the apartment, as he had promised himself; even in the first few moments it seemed to him natural and normal that he should be where he was. He simply turned to his desk, pulled the crumpled yellow sheet from his pocket and laid it down where it had been, smoothing it out; then he absently laid a pencil across it to weight it down. He shook his head, wonderingly, and turned to walk towards the closet.

There he got out his topcoat and hat and, without waiting to put them on, opened the front door and stepped out, to go and find his wife. He turned to pull the door closed and the warm air from the hall rushed through the narrow opening again. As he saw the yellow paper, the pencil flying, scooped off the desk and, unimpeded by the glassless window, sail out into the night and out of his life, Tom Benecke burst into laughter and then closed the door behind him.

Aunt Muriel was sentimental, tenderhearted, generous to a fault. True, she could become just a trifle impatient. But her little hobby was so perfectly *harmless, unless the model began to squirm.*

The Perfectionist

BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR

I HAD nightmares about it for several years afterward – the kind where something is on your heels, and you make desperate efforts, each more futile than the last, to escape it – and always felt bad about them when I woke up. I never could decide whether I was justified in having bad dreams at all.

It began when I went to live with Aunt Muriel in 1933. I hadn't had a job for six months when I got the letter of invitation from her, and I hadn't eaten much at all for two weeks.

Aunt Muriel wasn't exactly my aunt, to begin with. She was a sort of great-aunt, once removed, on my mother's side, and I hadn't seen her since I was a beady-eyed kid in knee breeches.

The invitation might have surprised me – though she explained in the letter that she was an old woman, getting lonely, and felt the need of some

kindred face near her – only I was too hungry to wonder.

There was a money order in the letter, and a ticket to Downie, where she lived. After I paid the back room rent with the money order and got myself a meal with double portions of everything, I had two dollars and thirteen cents left. I caught the afternoon train to Downie, and a little before noon the next day I was walking up the steps to Aunt Muriel's house.

Aunt Muriel herself met me at the door. She seemed glad to see me. She wrinkled up her mouth in a smile of welcome.

"So *good* of you to come, Charles!" she said. "I really can't thank you enough! So very *good* of you!" She ran to italics.

I was beginning to warm up to the old girl. She didn't look any older to me than she had fifteen years before. She'd been held together by whalebone and net collars then, and she still was. I put the more flattering portion of this idea into words.

"Oh, Charles," she chirped, "you *flatterer!*" She gave me another smile and then led me into the hall.

I followed her up the stairs to my room on the second floor front. It had a high ceiling and a tall four-poster bed which should have had curtains around it to cut off the draft. After she left, I put my imitation leather suitcase in the big closet and went into the bath next door to clean up.

Lunch was laid on the dining-room table when

I came down, and a maid, who looked a good deal older than Aunt Muriel, was fluttering in and out with more dishes. With my aunt's encouragement, I ate enough to keep me comatose all afternoon, and then sat back with a cigarette and listened to her talk.

She began by doing a good deal of commiserating with herself on the subject of her age and loneliness, and a good deal of self-congratulation because she was going to have a young kinsman around from now on.

It developed that I was expected to make myself useful in small ways like walking the dog – an unpleasant Pomeranian named Teddy – and taking letters to the mailbox. This was perfectly all right with me, and I told her so.

There was a short hiatus in the conversation. Then, picking Teddy up off the floor where he'd been during the meal, she installed him on her lap and launched out on an account of what she called her *hobby*. In the last year or so she'd taken up drawing and it had become, from what she said, almost an obsession.

Holding Teddy under one arm, she rose and went to the walnut sideboard and returned with a portfolio of drawings for me to look at.

"I do almost all my drawing here in the dining room," she said, "because the light is so good. Tell me, what do you think of *these?*" She handed me fifty or sixty small sheets of drawing paper.

I spread the drawings out on the dining-room

table, among the litter of dishes, and examined them carefully. They were all in pencil, though one or two had been touched up with blotches of water color, and they were all of the same subject, four apples in a low china bowl.

