

The Smile

Now that a nightmare logic has run its course, it is hard to believe that my friends and I thought it the most innocent caprice when I first brought Serena Cockayne to live with me in my Chelsea house. Two subjects have always fascinated me —' woman and the bizarre — and Serena combined them both, though not in any crude or perverse sense. During the extended dinner parties that carried us through our first summer together three years ago her presence beside me, beautiful, silent and forever reassuring in its strange way, was surrounded by all kinds of complex and charming ironies.

No one who met Serena failed to be delighted by her. She would sit demurely in her gilt chair by the sitting-room door, the blue folds of her brocade gown embracing her like a gentle and devoted sea. At dinner, when my guests had taken their seats, they would watch with amused and tolerant affection as I carried Serena to her place at the opposite end of the table. Her faint smile, the most delicate bloom of that peerless skin, presided over our elaborate evenings with unvarying calm. When the last of my guests had gone, paying their respects to Serena as she watched them from the hall, head inclined to one side in that characteristic pose of hers, I would carry her happily to my bedroom.

Of course Serena never took part in any of our conversations, and no doubt this was a vital element of her appeal. My friends and I belonged to that generation of men who

had been forced in early middle age, by sexual necessity if nothing else, to a weary acceptance of militant feminism, and there was something about Serena's passive beauty, her immaculate but old-fashioned make-up, and above all her unbroken silence that spelled out a deep and pleasing deference to our wounded masculinity. In all senses, Serena was the kind of woman that men invent.

But this was before I realized the true nature of Serena's character, and the more ambiguous role she was to play in my life, from which I wait now with so much longing to be freed.

Appropriately enough - though the irony then escaped me completely—I first saw Serena Cockayne at the World's End, in that area at the lower end of the King's Road now occupied by a cluster of high-rise apartment blocks but which only three years ago was still an enclave of second-rate antique shops, scruffy boutiques and nineteenth-century terrace housing over-ripe for redevelopment. Pausing on my way home from the office by a small curio shop announcing its closing-down sale, I peered through the sulphur-stained windows at the few remnants on display. Almost everything had gone, except for a clutch of ragged Victorian umbrellas collapsed in the corner like a decaying witch and an ancient set of stuffed elephant's feet. These dozen or so dusty monoliths had a special poignancy, all that remained of some solitary herd slaughtered for its ivory a century earlier. I visualized them displayed secretly around my sitting-room, filling the air with their invisible but dignified presences.

Inside the shop a young woman attendant sat behind a marquetry desk, watching me with her head tilted to one side as if calculating in a patient way how serious a customer I might be. This unprofessional pose, and her total lack of response as I entered the shop, ought to have warned

me off, but already I had been struck by the young woman's unusual appearance.

What I first noticed, transforming the dingy interior of the shop, was the magnificence of her brocaded gown, far beyond the means of a sales girl at this dowdy end of the King's Road. Against a lustrous blue field, a cerulean of almost Pacific deepness, the gold and silver patterning rose from the floor at her feet, so rich that I almost expected the gown to surge up and engulf her. By comparison, her demure head and shoulders, white bust discreetly revealed by the low bodice, emerged with an extraordinary serenity from this resplendent sea, like those of a tamed and domestic Aphrodite seated calmly astride Poseidon. Although barely beyond her teens, her hair had been dressed in a deliberately unfashionable style, as if lovingly assembled by an elderly devotee of twenties' film magazines. Within this blonde helmet her features had been rouged and powdered with the same lavish care, eyebrows plucked and hairline raised, without any sense of pastiche or mock nostalgia, perhaps by an eccentric mother still dreaming of Valentino.

Her small hands rested on her lap, apparently clasped together but in fact separated by a narrow interval, a stylized pose that suggested she was trying to hold to her some moment of time that might otherwise slip away. On her mouth hung a faint smile, at once pensive and reassuring, as if she had resigned herself in the most adult way to the vanishing world of this moribund curio shop.

'I'm sorry to see you're closing down,' I remarked to her. 'That set of elephant's feet in the window... there's something rather touching about them.'

