

The
Road to
Wellville



T. Coraghessan Boyle

PENGUIN BOOKS

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“Boyle doesn’t miss a single hilarious shot.... [*The Road to Wellville*] establishes him at the top of the literary game.... Boyle has a genius for envisioning his scenes in such delicious detail and for presenting his characters with such subtle insight.”

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“Boyle is a brilliant imp, a trickster of the highest order.... In *The Road to Wellville*, his rich and mind-bendingly delightful language explodes with the early 20th century’s passion for invention, even as he subtly reveals the depth and tragicomedy of the failure of the American dream.”

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“*The Road to Wellville* is an old-fashioned, generous book, rich in anecdote, plot, and character, rooted thoroughly in its time and place, even as it winks slyly at the modern reader.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“An extraordinarily good book ... Boyle has told us something about the human condition.”

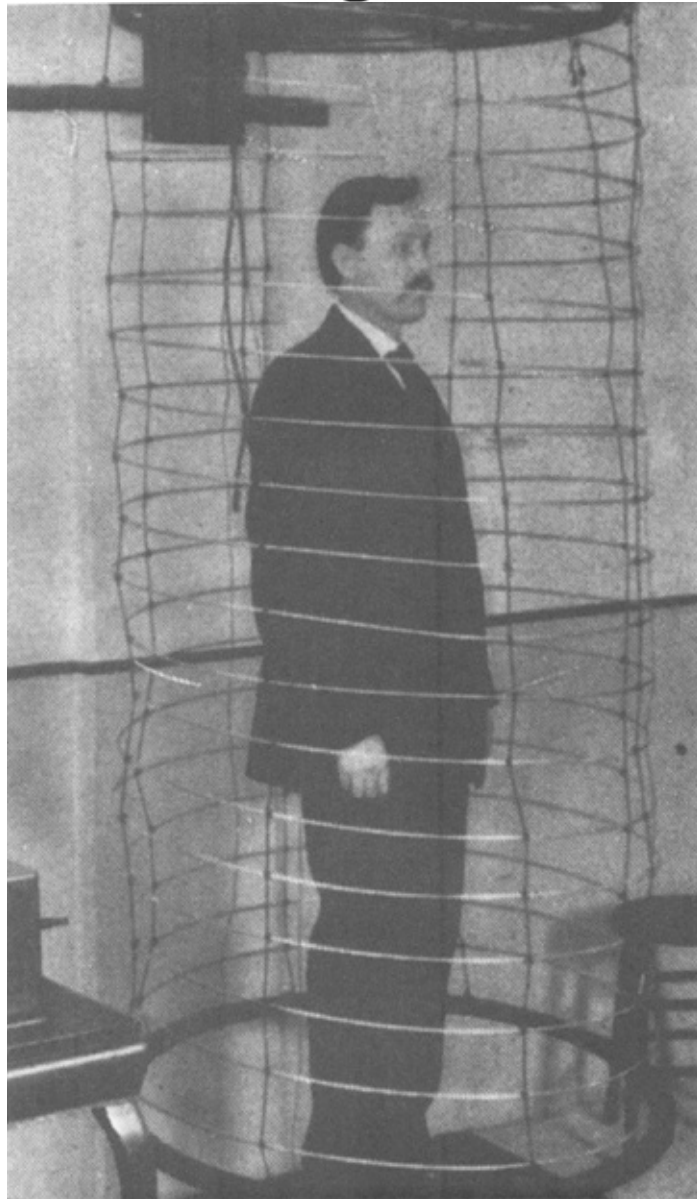
—*The Milwaukee Journal*

“In T. C. Boyle’s meticulously crafted, wildly comic new novel, the American obsession of self-improvement through right-thinking and purification is brilliantly, engagingly, *irresistibly* savaged.”

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

THE ROAD TO WELLVILLE

T. C. Boyle is the author of *The Inner Circle*, *Drop City* (a finalist for the National Book Award), *A Friend of the Earth*, *Riven Rock*, *The Tortilla Curtain*, *The Road to Wellville*, *East Is East*, *World's End* (winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award), *Budding Prospects*, *Water Music*, and seven collections of stories. In 1999, he was the recipient of the PEN/ Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction. His stories appear regularly in major American magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*. He lives near Santa Barbara, California. T. C. Boyle's Web site is www.tcboyle.com.



