

The Unsquirreling of Squeaks

It was a Saturday evening at the chic urban villa of Archie and Pru Hudson. All the lights were on. Chandeliers blazed in every room, upstairs and down. In the small but exquisitely manicured garden to one side, dozens of candles flickered romantically. The double front door stood open to all the guests. A young gentleman stood beside it, hired by the hour, watching discreetly for any gate-crashers.

It was customary, on the first Saturday evening in every month, for Archie and Pru to welcome all their friends for drinks, canapés and languid chit-chat. All that was required was a reason to hold the party. Sometimes it was to celebrate Pru's arrival at yet another new publishing company which - she had convinced them - urgently required her many and undoubted talents. Sometimes it was to celebrate the fact that Archie had signed a contract to deliver legal advice to the world of finance. At certain times of the year, they would celebrate the opening, or closing, of the grouse-shooting season, or the salmon-fishing season, or the stalking season. At New Year, naturally, no other excuse was ever needed.

Tonight, the first Saturday in October, the party was being held to mark the ten-year anniversary of the glittering marriage of Archie and Pru. Tonight, Archie was at his bluffest, Pru was at her dazzlingest. She had bought herself a superb, shimmering gold, pencil-thin dress that must have cost hundreds, and her hair glowed. Around her neck, pearls threaded on a slim golden thread that Archie had thoughtfully paid for at the best jeweller in town. Archie had decked himself out in a new blue blazer with the gold buttons, and a pair of pretty expensive chinos. His goatee was trimmed, his cheeks were flushed - probably something to do with the half-empty bottle of malt that he kept ready inside the trophy-cabinet in the hall.

Tonight, everyone who considered themselves to be anyone in the town turned up - not too early and not too late. To the west of Archie and Pru's villa, smart cars parked in the surrounding streets, couples hailed each other heartily, back-slapped and pecked their way to the door where they easily gained admittance. The vehicles that parked to the east of the villa were less smart. More disreputable, in fact. From out of them, higgledy-piggledy, but equally raucously, spilled young men of the outdoor persuasion, bronzed, fit and bleached by the surfs of a thousand beaches. They too gained entrance without great difficulty.

Inside the villa, the smart set turned sharp left into the drawing-room, where Archie held court, armed with a bottle of wine in each hand and a cheery greeting for everyone. Those who entered this room were generally of middle-age, some more so than others. There were very many blazers and not a few crumpled suits. Each ruddy gentleman had a ruddy wife in tow. All except one, who was accompanied by a very handsome and utterly charming Indian male friend. But even Archie's friends lived in the modern world, and the whole delightful story of that odd couple was known. The atmosphere grew heavy with expensive scents and hearty laughter.

In the reception-room across the hall, in which Pru was stationed like an statuesque queen among a band of loyal primitives, the bronzed surfers gathered, outdoing each other in their high-fives and their ability to crack open cans of beer and down the contents with astonishing rapidity. Here, there was the faintest scent

of ozone and after-shave. Dress was extraordinarily casual. Antipodean accents, both real and assumed, rang out. There was even an athlete here who was manifestly West Indian, with his hair done in Rastafarian dreadlocks. But Pru did not mind at all.

It had always been this way. Tonight was no different from any other night. Archie's friends and acquaintances were cut from the same tweedy cloth and much preferred the company of their own kind and, to a lesser degree, of their own wives. They looked askance at the rowdies who congregated around fun-loving Pru. But for those who had previously attended a few of these soirées, the chaps over the hallway were nothing more than a fleeting annoyance, something over which to shake their heads when their wives were fixing them a last night-cap at home. Those who were of newer acquaintance were at first terrified by the unexpected crowd of sun-tanned muscle and unnerving teeth; but then settled down when it was clear that the old hands had no concerns. As for the surfing crowd, their lives were consumed in ignoring the rest of the world, so they had no worries at all, and would spend the following four or five hours promoting that philosophy amongst themselves.

When the two worlds collided, as they frequently did, when the different species bumped into each other outside one of several toilets, or in an unauthorised exploration of the upper reaches of the villa, then the surfing dude would simply ignore the polite nods of the upstanding citizenry. It worked well.

For her theme tonight, in celebration of ten years of marriage, Pru had chosen "gold".

Archie had been puzzled by this. He had asked chaps he knew.

'Pru, darling,' he reported back, as they sat and sipped some sherry before supper one night, 'it seems that gold is for the fiftieth anniversary.'

'Really?' said his beloved, unconcerned. 'And what is the tenth, then?'

'Seems like it's tin, dearest,' he replied, pleased at the extent of his researches.

Pru gazed at him over the rim of her crystal glass. 'Tin,' she said without a trace of emotion.

