A FAMILY MAN

V.S. Pritchett

V.S. Pritchett *(1900–1997) was the best short story writer in English during the twentieth century. There should be no argument about this. He was born in 1900 and died ninety-seven years later having written two brilliant memoirs –* ***A Cab at the Door*** *and* ***Midnight Oil*** *– and several excellent biographies, including Chekhov. Chatto & Windus published his Collected Short Stories and Collected Essays in 1991, and it says something about our culture that neither are still in print.*

Late in the afternoon, when she had given him up and had even changed out of her pink dress into her smock and jeans and was working once more at her bench, the doorbell rang. William had come, after all. It was in the nature of their love affair that his visits were fitful: he had a wife and children. To show that she understood the situation, even found the curious satisfaction of reverie in his absences that lately had lasted several weeks, Berenice dawdled yawning to the door. As she slipped off the chain, she called back into the empty flat, "It's all right, Father. I'll answer it.'

William had told her to do this because she was a woman living on her own: the call would show strangers that there was a man there to defend her. Berenice's voice was mocking, for she thought his idea possessive and ridiculous; not only that, she had been brought up by Quakers and thought it wrong to tell or act a lie. Sometimes, when she opened the door to him, she would say, "Well! Mr Cork', to remind him he was a married man. He had the kind of shadowed handsomeness that easily gleams with guilt, and for her this gave their affair its piquancy.

But now – when she opened the door – no William, and the yawn, its hopes and its irony, died on her mouth. A very large woman, taller than herself, filled the doorway from top to bottom, an enormous blob of pink jersey and green skirt, the jersey low and loose at the neck, a face and body inflated to the point of speechlessness. She even seemed to be asleep with her large blue eyes open.

"Yes?" said Berenice.

The woman woke up and looked unbelievingly at Berenice's feet, which were bare, for she liked to go about barefoot at home, and said, "Is this Miss Foster's place?"

Berenice was offended by the word "place". "This is Miss Foster's residence. I am she."

"Ah," said the woman, babyish no longer but sugary. "I was given your address at the College. You teach at the College, I believe? I've come about the repair."

"A repair? I make jewellery," said Berenice. "I do not do repairs."

“They told me at the College you were repairing my husband’s flute. I am Mrs Cork.”

Berenice’s heart stopped. Her wrist went weak and her hand drooped on the door handle, and a spurt of icy air shot up her body to her face and then turned to boiling heat as it shot back again. Her head suddenly filled with chattering voices saying, Oh, God. How frightful! William, you didn’t tell her? Now, what are you, you, you going to do. And the word “Do, do” clattered on in her head.

“Cork?” said Berenice. “Flute?”

“Florence Cork,” said the woman firmly, all sleepy sweetness gone.

“Oh, yes. I am sorry. Mrs Cork. Of course, yes. Oh, do come in. I’m so sorry. We haven’t met, how very nice to meet you. William’s – Mr Cork’s – flute! His flute. Yes, I remember. How d’you do? How is he? He hasn’t been to the College for months. Have you seen him lately – how silly, of course you have. Did you have a lovely holiday? Did the children enjoy it? I would have posted it, only I didn’t know your address. Come in, please, come in.”

“In here?” said Mrs Cork and marched into the front room where Berenice worked. Here, in the direct glare of Berenice’s working lamp, Florence Cork looked even larger and even pregnant. She seemed to occupy the whole of the room as she stood in it, memorizing everything – the bench, the pots of paintbrushes, the large designs pinned to the wall, the rolls of paper, the sofa covered with papers and letters and sewing, the pink dress which Berenice had thrown over a chair. She seemed to be consuming it all, drinking all the air.

But here, in the disorder of which she was very vain, which indeed fascinated her, and represented her talent, her independence, a girl’s right to a life of her own, and above all, being barefooted, helped Berenice recover her breath.

“It is such a pleasure to meet you. Mr Cork has often spoken of you to us at the College. We’re quite a family there. Please sit. I’ll move the dress. I was mending it.”

But Mrs Cork did not sit down. She gave a sudden lurch towards the bench, and seeing her husband’s flute there propped against the wall, she grabbed it and swung it above her head as if it were a weapon.