They had been labored over; Aunt Muriel had erased and re-erased until the surface of the paper was gritty and miserable. I racked my brains for something nice to say about them.

"You – unh – you've really caught something of the essence of those apples," I forced out after a moment. "Very creditable."

My aunt smiled. "I'm *so* glad you like them," she replied. "Amy said – the maid, you know – that I was silly to work at them so much, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't *bear* to stop, until they were *perfect.*" She paused, then added, "Do you know, Charles, I had the biggest difficulty!"

"Yes?"

"The apples kept withering! It was dreadful. I put them in the icebox just as soon as I got through for the day, but still they went bad after two or three weeks. It wasn't until Amy thought of *dipping* them in melted wax that they lasted long enough."

"Good idea."

"Yes, wasn't it? But you know, Charles, I've gotten rather *tired* of apples lately. I'd like to try something else. . . . I've been thinking, that little tree out on the lawn would make a good subject."

She went over to the window to show me the tree she meant. I followed her. It was a young sapling, just coming into leaf. My aunt said it was a flowering peach.

"*Don't* you think that would be a good subject, Charles? I believe I'll try it this afternoon while you take Teddy for a little walk."

Amy helped bundle my aunt up in several layers of coats and mufflers, and I carried the stool, the easel, the box of pencils and the paper out into the garden for her.

She was rather fussy about the location of the various items, but I finally got them fixed to her satisfaction. Then, though I'd much rather have had an after-luncheon nap upstairs, I snapped the lead on Teddy's objectionable little collar and started out for a survey of the town of Downie.

I soon realized that Downie was the sort of town whose social life centers around the drugstore, but I managed to kill the next two hours by letting Teddy investigate the lamp posts which caught his fancy.

I expected to find Aunt Muriel on the lawn when I got back, hard at work on her drawing, but she had gone in and the easel and stool were gone, too. I looked around for her, but she wasn't in sight, so I let Teddy climb into his box in the dining room and went upstairs for that belated nap.

After all, I couldn't get to sleep. For some irrelevant reason I kept thinking of all those painstaking drawings of the bowl of apples, and I lay on the bed and counted the spots on the wall until dinner time.

The dinner was good, and plentiful. My aunt, however, was definitely snappish. After Amy had cleared away the dishes and my aunt had restored Teddy to his accustomed place on her lap, I found out what the reason was.

"My drawing went *badly,*" she complained. "The wind kept whipping those leaves around until I couldn't get a *thing* done."

"I didn't notice much wind, Aunt Muriel," I said rather stupidly.

"You just don't notice things!" she flared. "Why, the leaves weren't still a single *minute.*"

I hastened to make amends.

"I can see that a careful craftsman like yourself might be distracted," I placated her. "I'm sorry. I haven't been with artists much."

The reference to herself as an artist pleased my aunt.

"Oh, I'm sure you didn't mean to give offense," she said. "It's just that I can't work with anything unless it's *absolutely* still. That's why I stayed with the apples so long. But I *would* like to draw that tree. I wonder . . ." She went into a brown study which lasted until she had emptied two cups of coffee.

"Charles," she said finally, "I've been thinking. I want you to chop that tree down for me tomorrow and bring it into the house. I'll put it in one of those two-quart milk bottles. That way I can draw it without the wind bothering me."

"But it's such a nice little tree," I protested. "Besides, it won't last long after it's been cut down."

"Oh, it's only a tree," she replied. "I'll get another from the nursery. And about the withering, Amy is wonderful with flowers. She puts aspirin and sugar in the water, and they last forever. Of course, I'll have to work fast. But if I put in two or three hours in the morning and four or five after lunch, I ought to get something done."

As far as she was concerned, the matter was settled.

Immediately after breakfast next morning, Aunt Muriel led me to the tool shed in the rear of the house and gave me a rusty hatchet. She watched with ghoulish interest while I put an edge on the hatchet and then escorted me to the scene of the execution. Feeling like a murderer, I severed the little sapling from its trunk with a couple of chops and then carried it into the house.