'Yes, darling,' nodded her mate, smiling.

'That's what you'd like me to have, then, is it? Tin decorations, a tin anniversary, in front of all our friends?' She pursed her lips in disapproval, and looked steadily at Archie. 'Should we be serving cat-food at the party, perhaps? From a tin?'

Archie reddened and ducked his head. 'Of course not, dearest,' he conceded. 'Gold it is. If that's what you want?'

'It is what I want,' stated Pru quite clearly.

Thus there was a trace of gold almost everywhere one looked. On the clothes of the happy married couple, threaded into the cloth of the new curtains, gold flakes were in the liqueurs and the white wine was of the most golden hue. Archie had burnished his wedding-ring and looked at it contentedly every few minutes, making an exhibition of himself to every one of his friends as they arrived. Pru's arms were heavy with gold bracelets. The cold-buffet was set out on plates that looked as if they might be gold, even if they were not.

The gilded theme was greatly admired in both the drawing-room, to the left, and in the reception-room, to the right. 'Astonishing' and 'tasteful', said the one crowd. 'Cool' and 'wicked', voted the other. Tonight, Archie and Pru had outdone themselves. This was going to be a night to remember.

As ten o'clock sounded sonorously from a vast grandfather clock that Archie had inherited from some long-deceased uncle, the party was at its height. It was impossible to move, although bottles and glass and cans could still be slid from one person to another. It was impossible to hear any conversation, even if it was being shouted into one's ear. It was almost impossible to breathe, such was the crush and heave of bodies. Those who had their wits about them forced their way desperately through the mass and into the garden where they promptly started to shiver and sneeze in the cold autumn night: but far better, perhaps, to catch pneumonia than faint in front of one's friends and acquaintances. Gentlemen fetched shawls from their cars for their spouses, surfers merely joshed and pushed each other around in the bushes. Back inside, the sound of the clock went unnoticed, except by Mrs. Wright, who sat in a corner of the kitchen next to an open window and inhaled from a cigarette.

Mrs. Wright was not a guest. Mrs. Wright was Archie and Pru's cleaning-woman, who had demonstrated her ability to scrub up well in the evening and, in the uniform of a waitress, prepare canapés and sandwiches, heat up vol-au-vents, and pull boxes of chilled wines and beers from the pantry. Mrs. Wright resented every minute she spent at these soirées, but the extra cash was welcome, both for the evening and the full day of cleaning that came after it. It was some compensation for missing an evening at home in front of the telly with her husband and a take-away. But not much.

Mrs. Wright heard the grandfather clock strike ten, checked the kitchen-clock, blew out the last of her smoke and tossed the butt out of the window. Time to dish up the bouchées filled with venison. She pulled two vast steaming trays from the oven of the Aga, filled four handsome gold serving dishes and set off into the heaving mass. As was the custom, she turned left into Pru's Court first, and, at the door, passed the supplies into the mob. As was the custom, she was greeted with great mirth by tall young men who wished to know how she'd shrunk the pasties. Having made their great joke, they turned away from her. Then she headed for the more dangerous room, Archie's side, where her offerings would be snatched up and wolfed down by men and women who preferred not to acknowledge her existence.

And as she crossed the hallway, she tripped over something. Mrs. Wright went flying, dishes, venison bouchées, and all. Food hit the expensive wallpaper, trays rebounded off the trophy-cabinet. There was a tremendous clatter, that penetrated even to the noisiest partygoer. All heads turned.

And in the sudden and brief silence, there was a squeak. A small, but very noticeable squeak.

Standing in the middle of the hallway was - well: something. About the size of a rabbit. The thing itself looked down at Mrs. Wright sprawled on the parquet, one tiny hand pressed to its mouth, its eyes wide open with horror. Mrs. Wright got to her knees, and, in a fit of unprofessional concern, hugged the thing tightly to her bosom.

'There, there,' she said, 'no harm done.' She patted the thing on its long brown hair and then held it by the shoulders. 'But where did you come from?'

On closer inspection, the thing seemed to be a small child. In response to Mrs. Wright's comforting, it squeaked again, several times. All eyes were fixed upon this creature. The on-lookers began to mutter amongst themselves, in tones both outraged and amused. One of Archie's sportsmen speculated that a single rifle-

shot might get rid of the vermin, a suggestion that met with enthusiastic agreement in from his neighbours.

It was Archie who answered eventually. 'Well, of course, that's Squeaks,' he announced, sounding rather embarrassed. 'Isn't that so, Pru?'

Pru did not reply, but tried ineffectually to continue her conversation about the Seychelles with two of her young men.

