

The Blue Shazel

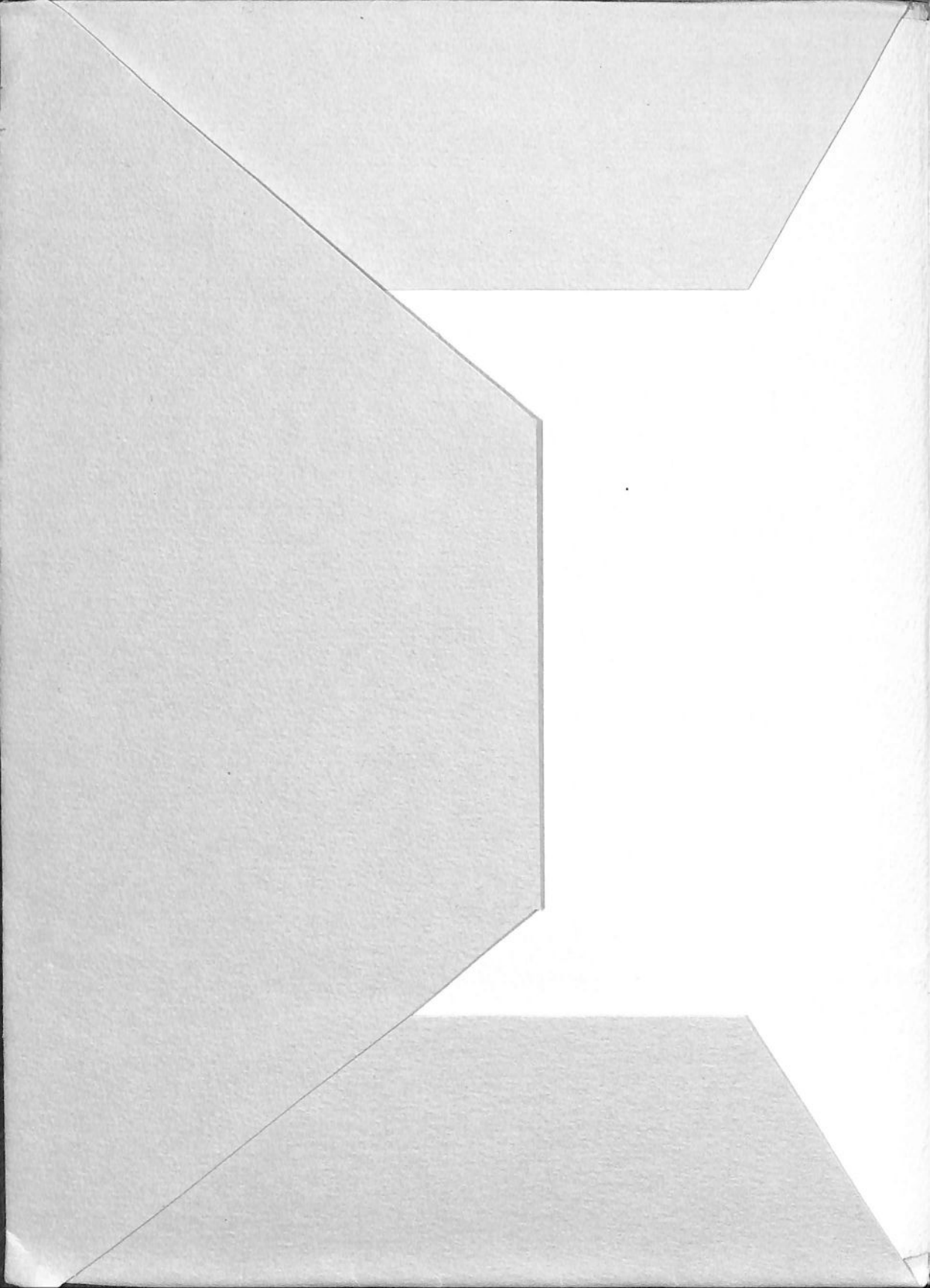
by

D. E. Stevens

Illustrations