“Yes,” said Berenice, who was thinking, Oh, dear, the woman’s drunk, “I was working on it only this morning. I had never seen a flute like that before. Such a beautiful silver scroll. I gather it’s very old, a German one, a presentation piece given to Mr Cork’s father. I believe he played in a famous orchestra – where was it? – Bayreuth or Berlin? You never see a scroll like that in England, not a delicate silver scroll like that. It seems to have been dropped somewhere or have had a blow. Mr Cork told me he had played it in an orchestra himself once, Covent Garden or somewhere …”

She watched Mrs Cork flourish the flute in the air.

“A blow,” cried Mrs Cork, now in a rich voice. “I’ll say it did. I threw it at him.”

And then she lowered her arm and stood swaying on her legs as she confronted Berenice and said, “Where is he?”

“Who?” said Berenice in a fright.

“My husband!” Mrs Cork shouted. “Don’t try and soft-soap me with all that twaddle. Playing in an orchestra! Is that what he has been stuffing you up with? I know what you and he are up to. He comes every Thursday. He’s been here since half past two. I know. I have had this place watched.”

She swung round to the closed door of Berenice’s bedroom. “What’s in there?” she shouted and advanced to it.

“Mrs Cork,” said Berenice as calmly as she could. “Please stop shouting. I know nothing about your husband. I don’t know what you are talking about.” And she placed herself before the door of the room. “And please stop shouting. That is my father’s room.” And, excited by Mrs Cork’s accusation, she said, “He is a very old man and he is not well. He is asleep in there.”

“In there?” said Mrs Cork.

“Yes, in there.”

“And what about the other rooms? Who lives upstairs?”

“There are no other rooms,” said Berenice. “I live here with my father. Upstairs? Some new people have moved in.”

Berenice was astonished by these words of hers, for she was a truthful young woman and was astonished, even excited, by a lie so vast. It seemed to glitter in the air as she spoke it.

Mrs Cork was checked. She flopped down on the chair on which Berenice had put her dress.

“My dress, if you please,” said Berenice and pulled it away.

“If you don’t do it here,” said Mrs Cork, quietening and with tears in her eyes, “you do it somewhere else.”

“I don’t know anything about your husband. I only see him at the College like the other teachers. I don’t know anything about him. If you will give me the flute, I will pack it up for you and I must ask you to go.”

“You can’t deceive me. I know everything. You think because you are young you can do what you like,” Mrs Cork muttered to herself and began rummaging in her handbag.

For Berenice one of the attractions of William was that their meetings were erratic. The affair was like a game: she liked surprise above all. In the intervals when he was not there, the game continued for her. She liked imagining what he and his family were doing. She saw them as all glued together as if in some enduring and absurd photograph, perhaps sitting in their suburban garden, or standing beside a motorcar, always in the sun, but William himself, dark-faced and busy in his gravity, a step or two back from them.

“Is your wife beautiful?” she asked him once when they were in bed.

William in his slow serious way took a long time to answer. He said at last, “Very beautiful.”

This had made Berenice feel exceedingly beautiful herself. She saw his wife as a raven-haired, dark-eyed woman and longed to meet her. The more she imagined her, the more she felt for her, the more she saw eye to eye with her in the pleasant busy middle ground of womanish feelings and moods, for as a woman living alone she felt a firm loyalty to her sex. During this last summer when the family were on holiday she had seen them glued together again as they sat with dozens of other families in the aeroplane that was taking them abroad, so that it seemed to her that the London sky was rumbling day after day, night after night, with matrimony thirty thousand feet above the city, the countryside, the sea and its beaches where she imagined the legs of their children running across the sand, William flushed with his responsibilities, his wife turning to brown her back in the sun. Berenice was often out and about with her many friends, most of whom were married. She loved the look of harassed contentment, even the tired faces of the husbands, the alert looks of their spirited wives. Among the married she felt her singularity. She listened to their endearments and to their bickerings. She played with their children, who ran at once to her. She could not bear the young men who approached her, talking about themselves all the time, flashing with the slapdash egotism of young men trying to bring her peculiarity to an end. Among families she felt herself to be strange and necessary – a necessary secret. When William had said his wife was beautiful, she felt so beautiful herself that her bones seemed to turn to water.

But now the real Florence sat rummaging in her bag before her, this balloon-like giant, first babyish and then shouting accusations, the dreamt-of Florence vanished. This real Florence seemed unreal and incredible. And William himself changed. His good looks began to look commonplace and shady: his seriousness became furtive, his praise of her calculating. He was shorter than his wife, his face now looked hang-dog, and she saw him dragging his feet as obediently he followed her. She resented that this woman had made her tell a lie, strangely intoxicating though it was to do so, and had made her feel as ugly as his wife was. For she must be, if Florence was what he called “beautiful”. And not only ugly, but pathetic and without dignity.

