

Maurice Valency

Tales Out of School
The Great Duke of Florence

It was raining.

Professor Wheeler stared down moodily through the grimy third-story window of his office in Stallmeyer. He was tired and he was desperately bored, and perhaps also he was hungry. And his knee ached where he had fallen on it and the arthritis had set in. A few disconsolate figures were scurrying across the campus, picking their way among the black puddles. It was almost five, and already a gloomy November twilight had settled over the city, a darkness heavy with despair. The morning had been clear. No one had expected rain. He had brought neither his raincoat nor an umbrella, nor even a hat.

His knee throbbed insistently.

The doctor had advised him to leave New York for a more appropriate climate, California preferably, or even Florida. So far it had been hopeless. He was tied to his job. But now there was this letter on his desk. He turned his back on the rain-streaked window and crossed the shabby Turkish rug that lay between it and the clutter on the desktop. A ten o'clock lecture. A seminar at two. And now this interminable office hour. In his youth he had dreamed of a life at sea. It hadn't happened, nothing like it; but he could still imagine himself straddling a heaving deck, on the wing of the bridge, braving a storm in oilskins and souwester, a man among men, bearded probably. Mechanically he sorted the scattered sheets of typescript on the desk and stacked them into the blue cardboard box they had come in. The word "Sphinx" was printed on the cover, and indeed there was a sphinx staring vacantly into the void across the blue cardboard desert. "Fine typewriter papers," it said. "Cotton Content." He picked up the title page. "La Bell Pucell and the Palace of Pleasure," it said, "A Study of Sources." And under that, "Frances B. Rosenblatt." And at the bottom of the page, the canonical statement, statutory, and heavy with mystery: "Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of Doctor of Philosophy." The requirements in question actually consisted of 568 pages of careful prose that had been a hardship for Frances B. Rosenblatt to write, and something worse for Professor Wheeler to read. Rites of passage to be borne with grace. Wheeler took off his glasses, and between him and La Bell Pucell there took shape briefly the figure of the probably bearded captain, narrowing his eyes against the storm, staring across great rolling seas at the far horizon from whose bourne no traveller returns.

But beyond that horizon, Wheeler remembered, were the sun-drenched beaches of Santa Barbara and the Sandra Nevins Chair of Literary History at forty-five thousand a year. Would he be available in the event that the offer was made? Ah yes, gentlemen, yes. He would be available. Readily available. Just make the offer, gentlemen of Santa Barbara, and he'd be off like a shot, consigning this dreary city to its fate and the mercies of the Sanitation Department. Just give me a sign, said Wheeler, speaking in fact aloud.

In answer, the chapel bell chimed briefly, and then rang five. A gust of rain sounded on the sooty pane that Buildings and Grounds had not got around to cleaning in all the fifteen years that he had occupied the room. Time to go home. He remembered there was an old cloth hat on the floor of his closet, a relic he had not ventured to disturb from the time when he first moved into the office. He fished it out of its corner now, and slammed the dust out of it against the side of the desk. It made him sneeze. It proved to be somewhat big for his head. It sat on his ears, but nobody would notice, and if anyone did, what would it matter? He opened the door and stepped out. Save for the greasy globe overhead, the hall was dark. In this weather, at this hour, the building would be deserted.

There was a sound of frantic footsteps on the stairs. It was a student to see him. It was Mr. Gupta. He was panting.

"Very sorry," said Mr. Gupta. "Am I late? I am not too late?"

"It's five o'clock," said Wheeler. "I was just going. Come in."

Mr. Gupta came in, and stood just inside the doorway, making it difficult for Wheeler to sidle past. He was a delicate man of indeterminate age. His skin was the color of milk chocolate and at the moment looked vaguely edible. He compensated for his size with a fussy air of importance which did not quite carry conviction. His manner was ceremonial, and his speech, somewhat overprecise, carried a faint odor of garlic, reminiscent of many curries. His right hand held a dripping umbrella by its middle; in the other was a black attaché case beaded with raindrops. His head was bare. It was evident that he had walked some distance in the rain, for his blue overcoat was sodden and his rubbers squelched as he shifted his feet.