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Rosemary Post

1923–1981

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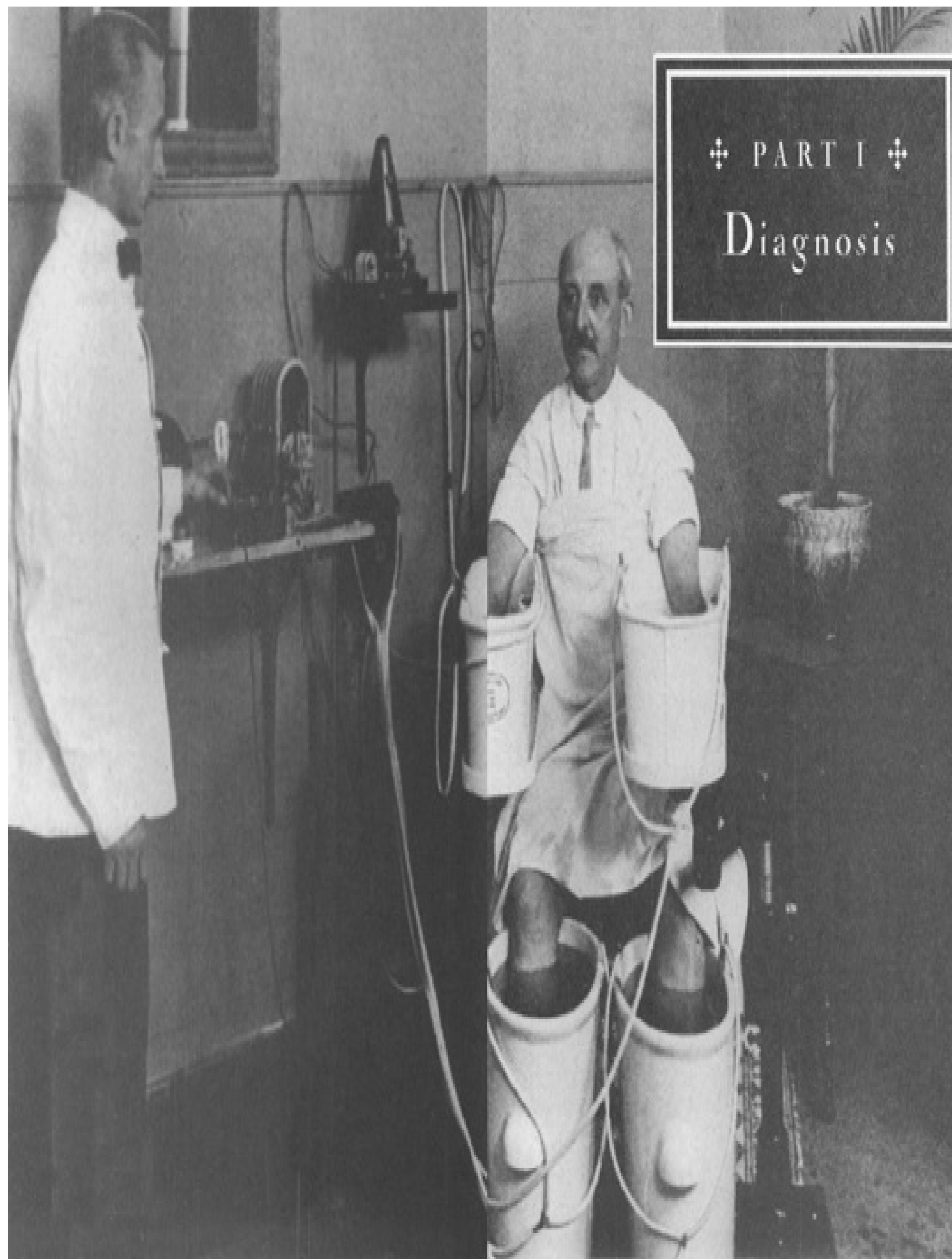
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Life is a temporary victory over the causes which induce death.

—Sylvester Graham, *A Lecture on Epidemic Diseases*

✦ PART I ✦

Diagnosis





Chapter 1



Of Steak

and

Sin



Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, inventor of the corn flake and peanut butter, not to mention caramel-cereal coffee, Bromose, Nuttolene and some seventy-five other gastrically correct foods, paused to level his gaze on the heavysset woman in the front row. He was having difficulty believing what he'd just heard. As was the audience, judging from the gasp that arose after she'd raised her hand, stood shakily and demanded to know what was so sinful about a good porterhouse steak—it had done for the pioneers, hadn't it? And for her father and his father before him?

The Doctor pushed reflectively at the crisp white frames of his spectacles. To all outward appearances he was a paradigm of concentration, a scientist formulating his response, but in fact he was desperately trying to summon her name—who was she, now? He knew her, didn't he? That nose, those eyes ... he knew them all, knew them by name, a matter of pride ... and then, in a snap, it came to him: Tindermarsh. Mrs. Violet. Complaint, obesity. Underlying cause, autointoxication. *Tindermarsh. Of course.* He couldn't help feeling a little self-congratulatory flush of pride—nearly a thousand patients and he could call up any one of them as plainly as if he had their charts spread out before him.... But enough of that—the audience was stirring, a monolithic force, one great naked psyche awaiting the hand to clothe it. Dr. Kellogg cleared his throat.

“My dear Mrs. Tindermarsh, I do thank you for your question,” he began, hardly able to restrain his dainty feet from breaking into dance even as the perfect riposte sprang to his lips, “but I wonder how many of those flesh-abusing pioneers lived past the age of forty?” (A murmur from the audience as the collective image of a skeletal man in coonskin cap, dead of salt pork and flapjacks, rose before their eyes.) “And how many of them, your own reverend forebears not excepted, went to bed at night and had a minute's sleep that wasn't racked with dyspepsia and the nightmare of carnal decay?” He paused to let that horrible thought sink in. “I say to you, Mrs. Tindermarsh, and to the rest of you ladies and gentlemen of the audience, and I say it with all my heart”—pause, two beats—“a steak is every bit as deadly as a gun. Worse. At least if one points a gun at one's head and pulls the trigger, the end comes with merciful swiftness, but a steak—ah, the exquisite and unremitting agonies of the flesh-eater, his colon clogged with its putrefactive load, the blood settling in his gut, the carnivore's rage building in his brittle heart—a steak kills day by day, minute by minute, through the martyrdom of a lifetime.”

He had them now—he could see the fear and revulsion in their eyes, the grim set of their jaws as they each inwardly totted up the steaks and sausages, the chops and pullets and geese consumed over the course of the greedy, oblivious years. “But don't take my word for it,” he said, waving his arms expansively, “let's be scientific about it. After all, the Sanitarium stands as a monument to biologic living and scientific analysis, a veritable University of Health. Let's just perform a little experiment here—right here, on the spur of the moment.” He ducked away from the spotlight and called out in a

suddenly stentorian voice: “Frank? Dr. Frank Linniman?”