She made no reply. Her hands remained clasped their millimetres apart, and her eyes stared in their trance-like way at the door I had closed behind me. She was sitting on a peculiarly designed chair, a three-legged contraption of varnished teak that was part stand and part artist's easel.

Realizing that it was some sort of surgical device and that

she was probably a cripple - hence the elaborate make-up and frozen posture - I bent down to speak to her again.

Then I saw the brass plaque fastened to the apex of the teak tripod on which she sat.

SERENA COCKAYNE

Attached to the plaque was a dusty price ticket. '£250'.

In retrospect, it is curious that it took me so long to realize that I was looking, not at a real young woman, but at an elaborate manikin, a masterpiece of the doll-maker's art produced by a remarkable virtuoso. This at last made sense of her Edwardian gown and antique wig, the twenties' cosmetics and facial expression. None the less, the resemblance to a real woman was uncanny. The slightly bowed contours of the shoulders, the too-pearly and unblemished skin, the few strands of hair at the nape of the neck that had escaped the wig-maker's attentions, the uncanny delicacy with which the nostrils, ears and lips had been modelled - almost by an act of sexual love - together these represented a *tour de force* so breath-taking that it all but concealed the subtle wit of the whole enterprise. Already I was thinking of the impact this life-size replica of themselves would have on the wives of my friends when I first introduced them to it.

A curtain behind me was drawn back. The owner of the shop, an adroit young homosexual, came forward with a white cat in his arms, chin raised at the sound of my delighted laughter. Already I had taken out my cheque-book and had scribbled my signature with a flourish befitting the occasion.

So I carried Serena Cockayne to a taxi and brought her home to live with me. Looking back at that first summer we spent together I remember it as a time of perpetual good humour, in which almost every aspect of my life was en-

riched by Serena's presence. Decorous and unobtrusive, she touched everything around me with the most delirious ironies. Sitting quietly by the fireplace in my study as I read, presiding like the mistress of the house over the dining-table, her placid smile and serene gaze illuminated the air.

Not one of my friends failed to be taken in by the illusion, and all complimented me on bringing off such a coup. Their wives, of course, regarded Serena with suspicion, and clearly considered her to be part of some adolescent or sexist prank. However, I kept a straight face, and within a few months her presence in my house was taken for granted by all of us.

Indeed, by the autumn she was so much a part of my life that I often failed to notice her at all. Soon after her arrival I had discarded the heavy teak stand and substituted a small gilt chair on which I could carry her comfortably from room to room. Serena was remarkably light. Her inventor - this unknown genius of the doll-maker's art - had clearly inserted a substantial armature, for her posture, like her expression, never changed. Nowhere was there any indication of her date or place of manufacture, but from the scuffed patent-leather shoes that sometimes protruded below the brocade gown I guessed that she had been assembled some twenty years earlier, possibly as an actress's double during the great days of the post-war film industry. By the time I returned to the shop to inquire about her previous owners the entire World's End had been reduced to rubble.

One Sunday evening in November I learned rather more about Serena Cockayne. After working all afternoon in the study I looked up from my desk to see her sitting in the corner with her back to me. Distracted by a professional problem, I had left her there after lunch without thinking, and there was something rather melancholy about her rounded shoulders and inclined head, almost as if she had fallen from favour.

As I turned her towards me I noticed a small blemish on her left shoulder, perhaps a fleck of plaster from the ceiling. I tried to brush it away, but the discoloration remained. It occurred to me that the synthetic skin, probably made from some early experimental plastic, might have begun to deteriorate. Switching on a table-lamp, I examined Serena's shoulders more carefully.

Seen against the dark background of the study, the down-like nimbus that covered Serena's skin confirmed all my admiration of her maker's genius. Here and there a barely detectable unevenness, the thinnest mottling to suggest a surface capillary, rooted the illusion in the firmest realism. I had always assumed that this masterpiece of imitation flesh extended no more than two inches or so below the shoulder line of the gown, and that the rest of Serena's body consisted of wood and papier mâché.