"Das Gupta," he announced. "I am sorry to be late. The weather, you see."

"Sit down, Mr. Gupta," Wheeler said. "Take off your coat."

Mr. Gupta put the wet attaché case down on Frances B. Rosenblatt's manuscript, then at once perceiving his error, snatched it away with the title page stuck to it, hooking the telephone cord as he did so. The instrument fell to the floor with a thud and a jangle, and as Mr. Gupta bent to retrieve it, the ferrule of his umbrella poked sharply into Wheeler's knee. Wheeler stepped back hurriedly, barely suppressing an oath.

"So sorry," said Mr. Gupta. "Most clumsy. The weather, you see."

"Sit down, please, Mr. Gupta," said Wheeler. "Please sit down." Mr. Gupta made no move to sit down. Instead he sighed deeply.

"It is raining heavily," he said.

"The monsoon," said Wheeler.

Mr. Gupta did not deign to notice this absurdity. Instead he fixed his gaze pensively on the little pool of water that was accumulating on the carpet at his feet.

"Why not put your umbrella in the corner by the door?" said Wheeler. "And do take off your wet coat. It's cold in here."

Mr. Gupta acknowledged these proposals with a curt nod. He stood his umbrella in the corner by the door at a rakish angle. It fell with a clatter and had to be replaced. Then he struggled out of his coat and, after looking about vainly for a suitable place to put it, rolled it up peremptorily and, throwing it on the chair by the desk, sat down on it. The attaché case he hugged tightly to his chest. His hands, Wheeler noticed, were beautiful, sensitive and slender, two of the fingers adorned with silver bands. Wheeler extended a packet of cigarettes.

"Smoke, Mr. Gupta?"

"Thank you, no," said Mr. Gupta. "No, thanks. Well, after all, why not? Perhaps I will. Thanks very much."

He accepted a cigarette, holding it daintily between thumb and forefinger, Russian fashion. Wheeler lit it for him, and sat back in the old swivel chair. He pushed the glass ashtray where Mr. Gupta could reach it.

"Well, Mr. Gupta," he said. "Where are we?"

"I am to report progress," said Mr. Gupta. "I have found something for my last chapter. My last chapter but one, that is to say. The last chapter will simply set forth my conclusions. Something, I believe, that will be of considerable interest. Something of importance. One might say I have made a discovery."

"Really?" said Wheeler. "That's wonderful."

"Yes."

Mr. Gupta flicked open the catches on his attaché case. He put his hand in, meanwhile peering over the lid with the eyes of a wary ferret.

"I have the proof," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have brought the proof. I have it here." He lifted some papers out of his case and waved them in the air.

"I don't entirely follow, Mr. Gupta. What is it you have in mind?"

"I have in mind," said Mr. Gupta. "Philip Massinger and Lope de Vega."

"Aha!" said Wheeler.

"I have in mind that I am at last in a position to prove to all the world—that is to say to anyone who entertains the least doubt—that Philip Massinger derived his play directly from Lope de Vega. I say, derived—not necessarily copied.

He struck the papers in his case lightly with the back of his hand.

"Both plot and title. Not the shadow of doubt."

There followed a tense silence in which Wheeler groped vainly for a cue. He looked for enlightenment first at Mr. Gupta's earnest face, then past it to the window, the rainy sky and the far horizon. He wondered briefly if there was any prospect of borrowing Mr. Gupta's umbrella so he could get home without being drenched, then dismissed the thought as stupid. Mr. Gupta's dissertation, he recalled, had something to do with seventeenth-century English drama, but there was something else in it, something Spanish. There had been a chapter on Tourneur and Calderón, or was it Alarcón? The title came to him—something about Spanish themes by English playwrights. He ventured a question. "You are fluent in Spanish, I believe, Mr. Gupta?"