I spent the rest of that day, and the next three or four days, working in the garden. I've always liked gardening, and there were some nice things in the place, though they'd been badly neglected. I divided some perennials and fertilized the earth around them with bone meal. Somebody had stocked up the shed with Red Arrow and nicotine sulphate, and I had a good time spraying for aphids and beetles.

Friday morning at breakfast I found a five-dollar bill folded up in my napkin. I raised my eyebrows toward Aunt Muriel. She nodded, yes, it was for

me, while a faint flush washed up in her flabby cheeks.

I folded it neatly and put it in my pocket, feeling a warm glow of gratitude for the old girl. It really was extraordinarily decent of her to provide me with cigarette money. I resolved to go shopping for a little present for her that afternoon.

I found that the resources of Downie were limited. After hesitating between a China fawn and a bowl of fan-tailed goldfish, I decided that the goldfish had more verve. I went in after them, and discovered that Drake, the clerk who sold them to me, had been to California, too, and was practically a friend. I made a date with him for a gabfest the following night.

Aunt Muriel seemed genuinely delighted with the fish. She oohed and ahhed over the sinuosity and filminess of their tails and ended by installing the bowl on the little stand beside her easel.

We began to settle into a routine. In the mornings and early afternoons Aunt Muriel drew in the dining room while I worked in the garden. Later in the day I ran errands, walked Teddy, and undertook a bunch of small repairs around the house.

About the middle of my second week with Aunt Muriel, the peach tree withered beyond any hope. She told me at dinner time, with a tone of one announcing a major disaster, that she had had to throw it out. We held a post mortem on the batch of thirty-two drawings she had been able to complete before the catastrophe.

I picked out one of them as having more plastic value than the rest. She admitted it was her favorite, too, and everything was fine. I could see, though, that she was wondering what she could draw next.

The next day she flitted restlessly through the house looking for something to draw. She kept popping out into the yard where I was transplanting antirrhinum seedlings, to ask my opinion of this or that as a subject for her pencil. I noticed, when I went in to lunch, that she kept watching the goldfish bowl speculatively, but I didn't make anything of it at the time.

That night when I returned from Drake's house she met me at the door and led me to the kitchen with an air of mysterious triumph.

"I was a little nervous about it," she said, with her hand on the handle of the refrigerator door. "But really, it came out ever so well!" She opened the refrigerator, fumbled in its depths a moment, and pulled out the goldfish bowl. Moisture began to condense on its surface. I stared at it stupidly.

"I *knew* the fish would never hold still, and yet I was just *aching* to draw them," she went on. "So I thought and I thought – and really, I *do* think it was a splendid idea, even if it was my own! I just turned the cold control way down, and put the bowl in, and came back in a couple of hours, and it was frozen solid!

"I was afraid the bowl would crack when it began to freeze, but it didn't. See, the ice is perfectly

clear." She picked up a dish towel and rubbed the moisture away until I could see the two goldfish neatly incased in transparent ice. "And now I'll be able to draw them without any trouble. Isn't it *wonderful?*"

I said yes, it was wonderful and went upstairs as soon as I decently could. The incident left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. Not that I held any especial brief for the continued existence of the goldfish, but somehow . . .

She'd seemed to enjoy watching them swimming about so much, and I'd given them to her, and — Oh, hell!

I woke up the next morning feeling faintly unhappy before I could remember what was disturbing me. When I remembered, I decided that I was acting like a champion chump. To let the demise of two goggle-eyed fish upset me was tops in imbecility. Whistling, I went down to breakfast.

After the meal was over, Aunt Muriel got the bowl out of the refrigerator and set to work. I went out in the shed and messed around with the spray gun for a while.

Looking up at the scaling side of the house, I had an idea. Why not repaint it? I asked my aunt and she approved. Accordingly, after some calculation, I brought home a bucket of paint from the store and started sloshing it on.

