

JOHN COLLIER

The *Chaser

Alan Austen, as nervous as a *kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of *Pell Street, and *peered about for a long time on the dim *landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he *had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, a *rocking-chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty *buff-colored walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars.

An old man sat in the rocking-chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given. "Sit down, Mr Austen," said the old man very politely. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"Is it true," asked Alan, "that you have a certain mixture that has—er—quite extraordinary effects?"

"My dear sir," replied the old man, "my stock in trade is not very large—I don't deal in *laxatives and *teething mixtures—but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary."

"Well, the fact is—" began Alan.

"Here, for example," interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. "Here is a liquid as colorless as water, almost tasteless, quite *imperceptible in coffee, milk, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of *autopsy."

"Do you mean it is a poison?" cried Alan, very much horrified.

"Call it a glove-cleaner if you like," said the old man indifferently. "Maybe it will clean gloves. I have never tried. One might call it a life-cleaner. Lives need cleaning sometimes."

"I want nothing of that sort," said Alan.

"Probably it is just as well," said the old man.

"Do you know the price of this? For one *teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask *five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less."

"I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive," said Alan *apprehensively.

"Oh dear, no," said the old man. "It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love *potion, for example. Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion."

"I am glad to hear that," said Alan.

"I look at it like this," said the old man. "*Please a customer with one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more *costly. He will save up for it, if necessary."

"So," said Alan, "do you really sell love potions?"

"If I did not sell love potions," said the old man, reaching for another bottle, "I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential."

"And these potions," said Alan. "They are not just—just—*er—"

"Oh, no," said the old man. "Their effects are permanent, and extend far beyond casual impulse. But they include it. *Bountifully, insistently. Everlastingly."

"Dear me!" said Alan, attempting a look of scientific detachment. "How very interesting!"

"But consider the spiritual side," said the old man.

"I do indeed," said Alan.

"For indifference," said the old man, "they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady—its flavor is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cocktails—and however gay and *giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude, and you."

"I can hardly believe it," said Alan. "She is so fond of parties."

"She will not like them anymore," said the old man. "She will be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet."

"She will actually be jealous?" cried Alan in a *rapture. "Of me?"

"Yes, she will want to be everything to you."

"She is already. Only she doesn't care about it."

"She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You will be her *sole interest in life."

"Wonderful!" cried Alan.

"She will want to know all you do," said the old man. "All that has happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She will want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why you are looking sad."

"That is love!" cried Alan. J

"Yes," said the old man. "How carefully she will look after you! She will never allow you to be tired, to sit in a *draught, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she will be terrified. She will think you are killed, or that some *siren has caught you."

"I can hardly imagine Diana like that!" cried Alan, overwhelmed with joy.

"You will not have to use your imagination," said the old man. "And, by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance you *should*, later on, slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She will be terribly hurt, of course, but she will forgive you—in the end."

"That will not happen," said Alan *fervently.

"Of course not," said the old man. "But, if it did, you need not worry. She would never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she herself will never give you the least, the very least, *grounds for—uneasiness."

"And how much," said Alan, "is this wonderful mixture?"

"It is not as *dear," said the old man, "as the glove-cleaner, or life-cleaner, as I sometimes call it. No. That is five thousand dollars, never a penny less. One has to be older than you are, to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it."

"But the love potion?" said Alan.

"Oh, that," said the old man, opening the drawer in the kitchen table, and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking *phial. "That is just a dollar."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Alan, watching him fill it.

"I like to oblige," said the old man. "Then customers come back, later in life, when they are *rather better off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective."

"Thank you again," said Alan. "Good-by."

"**Au revoir*," said the old man.

