

Splick-Splock

Charley knew he was awake when he heard the splick and the splock. He listened, without bothering to open his eyes, to the splick and the splock. It was a romantic and reassuring sound. It was an evocative sound, making him feel delightfully sorry for himself. So there he lay, in his ramshackle bed, eyes closed, listening to the splick and the splock.

Charley was penniless. He revelled in poverty—mainly because it was deliciously pitiful, but also because it gave him an excuse to complain to his friends; and there was nothing Charley like more than complaining to his friends. And all his friends were in the same boat, so they didn't mind his complaining, because it saved them the trouble of doing it themselves.

Charley, listening to the splick and the splock, was thinking about being poor.

Splick

He liked the way it dribbled from his nose.

Splock

He had been poor forever. When he left home, ten years earlier, he had stumbled into it, and never bothered to climb out—never even looked to see if there was a way out.

Splick

He liked its simplicity. It was easy to understand. It dribbled over everything, covered everything with its sticky ooze, made his life a straightforward empty road paved with snot. There were no confusing twists and turns, forks; just a line of snot going nowhere.

Splock

Charley financed his poverty by stealing. But he was a thief with a conscience. He only stole from people he did not know.

Splick

Charley was a creative thief, and the hard thing about being a creative thief was thinking up new capers. Tired of contemplating his poverty, though not particularly tired of feeling sorry for himself, Charley turned his attention to thinking up new capers.

Splock

There was one in particular that seemed promising: Charley lived in a poor neighbourhood, and, as in most poor neighbourhoods, there was a great deal of money around. The first problem was to find it; the second was to take it. Charley had solved problem number one. He was particularly fond of fish and chips. He liked the way it was cheap to buy; the way it was cooked by somebody else; the way it slipped greasily down his throat; the way it didn't dirty plates. In other words, he liked everything about fish and chips. Not surprisingly, everyone else liked everything about fish and chips. Charley had sat on the door step of his squat, late one evening, watching the drunks stagger from the pub down the road over to the fish and chip shop opposite. It was after midnight, the fish and chips shop had been closed some time, though a light in the back room was still burning. Then the place fell into darkness and the owner came out of the front door and locked up. He was a particularly fat man, no doubt a fan of his own fish and chips, but right then he looked slightly fatter than usual. He gave a shifty glance up and down the street, and this, more than his extra fatness, caught Charley's attention. He walked away and, for some reason, Charley decided to

follow. He scuttled from shadow to shadow, much like a shadow himself, close enough to see the extra-fat man, though far enough to avoid the odour of fried food.

The fat man crossed the road, and Charley realised where he was going: the Building Society was just ahead. Charley stood in the doorway of a sweet shop and watched the extra fat man slink over to the night deposit box, give another shifty look up and down the street, and then take an envelope from inside his buttoned jacket. He was only fat now, and the mouth in the wall gobbled up his extra pounds.

Splick

It would be like taking a toy from a baby.

Splock

He would have to disguise himself. A mask would do it. A clown mask would be good. He could hide behind the bank and wait for the extra fat man to come and lose weight.

Splick

The noise was starting to get on his nerves. Charley opened his eyes and looked up at the damp patch on the ceiling. Water dripped, with a splick and a splock, into a metal bucket on the floor.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Charley called.

"Breakfast, sir," the butler said. He carried a silver tray over to Charley, who sat himself up in bed.

"What is it?" Charley asked.

"Kippers, sir," the butler answered, placing the tray on a bedside table, uncovering the main course. He poured coffee.

"Thank you, Wilson."

The butler left; Charley took a sip of coffee and examined the kipper. It was the nearest thing to fish and

chips he would ever get.

"I wonder why things are the way they are?" he thought.

Charley climbed from bed, stretched, and walked over to the window. And then he said, "Ouch." And after that he mumbled, "Fucking damn thing."

He had stubbed his toe on the metal bucket, and it was hurting like mad.