The work proceeded slowly. Days went by and I got to be a familiar customer at the paint store. Aunt Muriel had finished her eighty-first study of

the frozen goldfish before I'd given the big house its first coat, and the surface was so bad it was going to require at least two.

Spring drifted imperceptibly into early summer, and I was still painting the house and Aunt Muriel was still drawing the goldfish, both of us increasingly absorbed in our tasks.

I was having a pretty good time. Drake had introduced me to his sister, a vivid brunette with just the combination of honey and claws which attracts me most in a woman, and he'd got another girl for himself. We went out together several nights each week. My room in the city with the unpaid rent, the hopeless hunt for a job, and the hunger, seemed a long way off.

I got the painting on the house done the day before Aunt Muriel decided she had exhausted the goldfish. I felt like celebrating. So I mixed soapsuds and nicotine sulphate, stirred up a mess of Red Arrow, and puttered among the neglected plants to my heart's content.

Aunt Muriel handed me the last of the goldfish studies at dinner the next day and I went over the entire group with her. I was beginning to hate these inquests over the anatomy of whatever she'd been drawing, but I bore up under it as well as I could.

When we'd finished, she said, "Charles, I've been wondering. Do you suppose Teddy would be a good subject for me next?"

I looked down at the little animal where he was

lying in her lap and said, yes, I thought he would, but would he hold still enough?

My aunt looked thoughtful.

"I don't know," she said. "I'll have to try to think of something. Perhaps I could give him his dinner right after breakfast. Or . . ." She went off into one of those periods of meditation of hers and, after a while, I left unobtrusively for my date with Virginia, Drake's sister.

We sat in the porch swing in the dark and held hands while the breeze blew the smell of purple lilacs toward us. It was a sweet, sad, sentimental sort of date.

The next day was Saturday. After breakfast my aunt told me to take Teddy for a walk, and to get him thoroughly tired out. She was going to feed him when I got back and she hoped that the exercise, plus the food, might make him comatose enough to serve as a model.

Obediently, we started out. Teddy and I assessed every lamp post in Downie at least twice, and if he wasn't tired out when I brought him back, he should have been. My aunt took the lead from his collar and led him to the pantry where his food dish was waiting, piled high with hamburger.

Teddy ate like a little pig. When he had finished he lay down on the floor of the pantry with a resolute air. My aunt had to carry him into the dining room and deposit him in a sunny spot near her easel. He was asleep and snoring before I left the room.

We had lunch late that day, almost two-thirty in the afternoon, so Aunt Muriel would be able to take full advantage of Teddy's lethargy. I was hungry, and Amy had prepared a really snazzy meal, centering around fried chicken Southern style. As a result, it wasn't until I had finished with the fresh peach mousse that I paid much attention to my aunt. Then I saw that she was looking distracted and morose.

"Didn't the drawing go well this morning, Aunt Muriel?" I asked.

She shook her head until the pendants of her bright earrings jangled violently.

"No, Charles, it did not. Teddy—" She halted, looking very sad.

"What was the matter? Wouldn't he stay asleep?"

If my aunt had been a different type of woman she would have laughed sardonically. As it was, she gave a tiny, delicate snort.

"Oh, he *slept*," she replied. "Yes, he *slept*. But he kept twitching and jumping and panting in his sleep until – well, really, Charles, it was *quite* impossible. Like trying to draw an aspen in a high wind!"

"That's too bad. I guess you'll have to find another subject."

For a moment my aunt did not answer. Looking at her, I thought I caught the glint of tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she replied slowly, "I guess I will . . . I think, Charles, I'll go into town this afternoon and buy a few little things for Teddy."

For a moment something cold slid up and down my spine. Then it was gone, and I was thinking it was nice of the old girl, considering how much store she set by her drawing, not to be annoyed at the little dog. . . .