A flurry from the rear of the auditorium, movement, the craning of three hundred necks, and all at once the summoned assistant was striding briskly up the aisle, his chin thrust forward, his carriage flawless. The audience took one look at him and knew that here was a man who would unflinchingly throw himself over a cliff if his Chief required it of him. He came to a halt before the podium and gazed up into the brilliant light. “Yes, Doctor?”

“Do you know the Post Tavern? The finest hostelry in Battle Creek—or, for that matter, anywhere else in this grand state of Michigan?” This was nothing, a bit of stagemanship, and the Doctor had been through it a dozen times before, yet still the image of Charlie Post, blandly handsome, effortlessly tall, a very Judas of a man, rose up before him like an assassin’s blade, and it ever so slightly soured the moment for him.

“I know it, Doctor.”

Dr. Kellogg was a diminutive man himself. It wasn’t so much that he was short, he liked to say—it was just that his legs weren’t long enough. Sit him in a chair and he was as tall as the next fellow. Of course, as he’d grown into his fifties, he’d expanded a bit on the horizontal plane, but that was all right—it gave him a glow of portly health and authority, an effect he enhanced by dressing entirely in white. Tonight, as always, he was a marvel of whiteness, a Santa Claus of health, from his flawless white high-button shoes to the cusp of his Vandyke and the fine pale tenacious hair that clung to his scalp. He paused a moment to take a sip from his water glass and rinse the taste of Charlie Post from his mouth.

Setting the glass back down, he glanced up briefly and saw that the audience was hanging on his every gesture; half a dozen of them were actually gaping. He gave them a sagacious look and then focused on his assistant. “Frank, I want you to go to the chef there—a chef of international renown, I’m told, an epicure Mr. Post has imported from Paris, a Monsieur Delarain, isn’t it?—and I want you to purchase the finest steak he has available and bring it back here, to this very stage, for our inspection.”

A tentative ripple of laughter, the scrape of chair legs.

“Well, go, Frank—fly. What are you waiting for?”

“A steak, sir?” Frank knew the routine, God bless him, as sturdy a straight man as you could hope to find.

“Not just *a* steak, Frank—the finest steak money can buy.”

Frank’s face was an open book. He was guileless, as baffled as the audience, his only desire to gratify his Chief. “I’ll be back in a twinkling,” he announced, and he was already turning away, already poised to dash up the aisle, when the Doctor spoke again.

“And Frank,” he said, drawing it out, “Frank, would you do me one other great favor?”

Silence. Not a breath expelled anywhere in the house.

“Would you stop at the livery stable and pick up a sample of another sort—for comparison, that is?” The Doctor chuckled amiably, avuncular, warm, the very avatar of geniality and good sense. “I’m referring to a bit of, well, horse excretus”—stunned laughter, picking up now, gales of it, so lusty the sequel could barely be heard—“about four hundred forty-eight grams, to be precise ... or the size of a good sixteen-ounce steak.”



It was a typical Monday night at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, bastion of right thinking, vegetarianism and self-improvement, citadel of temperance and dress reform, and, not coincidentally, the single healthiest spot on the planet. The women were uncorseted, the men slack in their suspenders, both

sexes quietly percolating over the toxin-free load of dinner in an atmosphere cleansed of tobacco, alcohol, corned beef, mutton chops and the coffee jitters. Stomachs full, minds at rest, they were gathered in the Grand Parlor to hear their Chief instruct them on matters relating to physical well-being and its happy concomitant, longevity. They might have been at Baden or Worishofen or Saratoga, but instead they were assembled here in the icebox of south-central Michigan—and paying handsome price for the privilege—because there was no place on the map to equal it.

In the thirty-one years of his directorship, Dr. Kellogg had transformed the San, as it was affectionately known, from an Adventist boarding house specializing in Graham bread and water cure to the “Temple of Health” it had now become, a place celebrated from coast to coast—and across the great wide weltering Atlantic to London, Paris, Heidelberg and’ beyond. Twenty-eight hundred patients annually passed through its portals, and one thousand employees, including twenty full-time physicians and three hundred nurses and bath attendants, saw to their needs; Six stories high, with a gleaming lobby half the size of a football field, with four hundred rooms and treatment facilities for thousand, with elevators, central heating and cooling, indoor swimming pools and a whole range of therapeutic diversions and wholesome entertainments, the San was the sine qua non of the cure business—luxury hotel, hospital and spa all rolled into one.

And the impresario, the overseer, the presiding genius behind it all, was John Harvey Kellogg. Preaching dietary restraint and the simple life, he eased overweight housewives and dyspeptic businessmen along the path to enlightenment and recovery. Severe cases—the cancerous, the moribund, the mentally unbalanced and the disfigured—were rejected. The San’s patients tended to be of a certain class, and they really had no interest in sitting across the dining table from the plebeian or the pedestrian or those who had the bad grace to be truly and dangerously ill. No, they came to the San to see and be seen; to mingle with the celebrated, the rich and the preposterously rich; to think positively, eat wisely and subdue their afflictions with a good long pious round of pampering, abstention and rest.