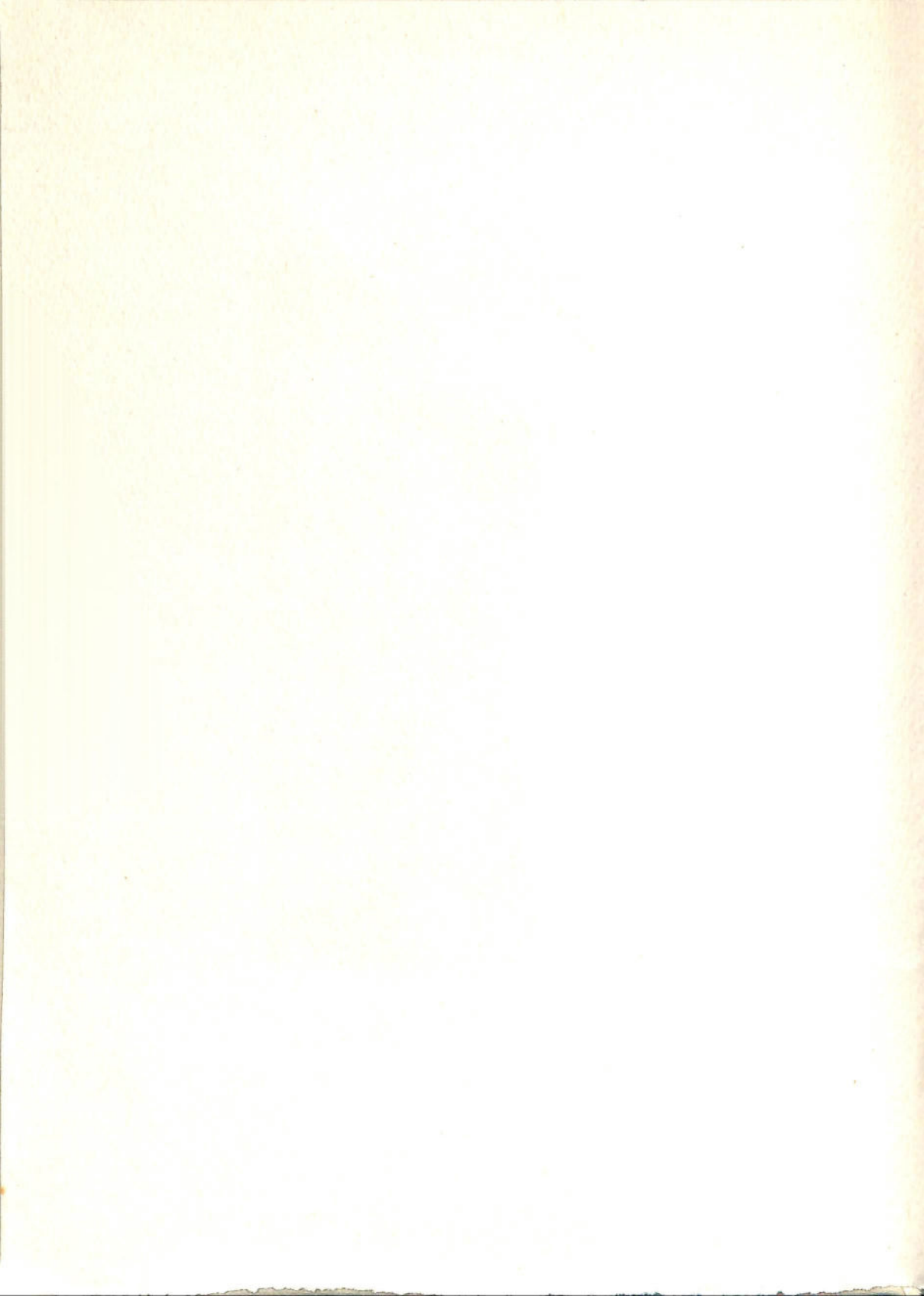
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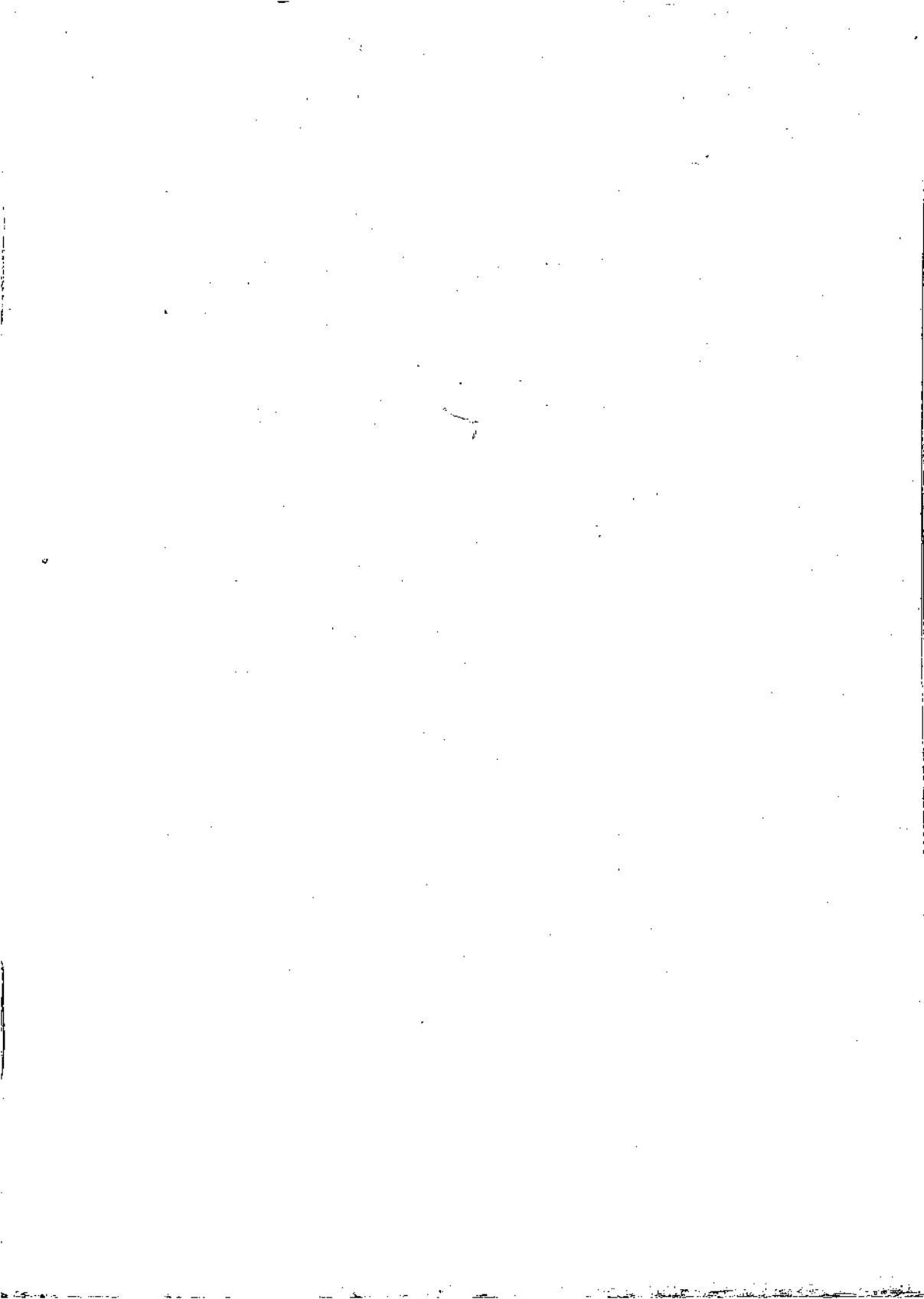