Looking down at the angular planes of her shoulder blades, at the modest curvatures of her well-concealed breasts, I gave way to a sudden and wholly unprurient impulse. Standing behind her, I took the silver zip in my fingers and with a single movement lowered it to Serena's waist.

As I gazed at the unbroken expanse of white skin that extended to a pair of plump hips and the unmistakable hemispheres of her buttocks I realized that the manikin before me was that of a complete woman, and that its creator had lavished as much skill and art on those never-to-be-seen portions of her anatomy as on the visible ones.

The zip had stuck at the lower terminus of its oxidized track. There was something offensive about my struggling with the loosened dress of this half-naked woman. My fingers touched the skin in the small of her back, removing the dust that had accumulated over the years.

Running diagonally from spine to hip was the hairline of a substantial scar. I took it for granted that this marked an essential vent required in the construction of these models.

But the rows of opposing stitch-marks were all too obvious. I stood up, and for a few moments watched this partly disrobed woman with her inclined head and clasped hands, gazing placidly at the fireplace.

Careful not to damage her, I loosened the bodice of the gown. The upper curvatures of her breasts appeared, indented by the shoulder straps. Then I saw, an inch above the still-concealed left nipple, a large black mole.

I zipped up the gown and straightened it gently on her shoulders. Kneeling on the carpet in front of her, I looked closely into Serena's face, seeing the faint fissures at the apex of her mouth, the minute veins in her cheek, a childhood scar below her chin. A curious sense of revulsion and excitement came over me, as if I had taken part in a cannibalistic activity.

I knew now that the person seated on her gilt chair was no manikin but a once living woman, her peerless skin mounted and forever preserved by a master, not of the doll-maker's, but of the taxidermist's art.

At that moment I fell deeply in love with Serena Cockayne.

During the next month my infatuation with Serena had all the intensity of which a middle-aged man is capable. I abandoned my office, leaving the staff to cope for themselves, and spent all my time with Serena, tending her like the most dutiful lover. At huge expense I had a complex air-conditioning system installed in my house, of a type only employed in art museums. In the past I had moved Serena from warm room to cool without a thought to her complexion, assuming it to be made of some insensitive plastic, but I now carefully regulated the temperature and humidity, determined to preserve her forever. I rearranged the furniture throughout the house to avoid bruising her arms and shoulders as I carried her from floor to floor. In the mornings I would wake eagerly to find her at the foot of my bed,

then seat her by me at the breakfast table. All day she stayed within my reach, smiling at me with an expression that almost convinced me she responded to my feelings.

My social life I gave up altogether, discontinuing my dinner parties and seeing few friends. One or two callers I admitted, but only to allay their suspicions. During our brief and meaningless conversations I would watch Serena across the sitting-room with all the excitement that an illicit affair can produce.

Christmas we celebrated alone. Given Serena's youth - at times when I caught her gazing across the room after some stray thought she seemed little more than a child - I decided to decorate the house for her in the traditional style, with a spangled tree, holly, streamers and mistletoe. Gradually I transformed the rooms into a series of arbours, from which she presided over our festivities like the madonna of a procession of altar-pieces.

At midnight on Christmas Eve I placed her in the centre of the sitting-room, and laid my presents at her feet. For a moment her hands seemed almost to touch, as if applauding my efforts. Bending below the mistletoe above her head, I brought my lips to within that same distance from hers that separated her hands.

To all this care and devotion Serena responded like a bride. Her slim face, once so naive with its tentative smile, relaxed into the contented pose of a fulfilled young wife. After the New Year I decided to bring us out into the world again, and held the first of a few small dinner parties. My friends were glad to see us in such good humour, accepting Serena as one of themselves. I returned to my office and worked happily through the day until I set off for home, where Serena would unfailingly wait for me with the warm regard of a proud and devoted wife.

While dressing for one of these dinner parties it occurred to me that Serena alone of us was unable to change her costume. Unhappily the first signs of an excess domesticity

were beginning to show themselves in a slight casualness of her personal grooming. The once elaborate coiffure had become unsettled, and the stray blonde hairs all too obviously caught the light. In the same way the immaculate make-up of her face now showed the first signs of wear and tear.