Mr. Gupta looked surprised.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "I taught Spanish literature at the University of Puerto Rico. In San Juan. For many years. I thought you knew."

"And that was before you specialized in English?"

"Also at the University of the West Indies. At Port of Spain. I am a native of Trinidad, you see."

"Ah yes, of course. And now you are teaching English?"

"I am at present a teacher of English," said Mr. Gupta with simple dignity. "At Kosciusko Community College in Staten Island. An instructor. I thought you knew that. When I have achieved the doctorate I hope to become an assistant professor. As it is, I sometimes give the course in Shakespeare. When registration permits, naturally."

"I see," said Wheeler. He flicked the ash of his cigarette to the floor. "And now this chapter. You are no longer writing on Tourneur?"

"No, no. I am through with Tourneur. Massinger. Philip Massinger. "The Great Duke of Florence." He smacked his lips delicately, as if he were savoring the words. "His finest play. In my opinion. You agree?"

"Yes," said Wheeler, "Probably." He recognized the title, but the title brought nothing to his mind. There had been no occasion to read the play since the days when he was cramming for his oral examination twenty years ago. He caught his breath sharply. Twenty years, he thought, a quarter-century, nearly—a lifetime. And what had happened in that lifetime? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. War. Peace. Depression. Inflation. The H-bomb. Nothing at all. A wasted life. The three books he had written that nobody ever read or cited. Three? And not four? His eyes shifted up to the bookshelf over Mr. Gupta's oily hair. They were there, right enough, four books still in their jackets, gathering dust, mutely conferring honor on their creator.

"The Great Duke of Florence," he said vacantly. And suddenly, without warning, the sub-title popped up in his mind. "A Comical History," he said.

Mr. Gupta nodded. He was evidently not as greatly astonished at this feat of memory as was Wheeler. Professor Wheeler, vastly encouraged, ventured a second attempt.

"1625," he said, giving the date the upward inflection of a question.

"1627," said Mr. Gupta. "But it was not printed for some years. The first printing was in 1636."

"Ah, yes," said Wheeler. "Yes." His mind, he thought, was a dusty attic filled with piles of ancient rubbish, and somewhere in this grimy middens lay buried the plot of "The Duke of Milan," no—"The Great Duke of Florence." If he rummaged a bit, perhaps it would turn up.

It turned up quite suddenly.

"Miles Standish," he said. And was surprised at the sound of his words.

Mr. Gupta looked puzzled.

"Miles Standish," said Wheeler. "'The Courtship of Miles Standish.'"

"Ah," said Mr. Gupta, "Yes. Yes. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. I never thought of that. The same theme. Very similar."

Professor Wheeler felt a surge of confidence that knew no bounds. His knee stopped aching. He felt oddly rejuvenated.

"A Knack to Know a Knave," he said.

"No," said Mr. Gupta. "Excuse me, but there I must disagree. I beg your pardon, Professor. I have studied those texts most carefully. I know everyone says that, all the authorities, so-called. But I cannot go along with that. Between that play and "The Great Duke" there is no connection, no real connection, none. I greatly fear the respected

authorities have not had time to read either play. Invariably they repeat Gifford. They repeat Chelli. And Chelli? He repeats Gifford. But I know this material, and I know better. I have come to certain conclusions."

He brought his palm down smartly on the papers in his case.

"Lope de Vega," he said. "El Gran Duque de Florenza."

On the far horizon a light began to dawn in Wheeler's mind.

"Ah, he said. "I see. You think you have located a Spanish source?"

Mr. Gupta looked up with an air of majesty.

"I do not think, Professor Wheeler," he said. "I know. Forgive me, but I know. For certain." He picked up the papers in his case and brandished them in the air. "I have the proof. I have it here!"