'Squeaks?' demanded one of Archie's crowd. 'Rum sort of name, Archie old chap. You sure?'

Archie nodded. 'It belongs to my good lady wife,' he advised his guests. 'Got it about - what: three, four years ago, was it? We keep it squirreled away, obviously. Isn't that right, darling? All yours, eh?'

Pru rose to the insult. 'That,' she hissed back at Archie, 'is *your* daughter. Nothing to do with me.'

Archie looked hurt. 'Well, all right then,' he compromised, 'it belongs to both of us. Yours and mine. Fifty-fifty. You did all the hard work, that I can say. All right, dearest?'

'And Squeaks is its name?' enquired one of the ladies, rather hoping it was not true. Already there was an subtle movement towards the cloakroom. Some things should never appear at a party, and perhaps it was best to pretend to have left before such a thing ever did appear.

'Well, yes and no, actually,' admitted Archie. 'It came with another name. What was its other name?' he asked of the thing's mother.

'Vogeline Hermione Juddson,' answered Pru shortly. She was growing pale with shame.

'Bit of a mouthful,' laughed Archie, as best he could. 'Thingy-thingy Juddson Hudson. So we call it Squeaks. Dammit, it's all it's ever done since it arrived, don't you know?'

Mrs. Wright could not help herself. 'But I've been doing for you for seven years,' she protested in a loud and, quite frankly, common voice. 'I've never seen this poor child before!'

'Whatever you may have been *doing* my good woman,' retorted Pru, indignantly, 'is no concern of ours.' She got no further. Mrs. Wright was clearly not paying attention.

'Three times a week cleaning every room in this house, and never once have I seen this poor little Vogeline.' And then she realised. The locked room at the back of the house, in which Archie claimed to keep his more expensive fishing rods and his rifles. She was never allowed in there, was Mrs. Wright. Out of bounds. Dangerous. Locked for your own protection, Mrs. Wright.

'Anyway, shoo it away, Archie,' said Pru decisively. 'It's boring our guests. You,' she pointed at Mrs. Wright, 'clear that mess up and bring in the hot smoked salmon.'

Archie had perhaps had too much wine and whisky. 'Oh no, not me,' he laughed in too loud a manner. 'I'm not shooing it anywhere. You can do that. It's more yours than mine, old thing.' He turned to his nearest neighbours and with a broad wink stated in a stage-whisper that 'She likes to get all maternal sometimes, bless her.'

Pru could not fail to hear this.

'Maternal?' she echoed in a dangerous tone. 'Me, maternal? I don't have time to get maternal. I've my career to think of. This thing, this - Squeaks: it was all

your fault, yours! You took advantage of me once. Never again, Mister Casanova! It's your child, so you get it back to its room. Now!

Archie flushed an angry red, but was lost for words. He emptied the glass in his right hand in one gulp and then the glass in his left hand. He glanced quickly at the tiny child that stood hugging Mrs. Wright, and then he stared over at Pru.

'I'm not taking it away anywhere,' he announced finally. 'You want it gone, you deal with it. I've done my bit these past five years. Bathed the blessed thing every so often, even combed its hair, don't you know? Bought it some slippers at Christmas. Now it's your turn.'

'Three years and eight months, Archie,' stated Pru acidly. 'Not five years. And it wasn't slippers: it was gloves. Can't you ever get your facts right?'

'Facts?' Archie was infuriated. 'I'm full of facts,' he stormed, 'and every man jack of 'em is right. Tin!' he exclaimed. 'A tin wedding anniversary, that's a fact, but not one you cared to accept. Oh no. Neither was Squeaks. Too much of a fact for you! Oh yes!'

Two by two, and then in droves, the embarrassed party guests fetched their coats and left the villa, assisted on their way by the able young janitor. The lights still blazed indoors as the last back car slid into the night, and the last of the VW Campers sputtered away to another party in town.

At the front of the house, neither deigning to enter the other's domain, Archie and Pru shouted their way to the end of their marriage. Accusations flew like daggers across the emptied hallway. Wine was consumed to fuel the pent-up wrath, and, when bottles were emptied, they smashed unseen against the walls. In the space of another ten minutes, ten years of wedded bliss were exposed as an empty void. In the following five, five months of courting went to the wall. After twenty minutes, there was nothing left.

At the back of the villa, in the peace and quiet and warmth of the kitchen, Squeaks sat in a soft cotton nightie on Mrs. Wright's knee and showed off the pretty slippers that it wore. The cleaning-lady cuddled the tiny child, crooned nursery rhymes and called it her little squirrel, like the daughter she'd never had. The child seemed quite content and squeaked a little more. And then it fell fast asleep.