Thinking it over, I decided to call on the services of a nearby hairdressing and beauty salon. When I telephoned them they agreed instantly to send a member of their staff to my house.

And here my troubles began. The one emotion of which I had never suspected myself, and which I had never before felt for any human being, coiled around my heart.

The young man who arrived, bringing with him a miniature pantechnicon of equipment, seemed harmless enough. Although with a swarthy and powerful physique, there was something effeminate] about him, and there was clearly no danger in leaving him alone with Serena.

For all his self-assurance, he seemed surprised when I first introduced him to Serena, his suave 'Good morning, madam...' ending in a mumble. Shivering in the cool air, he gazed at her open-mouthed, clearly stunned by her beauty and calm repose. I left him to get on with it and spent the next hour working in my study, distracted now and then by a few bars from *The Barber of Seville* and *My Fair Lady* that sounded down the stairs. When he had finished I inspected his work, delighted to see that he had restored every breath of her first glory to Serena. The over-domesticated housewife had vanished, and in her place was the naive Aphrodite I had first seen in the curio shop six months earlier.

So pleased was I that I decided to call on the young man's services again, and his visits became a weekly event. Thanks to his attentions, and my own devotion to the temperature

and humidity controls, Serena's complexion regained all its perfection. Even my guests commented on the remarkable bloom of her appearance. Deeply contented, I looked forward to the coming spring and the celebration of our first anniversary.

Six weeks later, while the young hairdresser was at work in Serena's sitting-room upstairs, I happened to return to my bedroom to collect a book. I could clearly hear the young man's voice, at a low pitch as if communicating some private message. I glanced through the open door. He was kneeling in front of Serena, his back to me, cosmetic pallet in one hand and paint stick in the other, gesticulating with them in a playful and mock-comical manner. Illuminated by his handiwork, Serena gazed straight into his face, her freshly painted lips almost moist with anticipation. Unmistakably, the young man was murmuring a discreet and private endearment.

During the following days I felt that my head had been seized by some kind of vice. As I tried helplessly to master the pain of that first intense jealousy, I was forced to realize that the young man was Serena's age, and that she would always have more in common with him than with me. Superficially our life continued as before — we sat together in the study when I returned from the office, I would carry Serena into the sitting-room when my friends called, and she would join us at the dining table - but I was aware that a formal note had entered our relationship. No more did Serena pass the night in my bedroom, and I noticed that for all her calm smile I no longer caught her eye as I used to.

Despite my mounting suspicions, the young hairdresser continued to make his calls. Whatever crisis through which Serena and I were passing, I was determined not to give in. During the long hour of his visits I had to fight through every second to prevent myself from rushing up the stair-

case. From the hall I could often hear his voice murmuring in that insinuating tone, louder now as if he were trying to incite me. When he left I could sense his contempt.

It would take me an hour before I could walk slowly up the stairs to Serena's room. Her extraordinary beauty, relit by the taper of the young man's flattery, made my anger all the greater. Unable to speak, I would pace around her like a doomed husband, aware of the subtle changes to Serena's face. Although in every way more youthful, reminding me painfully of the thirty years that separated us, her expression after each visit became fractionally less naive, like that of a young wife contemplating her first affair. A sophisticated wave now modulated the curve of blonde hair that crossed her right temple. Her lips were slimmer, her mouth stronger and more mature.

Inevitably I began an affair with another woman, the separated wife of a close friend, but I made certain that Serena knew nothing of this or of the other infidelities that followed during the next weeks. Also, pathetically, I began to drink, and in the afternoons would sit around drunkenly in my friends' empty apartments, holding long imaginary conversations with Serena in which I was both abject and aggressive. At home I began to play the dictatorial husband, leaving her all evening in her room upstairs and moodily refusing to talk to her at the dining table. All the while, through paralysed eyes I watched the young hairdresser come and go, an insolent suitor whistling as he sauntered up the stairs.