She came up to my room just before dinner and showed me what she'd bought for Teddy. There was a bright red collar with a little bell, a chocolate-flavored rubber bone, and a box of some weird confection called "Dog Treet," which, according to the label, was a wholesome sweetmeat for pets.

She put the collar on Teddy while I watched and then gave him two of the dark brown lozenges out of the "Dog Treet" box. He ate them with a flurry of little growls, and seemed to relish them. . . .

Sunday morning I sat around, nursing the old bones until my watch told me it was time to get going if I didn't want to be late for the all-day hike Drake and I had planned with the girls.

We had a fine time in the country. Drake wandered into a thicket of poison oak, and Virginia, giggling, dropped a woolly caterpillar down my neck.

It was quite dark when I returned to the house. Even before I got inside I noticed that all the lights were on and that there was a general air of confusion.

When I opened the door I found Aunt Muriel standing in the hallway, having what looked like a fit. Amy was standing before her waving a bottle of smelling salts.

"It's *Teddy!*" my aunt gasped when she saw me. "Oh, Charles, he's – "

I put my arm around her comfortingly, and my aunt dissolved into tears. They began to trickle over the coating of talcum powder on her cheeks and drop on the high net collar around her neck.

"It's Teddy," she whimpered. "Oh, Charles, he's dead!"

I'd been expecting it subconsciously, but all the same I jumped.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I let him out in the yard for a little run about three hours ago. He was gone a *long* time, and at last I went out to look for him. I called and called and finally I found him out under the rhododendron. He was *awfully* sick. So I came right in and called the doctor, but when he got here, poor little Teddy – was – was gone. Somebody must have poisoned him." She began to cry again.

I stroked my aunt's shoulder and murmured reassuring words while my mind was busy. Some one of the neighbors? Teddy had been a quiet little beast, but he did bark once in a while, and some people just don't like dogs.

"Dr. Jones was ever so nice and *sympathetic* about it. He took poor little Teddy away in a bag. He's going to take him to a man he knows and have him *stuffed.*"

Stuffed? I felt sweat break out along my shoulder blades and under my arms. Mechanically I pulled

the handkerchief out of my hip pocket and handed it to my aunt.

She took it and began to blot her eyes. "It's such a *comfort* to me, anyway," she said, blowing her nose, "to think that he did – enjoy his – last day – on earth."

I took her up to her room and mixed her a bromide. I stood over her while she drank and talked to her soothingly and patted her hand. After a while I got her calm enough so I could go to my room.

I lay down on the bed and stared up at the spots on the ceiling for a while. My heart was beating hard and quick. Pretty soon I reached in my coat pocket for cigarettes and began to smoke.

I emptied the pack while I lay there, looking at the ceiling, not thinking about anything, keeping my mind back, with an effort that was barely conscious, from the edge of something I didn't want to explore. About twelve I undressed and went to bed.

I felt soggy the next day. I'd slept, but it hadn't done me any good. Aunt Muriel came in later after I'd pushed aside my toast. She was red-eyed. I said good morning and went out into the garden.

The day was muggy and overcast, and I didn't feel like doing much, anyhow. I disbudded peonies for a while and clipped off seed pods; then I decided to give the Oriental cherries a light going-over with the pruning shears. It ought to have been done earlier. When I'd finished, I went into the

shed for some linseed oil and bordeaux to mix a poultice for their wounds.

Reaching for the can of bordeaux, an unfamiliar gleam in the corner behind it caught my eyes. It was a can of arsenate of lead. The label bore the usual skull and crossbones. I opened the can. About a quarter of an inch of the poison was gone.

It might have been in the shed before, of course; I wasn't sure it hadn't been. I held on to that idea: I wasn't sure.

I don't know what I did the rest of the day. I must have pottered around in the garden, trying not to think, until dinner time. Aunt Muriel came to the window once and asked me if I didn't want any lunch, and I said I wasn't hungry.

I guess she spent the day looking at Teddy's box in the living room.