At this juncture, in the fall of 1907, the San numbered among its guests such luminaries as Admiral Nieblock of the U.S. Naval Academy, Upton and Meta Sinclair, Horace B. Fletcher, and Tiepolo Cappucini, the great Italian tenor, as well as a smattering of state and national legislators, captains of industry, entertainers and assorted dukes, con-tessas and baronets. On the horizon were visits by Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Thomas Edison, Admiral Richard M. Byrd and the voluminous William Howard Taft. Dr. Kellogg was no fool, and he extracted as much benefit as he could from these dignataries, in terms of both promotional service and raw cash donations. He knew, too, that a diet of Protose fillets, beet tops and nut savory broth, combined with a prohibition on artificial stimulants and long unbroken stretches of ruminative time, might prove a bit, well, dull to the high-livers and men and women of action among his patients. And so he kept them busy, with a regimen of sports, exercise, rest and treatment, and he kept them entertained, too. There were concerts, lectures, sleigh rides, grand marches and sing-alongs. The Jubilee Singers might appear one night and George W. Leitch, twenty years in India and with his stereopticon slides in hand, the next. Or it would be “Professor” Sammy Siegel, hot off the vaudeville circuit, milking the strings of his mandolin, or the Tozer Twins and their trained dachshunds. And on Monday nights, without fail, the Chief himself took possession of the podium and held it for two and a half rapid-fire hours, enlightening his charges, edifying them and, as much as possible, scaring them half to death.



In the fifteen minutes it took Frank Linniman to trot down to the Post Tavern and back, the Doctor fielded two more questions. The first was from a gentleman in the rear (Mr. Abernathy, wasn’t it?

Gout, consumption and nerves?) who wanted to know of the dangers of tight-lacing among fashionable females who unnaturally constricted their midsections to achieve the “wedding ring” waist. The Doctor repeated the question for the benefit of those up front who might not have heard, and then, after stroking the white silk of his beard a moment, shot an admonitory forefinger into the air. “My dear sir, I can tell you without exaggeration that if the number of deaths recorded annually as a result of just such frivolous tight-lacing were properly recorded, you would be truly appalled. As a medical intern at Bellevue, I had occasion to be present for the autopsy of one such unfortunate woman—a woman, I might add, not yet out of her twenties. In any case, we found to our astonishment that her organs had been totally disarranged, the liver pushed up into the lungs and the intestines so effectively blocked they might just as well have been stoppered with a cork.” He shook his fine head wearily and let out a sigh that could be heard in the back row. “A pity,” he said, his voice cast low. “I tell you, it brought tears to my eyes.”

The second question was from a tall and very striking young woman in the fifth row, whose skin, unfortunately, had a faint greenish cast to it. (Muntz, Miss Ida; greensickness, autointoxication.) She rose, visibly excited at the thought of all those curious eyes upon her, and cleared her throat. “Doctor,” she asked in a plaintive, demure voice, “could you please give us your opinion of cigarette smoking, as practiced in private, of course, among young ladies of today?”

Dr. Kellogg furrowed his brows. He was furious, incensed, a tower of righteous strength and indignation. He paused to let his gaze fall upon the recidivist cigar and cigarette smokers among the audience. “Madame—or should I say Mademoiselle? Mademoiselle Muntz, I have only this to say, and it applies equally to both sexes. Tobacco”—and here the Doctor let a long shudder run through him—“tobacco destroys the sex glands.”

Someone gasped. Miss Muntz sank into her seat, stricken. The Doctor held his stony gaze. “And that,” he said, “is a medically proven fact.”

It was at this moment that Dr. Linniman dashed through the rear door, an air of breathless urgency about him, two identical packages wrapped in white butcher’s paper held out before him in offering.

“Ah,” the Doctor exclaimed, pushing at his spectacles, “Dr. Linniman.” And then he lifted his head to address the audience at large. “And now, to return, if we may, to Mrs. Tindermarsh’s query regarding porterhouse steak and its value as a food source—” He broke off here to lean forward and give Dr. Linniman, who now stood before him, these further instructions: “Frank, would you examine the scales, please, weigh the respective samples and prepare slides of a precisely equal portion of each? Thank you.”

A murmur from the audience. A few titters, a spatter of applause.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am about to provide you with a pair of demonstrations that should, I would fervently hope, forever turn you away from such a disgusting and unnatural food as this. I say ‘disgusting’ because of its high bacterial content—a content I will show to be equal to or greater than that of barnyard ordure—and I say ‘unnatural’ because this flesh food is an innovation and corruption of modern man, whose ancestors have been proven by such eminent researchers as Von Freiling in Germany and Du Pomme of the Pasteur Institute to be exclusively frugivorous. And, too, I will assert that such foods are in fact ‘sinful,’ as Mrs. Tindermarsh would have it, not only in the sin occasioned by the taking of the lives of our fellow creatures—and I would think that the piteous bleats of those blameless herds led to slaughter would ring in the ears of any flesh eater the moment his head hits the pillow at night—but in the very greatest sin of all, and that is, of course, in polluting the temple of the human body.”

The audience was hushed now, sitting rapt and motionless in the orthopedically correct chairs the Doctor had himself designed. Someone—was that Mr. Praetz, of Cleveland?—suppressed a cough.

“Frank?” The doctor swiveled round briskly to where Dr. Linniman had joined him at the rear of the

small stage. “Are we ready?”

A plain deal table stood just behind him; on it, conspicuously displayed, were the beefsteak from the Post Tavern and the grainy pungent sample from the livery stable. Between these two exhibits, Dr. Linniman had set up a matching pair of microscopes and a small naked incandescent bulb for illumination. “Yes, sir,” he answered. “All ready.”

“Good.” Turning once more to the audience, Dr. Kellogg flashed a toothy smile and rubbed his hands together with relish. “Now, we’ll need a disinterested party as observer—do I have any volunteers? No? How about you, Miss Muntz?”

A little gasp, a titter, and there, in the fifth row, was Miss Muntz, coloring prettily.

“Don’t be shy, Miss Muntz—this is all in the interest of science.”