Berenice watched warily as the woman took a letter from her handbag.

“Then what is this necklace?” she said, blowing herself out again.

“What necklace is this?” said Berenice.

“Read it. You wrote it.”

Berenice smiled with astonishment: she knew she needed no longer defend herself. She prided herself on fastidiousness: she had never in her life written a letter to a lover – it would be like giving something of herself away, it would be almost an indecency. She certainly felt it to be very wrong to read anyone else’s letters, as Mrs Cork pushed the letter at her. Berenice took it in two fingers, glanced and turned it over to see the name of the writer.

“This is not my writing,” she said. The hand was sprawling; her own was scratchy and small. “Who is Bunny? Who is Rosie?”

Mrs Cork snatched the letter and read in a booming voice that made the words ridiculous: “‘I am longing for the necklace. Tell that girl to hurry up. Do bring it next time. And darling, don’t forget the flute!!! Rosie.’ What do you mean, who is Bunny?” Mrs Cork said. “You know very well. Bunny is my husband.”

Berenice turned away and pointed to a small poster that was pinned to the wall. It contained a photograph of a necklace and three brooches she had shown at an exhibition in a very fashionable shop known for selling modern jewellery. At the bottom of the poster, elegantly printed, were the words

Created by Berenice

Berenice read the words aloud, reciting them as if they were a line from a poem: “My name is Berenice,” she said.

It was strange to be speaking the truth. And it suddenly seemed to her, as she recited the words, that really William had never been to her flat, that he had never been her lover, and had never played his silly flute there, that indeed he was the most boring man at the College and that a chasm separated her from this woman, whom jealousy had made so ugly.

Mrs Cork was still swelling with unbelief, but as she studied the poster, despair settled on her face. “I found it in his pocket,” she said helplessly.

“We all make mistakes, Mrs Cork,” Berenice said coldly across the chasm. And then, to be generous in victory, she said, “Let me see the letter again.”

Mrs Cork gave her the letter and Berenice read it and at the word “flute” a doubt came into her head. Her hand began to tremble and quickly she gave the letter back. “Who gave you my address – I mean, at the College?” Berenice accused. “There is a rule that no addresses are given. Or telephone numbers.”

“The girl,” said Mrs Cork, defending herself.

“Which girl? At Enquiries?”

“She fetched someone.”

“Who was it?” said Berenice.

“I don’t know. It began with a W, I think,” said Mrs Cork.

“Wheeler?” said Berenice. “There is a Mr Wheeler.”

“No, it wasn’t a man. It was a young woman. With a W – Glowitz.”

“That begins with a G,” said Berenice.

“No,” said Mrs Cork out of her muddle, now afraid of Berenice. “Glowitz was the name.”

“Glowitz,” said Berenice, unbelieving. “Rosie Glowitz. She’s not young.”

“I didn’t notice,” said Mrs Cork. “Is her name Rosie?”

Berenice felt giddy and cold. The chasm between herself and Mrs Cork closed up.

“Yes,” said Berenice and sat on the sofa, pushing letters and papers away from herself. She felt sick. “Did you show her the letter?” she said.

“No,” said Mrs Cork, looking masterful again for a moment. “She told me you were repairing the flute.”

“Please go,” Berenice wanted to say but she could not get her breath to say it. “You have been deceived. You are accusing the wrong person. I thought your husband’s name was William. He never called himself Bunny. We all call him William at the College. Rosie Glowitz wrote this letter.” But that sentence, “Bring the flute”, was too much – she was suddenly on the side of this angry woman, she wished she could shout and break out into rage. She wanted to grab the flute that lay on Mrs Cork’s lap and throw it at the wall and smash it.

“I apologize, Miss Foster,” said Mrs Cork in a surly voice. The glister of tears in her eyes, the dampness on her face, dried. “I believe you. I have been worried out of my mind – you will understand.”