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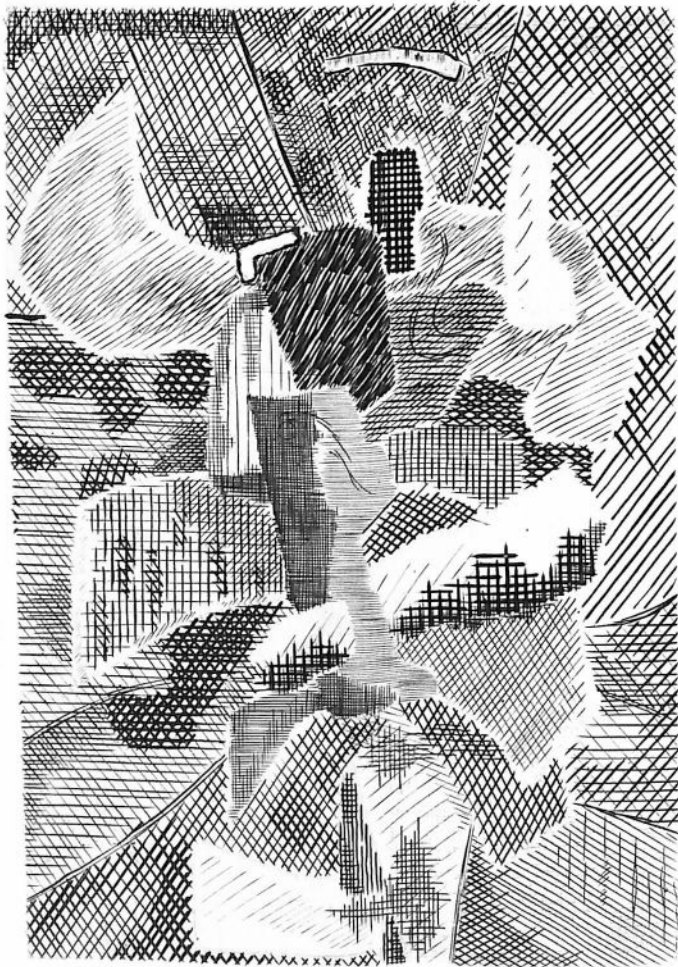