There were murmurs of encouragement, and in the next moment Miss Ida Muntz was clutching the sides of her skirts and making her way up the aisle, where she daintily mounted the three steps to the podium.

“Now, Miss Muntz,” the Doctor began, and he momentarily lost his train of thought as he saw how she towered over him—she was pretty, yes, and she gave them something to look at, greensickness and all, but he should have thought to choose someone with a little less legbone, for God’s sake. He fumbled a moment, uncharacteristically, and repeated himself: “Miss Muntz. Miss Muntz, I would like you to examine the slides beneath these identical microscopes and describe to us what you see, remembering that only Dr. Linniman knows which of these specimens is Mrs. Tindermarsh’s beefsteak and which the, well”—laughter from the audience—“the waste product of an animal very much like the one sacrificed for the venal tastes of the gourmands at the Post Tavern.”

The moment was exquisite: the girl bent prettily over the microscope, the men leaning forward in their seats for a better look, the women smiling secret smiles, the Doctor, as ever, conscious of his control, his benevolence, his wisdom—shepherd to his flock. “And would you describe for us what you see in the first exhibit, my dear?”

“Um, it’s black—or no, now I see ...”

“Yes?”

“Tiny things. Moving. Like, like bits of straw or rice—only alive.”

“Good, very good, Miss Muntz. Those are bacteria”—the Doctor turned to face the audience now—“and they are truncated, like bits of rice, as you say, because they are unfriendly bacteria, the *B. welchii*, *B. coli* and *Proteus vulgaris* we so often find in the stool of our incoming patients here at the Sanitarium. And could you accurately count the bacteria for us, Miss Muntz?”

She turned her head now, looking up at him out of a bright crystalline eye, and gave a little cry of surprise. “Oh, no, Doctor—there are so many hundreds and hundreds of them.”

“And now, Miss Muntz, would you do us the great favor of examining the sample beneath the second microscope?”

A flutter of skirts, a quick reassuring touch-up of the coiffure and millinery, and Miss Muntz was bent over the second microscope.

“Would you describe what you see now, Miss Muntz?”

“Yes, Doctor, it’s ... it’s much the same thing—”

The audience breathed out, a ripple that became a tidal wave.

“And could you count the bacteria in this sample?”

“Oh, no, Doctor—”

“But would you say that there are fewer or more than in the first sample?”

Her eye still affixed to the aperture of the lens, Miss Muntz tugged unconsciously at a loose strand of hair and let her voice drop reflectively. “This one is, is more cluttered. A lot more.”

“Would you say there were half as many more in this sample?”

“Oh, yes,” Miss Muntz breathed, taking her eye from the lens and straightening up to face the Doctor and the crowd ranged myopically behind him. “Yes, at least, Doctor—at least half as many more....”

“Very good. And now, Dr. Linniman, would you please reveal to the audience the identity of each of these slides?”

Frank’s face was perfectly composed—wonderful, wonderful, thought the Doctor, a rush of triumph building in him. *How he loved this life!* “The first slide—”

“Yes?”

“—this is the sample from the livery stable.”

At this, the audience erupted. There were hoots of laughter, cries of surprise and wonderment, and finally a sustained applause that echoed through the Grand Parlor like the steady wash of sea on shingle. It was a long moment before the Doctor, beaming and with both hands uplifted, was able to calm them. “I urge you,” he called out above the dying clamor, “to step up individually once we’re done here tonight, and confirm for yourselves Miss Muntz’s observations. And thank you, Miss Muntz—you may step down now—and thank you, Dr. Linniman.”

A moment drifted by, the crowd still abuzz, as Dr. Linniman helped the young lady from the stage, saw her to her seat and himself found a place in the front row. The Doctor could feel the pulse of the audience declining ever so slightly from the peak to which he’d brought it, and he knew now that they were vulnerable, putty in his hands: it was time for the pièce de résistance. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he cried, “I thank you for your attention. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions from what you’ve just seen,” he added slyly, “but we have a problem here ... what to do with Mr. Post’s porterhouse steak.” He held up a hand to silence the incipient laughter. “I propose a second small illustration of the Sanitarium’s principles....” Dr. Kellogg again looked pointedly to the rear of the auditorium. Those in front began to crane their necks. “Is Dr. Distaso ready?”

A gruff, French-accented bark of assent rose from the back of the room, and there was Dr. Distaso, the distinguished bacteriologist Dr. Kellogg had lured away from the Pasteur Institute in Paris, leading his ward for the evening up the aisle. This was an ancient, foul-smelling and fouler-tempered chimpanzee by the name of Lillian, an animal the Doctor had acquired from a circus some years earlier and kept around the San for just such a moment as this. When the audience caught sight of Lillian, who was usually confined to a cage in one of the back laboratories, there was a universal cry of approbation. Several of them actually got to their feet for a better look, and a pair of matrons in one of the middle rows clapped their hands like schoolgirls. The Doctor focused on one man in particular (Jennings, Bigelow; chronic flatulence, partial loss of hearing), who was laughing so hard his eyes were damp and his face seemed swollen to twice its size. Amidst the pandemonium, Dr. Kellogg took Lillian’s leash from Dr. Distaso and led her up onto the stage, where, knowing her routine as well as Frank Linniman knew his, she clambered atop a stool in the far corner and gave the Doctor her undivided attention. Raising his hands high above his head, Dr. Kellogg called for quiet.

It took them even longer to settle down this time, but when they’d quieted somewhat, the Doctor raised his voice and gave a quick little speech about the evils of meat and how contrary to man’s nature it was to consume it. “By way of illustration,” he said, “I am going to give our simian cousin here—Lillian, that is, and she certainly doesn’t resemble anyone on my side of the family”—a pause for laughter—“I’m going to give her a choice between Mr. Post’s finest beefsteak and the contents of this bag,” and he drew a brown paper bag out from behind the podium. “Let’s see which she prefers.”