"Let's have a look," said Wheeler.

Mr. Gupta put the manuscript back into his case.

"In a moment," he said. "In a little moment you shall know everything. I shall leave the manuscript with you to read at your leisure. But first you may wish to examine this document."

"What is it?" said Wheeler.

With the air of one conveying a priceless treasure, Mr. Gupta handed over a folded sheet of copy paper. It was a Xerox, somewhat smudged at the edges, and black at the center fold of what seemed to be two facing pages from an old book. On each page was a double column in italic type, a list of titles in Spanish. Wheeler ran his eye down the columns without encountering anything he recognized.

"What are these titles?" he asked. "Stories? Plays?"

"Plays," said Mr. Gupta. "Plays by Lope de Vega."

"I don't recognize any of the titles," said Wheeler.

"No," said Mr. Gupta. "Nor would anybody else. This is new. 130 additional plays. Am I justified in calling it a discovery?" Wheeler put the paper down on the desk.

"It looks like a list of plays," he said. "But what makes you think they were written by Lope?"

"Because," said Mr. Gupta, "it is a list of additional plays drawn up and published by the author himself. By Lope de Vega himself."

"Really? And where did you find it?"

"In *El Peregrino en su patria*, 1604," said Mr. Gupta, "you may recall, Professor, Lope appended a list of all the plays he had written up to that time. Up to the year 1603. 219 titles in all."

"219 titles," said Wheeler. "Imagine!"

"Yes," said Mr. Gupta. "219 plays. By the time he was forty."

"And he lived to be what? Seventy-five?"

"Seventy-three."

"Amazing chap," said Wheeler. The chapel bell struck the half hour. The rain was still beating on the window. He began wondering if Mr. Gupta would ever go away.

But Mr. Gupta had no such intention.

"You are, of course, aware, Professor," he began, "that in the *Onzena Parte* of his works, 1618, Lope says that up to that time he had written eight hundred plays."

Professor Wheeler was aware of something of the sort. However it was unbelievable, and he did not believe it. No man could write that much unless he worked an assembly line.

"The list of 219 titles," Mr. Gupta went on, "was published in the edition of 1604. But in the sixth edition of *El Peregrino*, in 1618—the same year as the *Onzena Parte*, mind you—he reprinted the list of 219 titles, plus 114 additional titles, making a total of 332 plays written up to that time. But a little further along in the book he says that the total number was 462."

Wheeler was by this time totally confused.

"That leaves 130 plays unaccounted for," said Mr. Gupta. "And where are those plays, Professor?"

"Lope is full of inconsistencies," said Wheeler. "Perhaps he couldn't add."

"I think we can safely dismiss that possibility. Lope could add as well as you or me. Or I, that is."

"I can't add to save my life," said Wheeler. "Never could."

"Lope could add," said Mr. Gupta. "I have the proof."

Wheeler squirmed in his chair, conscious once more of the ache in his knee, and of some discomfort in his crotch. He had no idea where this discussion was leading, and he realized all at once that he was becoming irritated.

"Well," he said, "show us. Tell us. Don't keep us on tenterhooks, Mr. Gupta. If you know something, tell us, for God's sake! The suspense is killing me."

"I shall," said Mr. Gupta. "I shall end the suspense. I shall make it perfectly plain. That list of plays you hold in your hand—"

Professor Wheeler hurriedly picked up the sheet.

"That list," Mr. Gupta pursued, "consists of two folios that were added to the book, to the edition of *El Peregrino* of 1618, the sixth edition. It lists 130 additional titles, making a total of 462 plays written up to that time, exactly as Lope says."

"But not 800, as he says elsewhere."

"Not 800. 462. Lope could add, Professor. He could add as well as you or I."

"Then perhaps you can tell me why—"

Mr. Gupta raised his hand with a dainty, but entirely peremptory gesture.