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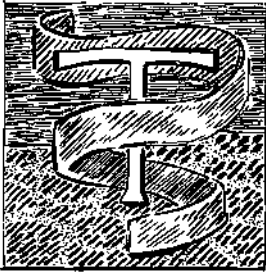
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THE BLUE SHAWL



HE outline of the shawl had been apparent almost from the moment I awakened, but the intense blueness of its coloring was brought into being only gradually by the gently probing fingers of the dawn. As the room lightened, the black silhouette of the stranger who wore the shawl was equally transmuted from a leaden anonymity into a being of dignity and strong features.

However, both shawl and wearer were secondary in importance to what was being said. The discourse being given by the stranger had started on friendship. In gradual stages it had proceeded through the intriguing subjects of personal finances, living in a business world

with all its challenges, and now was ranging through the core of man's relation to his self.

Regardless of my interest in the subjects and the viewpoints involved, fatigue finally began to assert itself. As I felt myself being drawn irretrievably into the swirling vortex of sleep, I remarked once more in some surprise the luminous quality of the blue shawl. That was the last sensation I had as I gave up trying to resist the almost drug-like torpor that engulfed me.

When I awakened, the day was in its prime and the man in the blue shawl had disappeared as mysteriously as he had come. Even so, my first concern was not with who he had been or how he had gotten into my room, but with what he had said.

To my astonishment, I found I had not forgotten the viewpoints he had expressed. I could remember the key ideas almost word for word. More gratifying yet, I felt myself still saturated by the sense of buoyant lightness and balance which I had felt as he talked.

In my excitement that none of this had slipp-

ed from me during the precarious intercession of sleep, I forgot momentarily the strangeness of the event itself. In some ways, the fact that it had happened was even more intriguing than the ideas expressed. It is not often that one goes to a nearby city for a few days' vacation, retires pleasantly tired at 2:00 AM after a non-alcoholic evening with close friends, and is awakened X minutes later by the knowledge that someone is standing beside one's bed.

If my muscles had been able to function instantaneously, I would certainly have leaped up and tried to knock the fellow over. It seemed at once the only thing to do, but at that precise moment, my muscles refused the command and the stranger began to talk.

To this day I cannot remember his first words. Certainly their content, or his gentle but firm manner of speaking, carried some narcotic towards fear. Instantly I forgot the impulse to leap. Within a few phrases I was deeply absorbed in the outlines of a new view-point expressed with the finesse of the master artist.