Well, I got over it. Two or three days later, when Teddy came back from the taxidermist's, I'd pushed the whole thing back so far in my mind that my reaction had begun to seem slightly comic as well as inexplicable.

Even when Aunt Muriel got her pencils and started on an endless series of sketches of the little stuffed animal, it was all right with me. If anyone had asked me, I'd have said it was only natural for her to want to draw the pet of which she'd been so fond.

While she drew Teddy over and over again, I started re-roofing the house. It was a rough job because it was full of old-fashioned turrets and

cupolas, and the summer was well along before I finished.

Aunt Muriel kept urging me to relax, but I just couldn't be quiet.

After the roof, I started a lath house in back for seedlings. Virginia and I were dating almost every night, and I told myself I was feeling fine. I did notice a slight, steady loss of weight, but I pretended it was due to my smoking too much.

One hot night toward the end of August, my aunt got out the packet of drawings she'd made of Teddy, and I went over them with her.

"I think I'll try a few more," she said when I'd laid the last sketch aside. "And then – well, I must get something else." She looked sad.

"Yes," I said noncommittally. The subject made me uneasy, somehow. But so thoroughly had I repressed my awareness, I had no idea why.

"Charles," she said after a minute. She was looking more depressed than ever. "You've made an old woman very happy. This Virginia you've been going around with so much – are you *fond* of her?"

"Why – unh – yes. Yes, I am."

"Well, I've been *thinking*. Would you like it, Charles, if – if I were to advance you the money to set up a little nursery business here in Downie? You seem to have a real *talent* for that sort of thing. I'd miss you, of course, but if you *wanted* to – I'm sure you'd be happy with Virginia, and – " She choked up and couldn't go on.

The old darling! I went around to her side of the

table and gave her a hug and kiss. I managed to tell her how happy it would make me and how much I'd been wanting to do just what she suggested. A business of my own, and Virginia for a wife! She was better than a fairy godmother!

We sat up late discussing plans for the nursery – location, stock, advertising, policy – items that I found fascinating, and Aunt Muriel seemed to enjoy listening to.

When I went upstairs to bed, I was feeling so elated I didn't think I could ever get to bed. I whistled while I undressed. And, despite my expectations, I corked off almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I awoke about three in the morning, my mind filled with an unalterable conviction. It was as if what I'd only suspected, what I'd made myself forget, had added itself up and become, while I slept, an unyielding certainty.

I sat on the edge of the bed in my pajamas, shivering.

Aunt Muriel was going to kill me.

Lovingly, regretfully, she was going to put poison in my food or in my drink. Lovingly, regretfully, she was going to watch my agonies or smooth my pillow.

With tears in her eyes, she would delay calling the doctor until it was too late. She'd be most unhappy over the whole thing. And, after I was dead, she'd give me to the best mortician in Downie to embalm.

A week later, after drawing me for eighteen hours daily, she'd consign me to the earth, still regretfully, but with her regret a little alleviated by the knowledge that my last days on earth had been happy ones. The nursery business and the marriage with Virginia Drake were, you see, to be the equivalent for me of Teddy's red collar and chocolate-flavored bone.

I went over my chain of reasoning rapidly. It was flawless. But there was one thing more – I had to see for myself.

I drew on my bathrobe and tiptoed along the corridor and down the back stairs. When I got into the shed, I lighted matches and looked until I found the spot on the shelf behind the can of bordeaux where the arsenate of lead should have been. It wasn't there.

Back in my room, I dressed, threw things into my suitcase, and exited in the classical way. That is, I knotted sheets together, tied them to the four-poster bed, and slid down them to the ground. I caught the five-thirty train for the city at the station.

I never heard from Aunt Muriel again. After I got to L.A. I wrote a few cards to Virginia, without any address, just to let her know I hadn't forgotten her. After a while I got into private employment and met a nice girl. One thing led to another, and we got married.

But there's one thing I'd give a good deal to know. What did Aunt Muriel draw next?