Berenice’s beauty had drained away. The behaviour of one or two of her lovers had always seemed self-satisfied to her, but William, the most unlikely one, was the oddest. He would not stay in bed and gossip but he was soon out staring at the garden, looking older, as if he were travelling back into his life: then, hardly saying anything, he dressed, turning to stare at the garden again as his head came out of his shirt or he put a leg into his trousers, in a manner that

made her think he had completely forgotten. Then he would go into her front room, bring back the flute and go out to the garden seat and play it. She had done a cruel caricature of him once because he looked so comical, his long lip drawn down at the mouthpiece, his eyes lowered as the thin high notes, so sad and lascivious, seemed to curl away like wisps of smoke into the trees. Sometimes she laughed, sometimes she smiled, sometimes she was touched, sometimes angry and bewildered. One proud satisfaction was that the people upstairs had complained.

She was tempted, now that she and this clumsy woman were at one, to say to her, "Aren't men extraordinary! Is this what he does at home, does he rush out to your garden, bold as brass, to play that silly thing?" And then she was scornful. "To think of him going round to Rosie Glowitz's and half the gardens of London doing this!"

But she could not say this, of course. And so she looked at poor Mrs Cork with triumphant sympathy. She longed to break Rosie Glowitz's neck and to think of some transcendent appeasing lie which would make Mrs Cork happy again, but the clumsy woman went on making everything worse by asking to be forgiven. She said "I am truly sorry" and "When I saw your work in the shop I wanted to meet you. That is really why I came. My husband has often spoken of it."

Well, at least, Berenice thought, she can tell a lie too. Suppose I gave her everything I've got, she thought. Anything to get her to go. Berenice looked at the drawer of her bench, which was filled with beads and pieces of polished stone and crystal. She felt like getting handfuls of it and pouring it all on Mrs Cork's lap.

"Do you work only in silver?" said Mrs Cork, dabbing her eyes.

"I am," said Berenice, "working on something now."

And even as she said it, because of Mrs Cork's overwhelming presence, the great appeasing lie came out of her, before she could stop herself. "A present," she said. "Actually," she said, "we all got together at the College. A present for Rosie Glowitz. She's getting married again. I expect that is what the letter is about. Mr Cork arranged it. He is very kind and thoughtful."

She heard herself say this with wonder. Her other lies had glittered, but this one had the beauty of a newly discovered truth.

"You mean Bunny's collecting the money?" said Mrs Cork.

"Yes," said Berenice.

A great laugh came out of Florence Cork. "The big spender," she said, laughing. "Collecting other people's money. He hasn't spent a penny on us for thirty years. And you're all giving this to that woman I talked to who has been married twice? Two wedding presents!"

Mrs Cork sighed.

“You fools. Some women get away with it, I don’t know why,” said Mrs Cork, still laughing. “But not with my Bunny,” she said proudly and as if with alarming meaning. “He doesn’t say much. He’s deep, is my Bunny!”

“Would you like a cup of tea?” said Berenice politely, hoping she would say no and go.

“I think I will,” Mrs Cork said comfortably. “I’m so glad I came to see you. And,” she added, glancing at the closed door, “what about your father? I expect he could do with a cup.”

Mrs Cork now seemed wide awake and it was Berenice who felt dazed, drunkish, and sleepy.

“I’ll go and see,” she said.

In the kitchen she recovered and came back trying to laugh, saying, “He must have gone for his little walk in the afternoon, on the quiet.”

“You have to keep an eye on them at that age,” said Mrs Cork.

They sat talking and Mrs Cork said, “Fancy Mrs Glowitz getting married again.” And then absently, “I cannot understand why she says ‘Bring the flute.’”

“Well,” said Berenice agreeably, “he played it at the College party.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Cork. “But at a wedding, it’s a bit pushy. You wouldn’t think it of my Bunny, but he is pushing.”

They drank their tea and then Mrs Cork left. Berenice felt an enormous kiss on her face and Mrs Cork said, “Don’t be jealous of Mrs Glowitz, dear. You’ll get your turn,” as she went.

Berenice put the chain on the door and went to her bedroom and lay on the bed.

How awful married people are, she thought. So public, sprawling over everyone and everything, always lying to themselves and forcing you to lie to them. She got up and looked bitterly at the empty chair under the tree at first and then she laughed at it and went off to have a bath so as to wash all those lies off her truthful body. Afterwards she rang up a couple called Brewster who told her to come round. She loved the Brewsters, so perfectly conceited as they were, in the burdens they bore. She talked her head off. The children stared at her.

“She’s getting old. She ought to get married,” Mrs Brewster said. “I wish she wouldn’t swoosh her hair around like that. She’d look better if she put it up.”