Glossary

- apprehensively** worriedly, fearfully
au revoir Good-bye until we meet again (French)
autopsy the medical examination of a body to determine the cause of death
bountifully generously, in great quantity
buff-colored a pale yellowish-brown
chaser a drink of water or beer taken after a drink of hard liquor (informal)
costly expensive
dear expensive
draught chiefly-British spelling of **draft** "a current of air."
The choice of spelling is consistent with the old man's rather formal style of speech.
er *The word Alan is too shy to say is aphrodisiac "arousing sexual passion."*
fervently with great sincerity and passion
five thousand dollars *Given his modest style of life (and New York prices at the time the story was written), this would be enough to support the old man for a year.*
giddy silly, not serious toward life
grounds basis, reason
had been told by the person who sent him
imperceptible not able to be seen
kitten a baby cat
landing the area at the top of a flight of stairs
laxative a medicine or drug that causes a bowel movement
peered about looked around intently, unable to see well
Pell Street a rather poor street in New York's Chinatown
phial a small glass tube
please satisfy
potion a (magic) liquid, most often associated with love
rapture state of great happiness
rather better off wealthier, richer
rocking-chair a chair mounted on curved pieces of wood which enable it to rock back and forth
siren a seductive woman

- sole** only
teaspoonful five liquid grams
teething mixture a medicine to lessen the pain of a baby's teeth growing in

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

- *1. What kind of a building does Alan go into? Office or residential? Old or new? Well kept up or shabby?
2. Why does he enter without ringing the bell or knocking?
3. What is there in the room?
4. How does the old man know Alan's name?
- *5. What sort of products does the old man have for sale? Do you think he has many customers? Why?
6. What is the "life-cleaner"? How much does it cost?
- *7. What does the old man mean when he says "Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion"?
- *8. What is the old man's sales philosophy?
9. Are the physical effects of the love potion temporary or long-lasting? Slight or great?
- *10. How will Diana's attitude toward Alan change after she has drunk the potion?
11. Will Diana ever tire of Alan or become angry with him? Will she ever be unfaithful to him?
- *12. Where does the old man keep the love potion? How much does it cost? Why do you think it is so inexpensive?
- *13. Why does the old man say *au revoir*?
- *14. What does the title of the story imply?

* These questions are the most important for class discussion.

Exercises

A. **ANTONYMS.** Match each adjective in Column I with the word in Column II which means the opposite.

I	II
Ex. apprehensive (<i>CALM</i>)	adoring
1. casual	calm
2. costly	despairing
3. dim	inexpensive
4. imperceptible	interested
5. indifferent	limited
6. polite	long-lasting
7. rapturous	noticeable
8. scornful	rude
9. varied	well-lit

B. **WORD CHOICE.** Now choose the most appropriate words among those in Columns I and II above to complete the following sentences.

- Ex. As Alan climbed the stairs, he felt APPREHENSIVE.
- The name was hard to read because the light was _____.
 - "I am glad to make your acquaintance" is an extremely _____ greeting.
 - The old man's stock was much more _____ than that of a drugstore.
 - The taste of a poison shouldn't be _____ to the victim.
 - Five thousand dollars for a teaspoonful of liquid is certainly _____!
 - Alan tried to pretend that he was _____ to the aphrodisiac effects of the love potion.
 - The effects of the love potion were guaranteed to be _____.
 - Alan was _____ at the idea of having Diana's total devotion for the rest of his life.
 - The old man wasn't the least bit _____ in Alan's enthusiastic belief in the joys of marriage to Diana.

C. **STYLISTIC VARIATION.** Make the style of these sen-

tences more casual EITHER by replacing the italicized expression OR by using the negative contraction N'T with the verb.

Ex. The room contained *no furniture but a table*.

THE ROOM CONTAINED ONLY A TABLE.

"I want *nothing* of that sort."

"I DON'T WANT ANYTHING OF THAT SORT."

- "My stock in trade is *not very large*."

- "Young people who need a love potion *very seldom* have five thousand dollars."

- "I hope *all* your mixtures are *not as expensive*."

- "It would be *no good* charging that sort of price."

- "You *need not* worry."

D. **DRAMATIZATION.** In class, read the story as a play, with each member of the class reading one or two speeches (the OLD MAN has 22; ALAN has 21). Begin with "Sit down, Mr. Austen" and omit everything not in quotation marks.

Topics for Discussion or Composition

- What is there in the text to suggest that Alan is a very shy and naive young man? How old do you think he is?
- What do you suppose the old man sells besides the "life-cleaner" and love potion? There are "perhaps a dozen" bottles and jars on the shelf. Do you think each one contains something different? What similar products might his customers want?
- The old man guarantees that the love potion will produce all the effects of idealized romantic love. Do you find the sort of life he describes for Alan and Diana appealing?
- What do you think will happen to Alan and Diana?