After the last of his visits came the weary denouement. I had spent the afternoon drinking alone in a deserted restaurant, watched by the patient staff. In the taxi home I had a sudden confused revelation about Serena and myself. I realized that our breakdown had been entirely my fault, that my jealousy of her harmless flirtation with the young man had magnified everything to absurd proportions.

Released from weeks of agony by this decision, I paid off

the taxi at my door, let myself into the cool air of the house and rushed upstairs. Dishevelled but happy, I walked towards Serena as she sat quietly in the centre of her sitting-room ready to embrace her and forgive us both.

Then I noticed that for all her immaculate make-up and extravagant hair her brocade gown hung strangely from her shoulders. The right strap exposed the whole of her collarbone, and the bodice had slipped forward as if someone had been fumbling with her breast. Her smile still hovered on her lips, as if calling on me in the most kindly way to resign myself to the realities of adult life.

Angrily I stepped forward and slapped her face.

How I regret that senseless spasm. In the two years that have passed I have had ample time to reflect on the dangers of an over-hasty catharsis. Serena and I still live together, but all is over between us. She sits on her gilt chair by the sitting-room fireplace and joins me at the dining table when I entertain my friends. But the outward show of our relationship is nothing more than the dried husk from which the body of feeling has vanished.

At first, after that blow to her face, little seemed to change. I remember standing in that room upstairs with my bruised hand. I calmed myself, brushed the face powder from my knuckles and decided to review my life. From then on I stopped drinking and went to the office each day, devoting myself to my work.

For Serena, however, the incident marked the first stage in what proved to be a decisive transformation. Within a few days I realized that she had lost something of her bloom. Her face became drawn, her nose more protuberant. The corner of her mouth where I had struck her soon became puffy and took on a kind of ironic downward twist. In the absence of the young hairdresser - whom I had sacked within ten minutes of striking her - Serena's decline

seemed to accelerate. The elaborate coiffure which the young man had foisted upon her soon became undone, the straggling hairs falling on her shoulders.

By the end of our second year together Serena Cockayne had aged a full decade. At times, looking at her hunched on her gilt chair in the still brilliant gown, I almost believed that she had set out to catch and overtake me as part of some complex scheme of revenge. Her posture had slumped, and her rounded shoulders gave her the premature stoop of an old woman. With her unfocussed smile and straggling hair she often reminded me of a tired and middle-aged spinster. Her hands had at last come together, clasped in a protective and wistful way.

Recently a far more disquieting development has taken place. Three years after our first meeting Serena entered upon a radically new stage of deterioration. As a result of some inherent spinal weakness, perhaps associated with the operation whose scars cross the small of her back, Serena's posture has altered. In the past she leaned forward slightly, but three days ago I found that she had slumped back in her chair. She sits there now in a stiff and awkward way, surveying the world with a critical and unbalanced eye, like some dotted faded beauty. One eyelid has partly closed, and gives her ashen face an almost cadaverous look. Her hands have continued on their slow collision, and have begun to twist upon each other, rotating to produce a deformed parody of themselves that will soon become an obscene gesture.

Above all, it is her smile that terrifies me. The sight of it has unsettled my entire life, but I find it impossible to move my eyes from it. As her face has sagged, the smile has become wider and even more askew. Although it has taken two years to achieve its full effect, that blow to her mouth has turned it into a reproachful grimace. There is something knowing and implacable about Serena's smile. As I look at it now across the study it seems to contain a complete under-

standing of my character, a judgment unknown to me from, which I can never escape.

Each day the smile creeps a little further across her face. Its progress is erratic, revealing aspects of her contempt for me that leave me numb and speechless. It is cold here, as the low temperature helps to preserve Serena. By turning on the heating system I could probably dispose of her in a few weeks, but this I can never do. That smirk of hers alone prevents me. Besides, I am completely bound to Serena.

Fortunately, Serena is now ageing faster than I am. Helplessly watching her smile, my overcoat around my shoulders, I wait for her to die and set me free.