The Doctor backed away from the podium and slipped on a pair of gloves that had been laid out for him on the table. He then hefted the dripping slab of meat, held it out briefly for all to see, and casually tossed it to Lillian. The chimp was adept. She snatched it from the air in a spidery hand and brought it to her nose, uttering a low coughing sound and folding her lips back over her teeth. The

audience stirred, poked one another, hummed with laughter. Perplexed, Lillian touched the tip of her tongue to the surface of the meat, made a face of gargoylelike disdain, and then suddenly, and rather violently, flung the thing back at the Doctor, who caught it neatly. Setting the steak down, he extracted a banana from the bag. With a cry of “Voilà!” he threw it to the chimp, who immediately peeled and ate it. “*Hoo-hoo,*” she murmured, turning her chocolate eyes on him with a look of pure and abiding love.

Dr. Kellogg tossed her another, and all at once the audience was on its feet, cheering, whistling, faces animated; ills, aches, twinges and conniptions all but forgotten. The applause was thunderous. Dr. Kellogg bowed deeply, and as Lillian greedily plunged the second banana into the rictus of her mouth and his patients cheered mightily, he waved his way out the door and into the hallway, floating on the exhilaration of the moment.



Outside, amongst the potted palms and bathed in the gentle glow of the electric lamps, stood his secretary, Poultney Dab. Dab had been waiting patiently, a sheaf of papers clutched awkwardly in one hand, a briefcase in the other.

“Hear them, Poult? We taught them a thing or two tonight they won’t soon forget, eh?” The doctor was already hurrying up the hall with his short brisk strides, throwing the words back over his shoulder at Dab’s large and anxious face. “See that Lillian gets an extra ration tonight and that the new man, what’s his name, Murphy? changes her litter—he’s been remiss about that—and I’ll need a second copy of the trustees’ report, as I think I told you, and oh, yes, there’s been a complaint of cooking odors on the fifth floor—Mrs. Crouder’s room, five-nineteen, I believe—and I want you to have Sturman look into it, and be prepared to take dictation in my office at eleven P.M. sharp, will you?”

Dab was a short large man with an unfortunate waddle; the more he hurried after his Chief, the more pronounced it became. “Dr. Kellogg,” he was saying, his voice harsh and breathless, and there seemed to be some sort of urgency stuck in the craw of it, “Dr. Kellogg—”

The Doctor pulled up short in the middle of the wide gleaming corridor that stretched five hundred thirty feet from the Grand Parlor to the lobby, the corridor set in the spotless Italian marble he’d chosen himself, and spun round to face his secretary. Over Dab’s shoulder he could see the people filing out of the Grand Parlor, a parade of the distinguished, the celebrated and the wealthy. A group of nurses passed by, beautiful girls all, smiling shyly. “Evening, Doctor,” they murmured. “Evening, girls,” he replied grandly. “And now, Poult, what in God’s name is it that’s got you so worked up?”

But the doctor didn’t have to wait for his secretary’s response: there it was, slouching indolently against the wall not ten feet away, there it was, staring him in the face. All at once his mood shattered like a windowpane. He could feel the rage take hold of him. “How dare you!” he choked, storming up to the ragged figure propped against the wall. “Haven’t I told you—”

But the figure moved and spoke and cut him off. The words seemed to come from deep inside him even as the sparkling audience flowed through the doors of the Grand Parlor and made their way in a knot toward them; the words spat themselves out like a curse, twisted by the unshaven lips, forced from the stinking rags and the feverish eyes: “Hello, Father. Aren’t you going to introduce me?”



Chapter 2



Scavengers

of the

Sea



Ignoring the dainty little three-pronged fork, Charlie Ossining lifted the oyster to his mouth, tipped the shell forward and with a quick practiced pursing of the lips, allowed it to become one with himself. Before him, atop a bed of crushed ice, lay eleven others, glistening with the juice of life. He lingered over the second, garnishing it with a dash of cocktail sauce and a squeeze of lemon before sending it off to bed with its brother, the moment settling round him in a warm gastric glow as he took a leisurely sip of his Pommery & Greno '96, and contemplated the snug green neck of the bottle peeking out from its icy cradle. This was living, all right, he thought, patting his lips with a swath of snowy linen and letting his gaze fall idly over the glittering depths of the car.

Outside, the scenery beat by the windows, as cold and cheerless as an oyster's gullet—did oysters have gullets? he wondered briefly before downing another—but here, in the softly lit grip of the diner it was all mahogany and crystal. Amazing, really. You'd hardly think they were rocketing along at nearly forty miles an hour—the car barely trembled, the champagne clinging to the rim of the glass even as the potted palm swayed serenely over the table. He could feel the vibration of the rails, of course, but it was nothing, a distant throb, as if threads of silk were pulling him gently through the bleak countryside.

He was halfway through the plate of oysters—six shells denuded, six to go—when the Negro waiter pranced up the aisle, a pair of menus clutched to his chest, a cadaverous-looking couple following in his wake. Casting a quick look round him, Charlie saw to his dismay that his was the only table for four occupied by a single diner, and saw further that they were headed straight for him. So much for solitary pleasures.