From time to time, as the acid of dawn etched the lines of face and figure, I withdrew my attention momentarily from the subject under discussion to stare at the man himself. He was of medium height and build, distinguished by a short black beard which outlined a gently oval face, and he wore a long white robe as his principal garment.

Then there was the blue shawl. It hung in simple restful folds over his left shoulder, reaching from toe in front to heel behind. He had some sort of headdress, but as it bore no distinguishing characteristic, my attention did not focus on it and so it drifted rapidly from memory.

These are all the things I remember about the man in the blue shawl. How he entered the room, or how he disappeared from it I never knew. No one will be satisfied with my statement that I had locked and bolted the door the night before, and found it in like condition the following morning. Nor was there any fire-escape or ledge outside my single

bedroom window which would have given the stranger a risky but possible access.

With one exception, which I will relate later, I never again saw the man with the blue shawl. Despite our brief contact, he burrowed deep into my thoughts during that short hour in the Olympic Hotel. I gradually forgot the exact words he used in breathing optimism and vitality into four difficult subjects, but his viewpoint stayed persistently in my memory like a delicately pungent aroma.

Now, years later, I find that the concepts he outlined have become an integral part of my nature. It would be wishful to imply that I can live the precepts with the vitality he gave them, but still they have become a way of life for me.

One day I will sit down and write the whole story of that night and the astonishing events followed hard on its heels. I think it is worth the telling. It changed my way of life from one of hard, rationalistic self-dependence into one in which I found that there was still room

left in the universe for miracles. I even found that once in a while I was swept into the vortex of acting as the agent for one of them.

Before I tell the end of the story of the blue shawl — or should I say the end for just now — I will recount one of these thought provoking incidents. It illustrates very well a major point made that night by my visitor. I will not try to make that point, because I think the story will speak more clearly than I could ever hope to do.

In Europe there are few first class air flights, the European having learned that tourist class travel is quite painless. On occasion though I am booked in a first class section. Normally I dislike it because seats are usually assigned by number and I have a bad habit of being stuck with a rather dull person.

Leaving Madrid for Rome one afternoon I found myself on the first class section of a TWA plane assigned to an aisle seat. As I took my place, my window-seat partner had not yet arrived. I found myself wondering

just what I would pull out of the grab bag this time. I was moderately concerned because I was thoroughly tired and figured it would be just my luck to draw an ardent conversationalist.

At that point my speculations were cut short as the trimlegged stewardess ushered a rather dark, heavy-set woman to my side.

Cramping my legs close in against the seat, I looked up with unashamed interest. Confirming my worst fears, the woman's face was darkened by a cloud of anxiety. I sensed that any sympathy I might show would act as a lightning rod to precipitate a cloudburst of unhappiness.

Being sure that I had no eagerness to learn the nature of that unhappiness, I drew a small book from my pocket and plunged into one of Hercule Poirot's deeply satisfying and aesthetic solutions of murder. As I read I risked no side glances at my seat companion. I had a premonition that she would enter a solid wedge into any chink in my armor of neutral absorption.

During an hour of flight I carefully preserved the barrier. Then the clatter of dishes from the galley told me with a shock that I was lost. It was time for dinner. I was certain to get the deluge as soon as I put the book down and picked up a fork.

Since my game was finished I decided I might as well go graciously to my defeat. Fondly and regretfully, I replaced Hercule Poirot in my pocket and deliberately faced into the onslaught. I had hardly turned my head when the first patter of rain began.

“ Are you going on to Karachi? ” she asked politely.

“ No, I’m stopping in Rome. How about you? ”

“ Yes, I’m going on to Karachi, then catching another plane to New Delhi. ”

This aroused my interest, as I had spent a delightful vacation in India the previous year.

“ I was there myself just a few months ago, ” I countered.

“ You were? What did you think of India? ”

“ I’ve never enjoyed a people so much in all my life. I think they’re wonderful. ”

At this point the stewardess placed the tray supports in the arms of our seats with the usual amount of jamming, fumbling and banging. After the interruption we returned at once to our exchange.

“ What made you like the Indian people so much? ” my companion asked.

