hand. George makes ineffectual lunges here and there but the fawn cardigan seems to be now the only female garment in the shop not actually buttoned to a female. The whole field is down rucking for it along the touch-lines. From time to time it spins into the air as woman after woman discovers its real nature and flings it away in disgust. George feels left out.

He tries to escape from the shop, but the manager has bolted the door. Eyes, noses and mouths are moving up and down the glass outside hungry for sacrifices: "Out the back way!" signals the manager, his body wedged against the bulging locks. George is finally catapulted out into an alleyway full of rubbish-bins, drain-pipes and rude words chalked on brick. He plunges up and down like a Fourth Man being chased through the sewers.

Upon his return to the upper world he makes straight for a large and dignified emporium, established 1872. Inside there is a holy morning hush. Not another customer is as yet sinking to his ankles in the axminster. George is approached by Adolphe Menjou, who begs to be permitted to help.

"Is this the ladies' cardigan department?"

"Oh, no, sir. This is all boo-clay, lah-may, long-ray, broydray englay."

"Oh, mong Dieu."

"But if you will follow me, sir." Adolphe introduces him to a cool creature with long, purple finger-nails, hoops in her ears and a black line running up the back of her legs, who lays out a white cardigan before him with all the grace of an Indian priestess placing lamps upon an altar. George unpacks five pounds.

It is several days before Joan remembers the fawn cardigan.

"Oh, that," murmurs George. "I'm having it dyed pineapple to go with Gwynnda's lemon."

## THE PARSON'S ROCK

*UNDER the Parson's Rock*

*Where weeds of love loop every tide  
My three dead uncles walk,  
The gutted greenbone in their sack  
Spilling on scaled stone a sea bright blood.*

*On beaches to the moon's bell  
From a wave's steeple swung,  
Old ghosts, the last grief over, tell  
How sweetly at the quick of the gilled soul  
God's deepsea mercy moves, how praise from stones is wrung.*

*But I, thin on the moon stranded  
Low lovers' dune, alive must grieve  
For the true flesh time wounded,  
The prodigal Lent of a fisherman's harvest ended  
By the dry handed grave.*

*Only the bald rock  
Preaching to fishes, the lupin sheeted  
Bed of the swaybacked sinners, these will speak  
For the dead fishermen, and the moon awake  
On waters by the fingered night braided.*

—James K. Baxter