“Scuse me, sir,” the Negro said, dipping his head in extenuation, and then he drew out the chair opposite Charlie for the lady (thirtyish, too pale, too thin, nice eyes, a three-tiered hat built up like the Tower of Pisa with artificial fruit, lace, ribbon, assorted gewgaws and a pale little dead bird with glass eyes perched atop a wire twig) and the chair beside her for the man (too much nose, unruly hair, dressed up like a prince on his way to the opera). Charlie took an immediate dislike to them, but then he softened a bit, always willing to make concessions for the rich.

“Good evening,” Charlie offered. He was wearing a blue serge suit himself—a bit linty, maybe, but his pink-and-white-striped shirt had been worn only three or four times, and his cuffs and collar were new from the shop that morning.

The woman smiled—nice teeth, too. And lips. “Evening,” the man murmured, handing the wine list back to the waiter as if it were a bit of offal and turning the menu face down without even glancing at it. He fixed Charlie with an ever-so-slightly cross-eyed gaze, held it perhaps a beat too long, and then broke into a grin. Suddenly, a fleshless hand, chased by a bony wrist, shot out across the table, and Charlie, startled, took it in his own. “Will Lightbody,” the man said, his voice booming out now in an

excess of enthusiasm.

Charlie spoke his own name, disengaged his hand, and turned to the woman.

“Mr. Ossining,” Will pronounced, and there was an odd hollowness to his voice, as if he were speaking from the bottom of a well, “I’d like you to meet my wife, Eleanor.”

The towering hat trembled beneath its excrescences, a pair of sharp mocking eyes took hold of Charlie’s like pincers, and Eleanor Lightbody was murmuring a standard greeting. A moment of silence followed, Eleanor glancing down at her menu, Will grinning inappropriately, nakedly, a thirty-year-old schoolboy with a new plaything. Charlie began to wonder if he wasn’t a bit unbalanced.

“Oysters,” Will said suddenly. Eleanor lifted her eyes from the menu.

Charlie glanced at the half-dozen shellfish remaining on his plate and then looked up into Will’s horse-toothed grin. “Yes. Bluepoints. And they’re delicious, really sweet ... would you care to try one?”

The grin vanished. Will’s lower lip seemed to tremble. He glanced out the window. It was Eleanor who broke the silence this time. “It’s his stomach,” she said.

His stomach. Charlie hesitated, wondering at the appropriate response. Sympathy? Surprise? A spirited defense of the digestive properties of oysters? He gazed wistfully on the plate of shellfish—the air had to be cleared before he communed with another, that much was apparent. “Dyspepsia?” he wondered aloud.

“I haven’t slept in three weeks,” Will announced. He was fidgeting with the corners of the menu, and his leg had begun to thump nervously beneath the table. Without benefit of the grin, his face had grown longer and narrower, his eyes had retreated into his skull, and there were two pronounced caverns beneath his cheekbones. He looked ready for the grave.

“Really? You don’t say?” Charlie glanced from husband to wife and back again. She had stunning eyes, she did, but the mocking gleam was gone from them now, vanished like her husband’s grin. “Three weeks?”

Will shook his head sadly. “Afraid so. I lie there in bed staring at the ceiling and my stomach is like a steam engine, like a boiler, and pretty soon I start seeing all these visions in the dark....” He leaned forward. “Pies, oranges, beefsteaks—and every one of them with legs and arms, dancing round the room and mocking me. Do you know what I mean?”

The waiter reappeared at that moment, hovering over the table with his order pad and sparing Charlie the awkwardness of a reply. “May I take your order, sir? Madame?”

Night was settling in beyond the windows, a descent of the dead gray sky over the dead gray landscape, shadows deepening, trees falling away into oblivion, the river running black. Charlie was suddenly aware of his reflection staring back at him—he saw a hungry man in a linty blue suit hunkered over a plate of oysters. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, he hastily slid an oyster down his throat, emptied his glass and filled it again, the cold neck of the bottle as satisfying to the hand as anything he’d ever held.

“The potage,” Eleanor was saying, “it is leek, isn’t it?”

“Yes, madame.”

“No beef or chicken stock—” Her voice took on an admonitory tone the waiter was quick to recognize.

“Oh, no, ma’am—veggeble stock only.”

“Yes. All right. And none of the entrées is acceptable—would you bring me some vegetables, please? I don’t suppose you have crudités?”

The waiter looked uncomfortable. He shifted from one foot to the other. His white jacket was so bright it seemed to glow. “We have all the very finest here, ma’am, I can assure you of that....” He faltered. “I will inquire of the chef.” And then, after gazing searchingly at the floor a moment, he

added, "We do have a fine cucumber salad tonight."

Eleanor heaved a sigh. "All right, then—the cucumber salad. And a glass of water." As she leaned forward to hand the waiter the menu, she seemed to think of something else. "Oh," she said, "and a bowl of bran. To sprinkle over the salad."

"Bran?" The waiter looked confused. "I'll be sure to inquire of the chef, ma'am."

She made a little puffing noise with her lips. "Oh, never mind," she said. "Just the soup and the salad."

Looking relieved, the waiter accepted the menu and bent forward, attentively gazing into Will Lightbody's upturned face. "And for the gentleman?"

As Charlie took up another oyster, he couldn't help noticing the look of panic settling into his fellow diner's ever-so-faintly crossed eyes. Will waved his hand carelessly, as if he hadn't come to eat at all, as if this weren't the dining car of the Twentieth Century Limited, the world's premier train, boasting the finest cuisine and finest service known to man. "Oh, nothing for me. A bit of toast, maybe."

"Toast, sir?"

"Toast."