“ It’s the warm, friendly atmosphere they generate. I felt all the time as if I were lulled in a tepid bath of discreet human affection. ”

Then I went on to tell her the tale of the beggar who had produced two oranges from among his rags as a token of esteem for me, and how I had been allowed to give him neither money nor a gift in return. This story seemed to set her thinking.

“ Do you think it has to do with their religion? ” she finally asked.

“ Yes, I think it’s partly — perhaps entirely— that. I had always thought India was a poor

country filled with superstitious inhabitants. Now I have to admit to myself that in matters of religion and philosophy there are some who are among the most sophisticated people I know. Even the peasant who seems to accept his religion through superstition, often generates an atmosphere, an aroma, of gentle, loving living which is unlike anything I've experienced.

"The closest I've come to it is in Italy, where the inhabitants have a similar feeling for life and for people. However I don't think the Italians have a fraction of that quality which one finds in the people of India."

"I've been very much interested in India and its religious teachers too," my companion confided.

"Well that's interesting," I noted, my curiosity now further aroused. "I had quite a good opportunity to look into the subject while I was there. Several of my friends, who are Indians by birth and ancestry, are pretty deeply immersed in the subject. In fact I was fortunate to be present at some meetings one

of India's greatest gurus held for picked followers chosen from all over the country.

"How fortunate you were," she said with a note of sincere admiration. "That's what I'd like to do, too. I'm going to New Delhi on business, but I've saved enough money to stay there an extra month. During that time I'm going to look for a guru."

This was an astonishing admission to come on such short acquaintance from a cultured European. I began to wonder at the strange coincidence which had placed me beside this woman. Sensing that perhaps I had some needful role to play in this short drama, I began deliberately to fish for my point of entry.

"It's unusual for an Occidental to set out looking for a guru," I took up the thread. Then, struck by an inspiration, I went on.

"Incidentally, I have a good friend in New Delhi in the government who knows a great deal about the religious life of the country. He knows several of the principal religious figures too. If you want to give me your name and

hotel in New Delhi I'll write to him and suggest he call on you. I think he could make some suggestions for your search which would be of real help to you."

"Would you do that? I'd be so grateful to you. Here, let me give you my card."

As she fumbled through her bag, I remembered my original unwillingness to show even the most elementary courtesy towards this woman. Involuntarily a swift blush of shame swept over me.

"I can't seem to find my card case. Perhaps I have it in my other bag," she said, heaving herself bodily out of the seat to look in the elastic pouch on the rear of the forward seat. The seating arrangement in the luxury section of a modern trans-Atlantic plane is so spaced that it is impossible to do a thorough search through one's forward odds-and-ends pouch without rising.

As she stood to make her examination, a small book fell onto the cushion, face up. A picture on its front caught my eye. Turning

curiously to see it better, I was startled to recognize the great Indian leader whom I had visited the previous year.

The woman spent an interminable time fumbling through her belongings in the elastic pocket. Meanwhile I was ready to blow my safety valve from curiosity.

Finally, after an age of muttering and sorting, she triumphantly drew her card case from a remote corner and sat down, little suspecting the turn events had taken. Before she could say anything I plunged into the new development.

“ I couldn't help noticing the small book you have been reading. Do you happen to know anything about this man? ”

“ *Know* anything about him? I just spent several days with him in London last month, ” she announced with a blend of indignation and triumph.

“ Isn't that odd, ” I countered, ready to trump her card and carry the game. “ I just spent two weeks travelling with him in the United States. In fact he's the person who

held the meetings I attended in India last year.”

The look of incredulity, awe, almost fear, which passed over that woman's face is something I shall never forget. Here, in her own life, was a coincidence so astonishing that for a moment it rocked her from the accustomed order of her world.

“You did? He is? Why, this is the most remarkable thing. He's the guru I'm searching for in India.”

In a rush she explained to me the cause of her unhappiness. She had known for some time that this trip might develop. In London she had been given instructions that if she came to India, she must proceed to wherever the guru was at that time and spend one day with him.

When the trip to New Delhi had unexpectedly precipitated and she found she must leave within twenty-four hours, she had cabled London for the guru's present address. This was a matter of real concern, for he had retired into the country for several months' seclusion. Consequently his whereabouts was known to

only a few people. Her cable to London to one of those persons had not been answered when she had had to leave. Due to a complexity of circumstances there was no way the cable advice could now be forwarded to her.