There was a silence as the waiter contemplated this request. This was an era of vigorous and accomplished eating, of twelve-course meals, of soups, sauces and gravies, of three meats and a fish course, not to mention a cascade of wines—sherries, clarets, ports, Zinfandel and Niersteiner—and a succession of oleaginous desserts. The kitchen was groaning with rib roasts, broiled geese and slabs of venison, the cooks were furiously shucking oysters and poaching sturgeon, waiters staggered up and down the aisle beneath the burden of their laden trays, and here was Will Lightbody ordering toast. The silence held and Charlie was aware in that moment of the distant ticking of the rails. At the next table a woman swathed in furs gave a silvery little laugh in response to something her companion—an old man with gargantuan mustaches—was saying in a muted rumble.

"And, uh, how would the gentleman like that?"

Charlie's new acquaintance seemed distracted. "Like what?"

"The gentleman's toast, sir."

"Oh, yes. Toasted, please." Will glanced uneasily at his wife. "And with a bowl of broth," he added in a single breath, as if afraid the tongue would be snatched from his mouth before he could get the words out.

"No broth," Eleanor countered just as quickly, and there was no arguing with the tone of that voice. The waiter penciled out "broth" as expeditiously as he'd penciled it in. "Full of creatine," she added, giving Charlie a look he couldn't quite fathom.

"Will that be all?" the waiter asked, clasping his hands before him as if in prayer and giving an obsequious little nod of his head.

Will glanced up sharply. "Yes, yes. That's all."

The waiter retreated, the woman at the next table laughed again, and the night deepened a further degree, so that the diners could no longer see the countryside rushing past them. Charlie ducked his head to receive another oyster.

"Scavengers of the sea," Will said suddenly.

Eleanor smiled, a faint compressing of the lips. Her eyes were keen again.

"Beg pardon?" Charlie returned, lifting the wine glass to his lips even as the soft pulp of the oyster met his teeth and found its way down his throat to join its companions.

"Oysters," Will said, turning to his wife. "Right, darling? Isn't that what your Dr. Kellogg calls them?"

There was a joke here somewhere—Charlie could see it in her eyes—and he seemed to be the brun-

of it. She tilted her head slightly, so that the glassy dumbstruck eyes of the bird atop her hat flashed luridly in the light. “Yes, Will darling,” she said, all the while staring at Charlie, “but he’s only speaking the truth. Oysters *are* unclean, after all. They live in muck and filth and they feed on it. And oyster juice, he insists, is nothing more or less than urine.”

Charlie glanced down at the three sorry bivalves remaining on his plate. “Urine?”

Her smile was widening. “Piss,” she said, “to use the vernacular. As in ‘making water’?”

Will was grinning at him again, too, his eyes swallowed up in a filigree of wrinkles and laugh lines; he looked like a gargoyle leering from its perch. “I wouldn’t want to eat a scavenger, would you?”

Charlie could feel his hackles rising. “Actually—” he began, but Eleanor cut him off.

“Dr. Kellogg took a sample from this very train, did you know that?” she said, wagging a gloved finger for emphasis. “Had it shipped on to Battle Creek from the terminus at Chicago and analyzed it in the laboratories at the San....” She paused for emphasis. “And he found the juice of each of those oysters to be almost identical to a teaspoon of, well, *human* urine.”

Charlie had been about to defend his oysters—urine or no, they were about as perfect a way to begin an evening, or end one, as he could imagine—but a new note had entered the conversation and he jumped on it. “Battle Creek? Did you say ‘Battle Creek’?”

Eleanor nodded. Will bobbed his head.

“But that’s my destination—Battle Creek. I’m on my way there now. Once we get to Chicago, I connect with the Michigan Central Line.” He loved the sound of that, *Michigan Central Line*—it made him feel worldly, well-traveled, an important man doing important things. Never mind that he’d never been west of the Jersey Palisades or ever before had anything to do with an overnight train other than to watch it roar out of the station, packed to the windows with its rich cargo.

He wanted to elaborate, the whole business of timetables and porters and connections wonderfully exotic to him, but he couldn’t go on. The Lightbodys had burst out in a simultaneous peal of laughter; Eleanor actually clapping her hands together like a girl at a party. “But that’s marvelous,” she gasped. “What a wonderful coincidence.”

“You too?” Charlie surmised.

“Yes,” Will said, and his grin faded a degree or two, “we’re on our way to the Sanitarium—for the cure.” He hesitated, and the bleakness returned to his face: he was hunted, he was starved, he was condemned before his time. “I’ve—I’ve never been,” he confessed, “but Eleanor—”

“This will be my third visit,” she announced, reaching up prettily to adjust her hat. “I’m afraid I’ve become one of those ‘Battle Freaks’ you read of in the papers.”

Charlie couldn’t help giving her a quick once-over: the slim arms and dainty hands, the white arch of her throat above the choke collar set with a studded pin, the swell of her chest. And what was wrong with her? She seemed fine—a bit drawn and pale, maybe, but nothing a week in the country wouldn’t cure. The husband was a man of sticks—he looked as if he could use all the help he could get—but the wife, the wife intrigued him. He was framing the question in his mind, wondering just how to put it, when the waiter materialized with two glasses of water and set them down with a flourish in front of the Lightbodys. “Is the gentleman finish?” the waiter murmured, making a feint toward the remaining oysters.

Charlie looked into Eleanor’s mocking eyes and then at Will, who gave him a doleful sidelong glance. He waved his hand and the oysters vanished.

“Tell me, Mr. Ossining,” Will said, “if I may inquire—what brings you to Battle Creek? Convalescence? Business? Pleasure?”

Charlie had been a bit off his mark since the Lightbodys had joined him—these people were odd, there was no doubt about it—but he understood only too well that oddness was the prerogative of the rich and that it was his job and mission to exploit it as best he could. He felt a sudden surge of the old

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