Her instructions from the guru had been strict. Although he was to be in seclusion, she was to obtain his address and come for one day. This she regarded as tantamount to an order from heaven. Yet here she was setting out on her journey without the necessary information, and with no sure way of obtaining it.

In an instant the picture fell together in my mind.

“ Now I understand why you looked so unhappy when you came aboard the plane. And I understand now why I’m sitting next to you. I just received a letter from your guru’s younger sister while I was in Madrid. In it she gave me their address for the next three weeks. ”

The lady on the plane? I heard from India some weeks later that she arrived promptly

and safely, although somewhat dazed by the extraordinary manner in which she had obtained the vital address.

It was about this time that the sequel to my night in the Olympic Hotel in Los Angeles occurred.

In the years that followed the evening visit of the man in the blue shawl I began to forget little by little the exact words he had used. Even as I became alarmed at my slow loss of such a valuable windfall, I sensed that what I was losing in theory, I was gaining through a new way of living. All of life and my attitude towards it were reorienting. I was forgetting in words what was now becoming a way of life. When I realized this, I worried no more.

As the individual words slipped gradually into oblivion, so did the memory of the man in the blue shawl. After some years, his image no longer came to mind. For all practical purposes, I had forgotten him.

More than twelve years after the eventful night in the Olympic Hotel, I was giving a lecture before a small class in San Francisco. When I had been talking for perhaps ten minutes, the classroom door opened and one of the students appeared with a distinguished, white-haired man. They sat down in the back row. After a moment's annoyance at the interruption, I resumed the thread of my talk and thought no more of the latecomers.

When I had finished, I stood as a sign that the evening was at a close. At once the two latecomers pressed down the aisle. The student introduced me to her friend, who was a doctor specializing in dietary problems. His robust appearance was an excellent advertisement for his capabilities.

"I certainly enjoyed your lecture this evening," he commenced. "It was expounded with vigor and clarity."

"You're too kind," I protested.

"Not at all, I mean it," he went on. "But I must confess that, even more than what you

were saying, I was interested in the person standing beside you.”

This statement startled me, and I raked my mind unsuccessfully trying to recall anyone who had come up to stand beside me during the evening. For a moment I thought that perhaps Malcolm, the ten-year-old son of two of the students, might have stood beside me. He sometimes did so when his wandering entrained his feet into a similar wander.

No, that couldn't be it, because Malcolm hadn't come this evening.

Oh for heaven's sake, I realized, this must be one of these fellows who thinks he has second sight.

“ ... with a long flowing white robe...,” he was continuing his description of the person he had seen.

There are so many people in the world who see things that, if given any encouragement, they soak up hours of time with interesting but profitless stories. By reflex, my conscious attention switched from the description being

poured out and focussed itself instead on a personal problem needing attention.

“ ... a short black beard, and rather oval face... ”

What was this? For some reason these words penetrated through the barrier of my preoccupation. In some way they seemed vaguely familiar. A memory far back in the past began to stir, and I felt the need to equate something to the description being given me by the energetic doctor.

“ He was of medium height, a trifle on the slim side, with a strange headdress. ”

Good heavens, the fellow in the blue shawl in the Olympic Hotel, I suddenly thought! He's giving me a dead-ringer description of the fellow in the blue shawl!

“ Have you ever seen the man before? His white robe looked a bit like a Roman toga, but it hung in straight folds instead of being draped, and his features had a definite oriental cast, ” the doctor continued.

I did not reply to the direct question. Why

don't you speak about the shawl, I thought loudly to myself, and then I'll know you saw the same man I saw in Los Angeles that night?

Suddenly the doctor stopped his good-humored prodding, looked quizzically at me from the corner of his eye and then made a quarter turn so that he could look directly into my eyes.

"And I bet you thought I wouldn't mention the blue shawl draped over his right shoulder, didn't you?" he shot at me in triumph.



ACHEVÉ D'IMPRIMER, LE 15 DÉCEMBRE 1963,
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