"Dr. Wheeler," he said, "these two pages do not appear in any of the known copies of the sixth edition. Except one. And that one I found, entirely by chance, in the library of the Hispanic Society of New York."

"You mean that place on 157th Street?"

"155th Street," said Mr. Gupta. "I was turning over the pages at the end of the book, thinking about something else, when all of a sudden this title jumped out of the middle of a column. You see it? *El Gran Duque de Florenza*. You see it? It practically jumps out at you."

Wheeler ran first his eye, then his finger down the column. The title did not precisely jump out at him, but he managed to find it. It was there.

"Mr. Gupta—" he began. Mr. Gupta interrupted the question by closing his eyes.

"That morning," he said, "I went to the telephone and called the reference desk at the British Museum in London, England. I asked them to check the copy of *El Peregrino* that was in their possession. They were good enough to do so at once. It lacked the folios in question. After that, I spoke with Madrid, the Biblioteca Nacional. Same thing. Then I checked the Barcelona copy and also the copy in Brussels, at considerable expense, I may say. And finally I took the train to Boston, and looked at the copy in the Harvard library. Nothing, nothing, and nothing. Professor Wheeler, I have now examined all the extant copies of the edition of 1618, all the copies in the world, as I think. My conclusion is that the copy in New York is unique."

"But I don't get it," said Wheeler. "Why in hell should these two pages turn up in one copy only?"

"Professor, I cannot account for it. I can only give you the facts. I imagine that those pages were added toward the end of the press run, very likely at the author's insistence. In that case only a small number of copies would have them. And, so far as I can see, only one of these has so far come to light. And, by great good fortune, I chanced upon it. Not entirely by chance, of course, I had my eyes open. As you see."

Mr. Gupta had by this time worked himself up to the point where his excitement was visible. Though the room was cold, his brow was beaded with sweat, and he had to wipe the mist from his glasses. It suddenly occurred to Wheeler that the affair went beyond a joke. A definitive edition of Lope's works had been announced for spring publication. A group of influential scholars had collaborated on it, and in all probability the final text was already in the hands of the

printer. If a hundred and thirty additional titles must now be included, a number of plays hitherto attributed to other authors would have to be re-examined and perhaps re-assigned, dates would have to be reconsidered, there would be extensive discussions and revisions, and if the text was already set up there would be hell to pay.

"I'm afraid you've turned up a mare's nest, Mr. Gupta," said Wheeler.

"So that Massinger," Mr. Gupta went on, "would almost certainly have had access—or could have had access, anyway—"

"Wait a bit, Mr. Gupta. About this list of titles. Does anyone know about them, beside you?"

"Why, nobody, no. I haven't communicated with anyone, so far. Except my wife, perhaps. But my wife—she is not much interested in such things. Why?"

"This book in the Hispanic library. Could you possibly borrow it for a day?"

"You wish to see it?"

"I should very much like to see it, yes."

"You wish me to bring you the book?"

"I'd appreciate it if you could. Can you?"

"Why yes. I suppose I can. I don't know if these books circulate. But I imagine in the circumstances—. Yes, I think so."

"Perhaps tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is Saturday, Professor."

"Well, then, the next day."

"Sunday?"

"No, no. Of course—Monday afternoon."

"It will have to be about five. I have classes till two, you see."

Wheeler rose. "I'll see you Monday at five, Mr. Gupta," he said. Mr. Gupta got up also, and shook out his coat, which had by now taken on the form of a sausage, and was reluctant to take on any other form. It was some little time before he could be induced to take his leave. When at last they were parted, Wheeler turned once more to the window, this time to meditate. The rain was coming down now in sheets. It was a tempest, he thought. And now perhaps Mr. Gupta was whistling up a little tempest of his own. A tempest in a teapot, of course. But tempests could rage in teapots quite as furiously as anywhere else. A question of scale. He picked up the old cloth hat from under the desk where it had fallen, and clamped it on his head. It came down to his eyebrows.

Monday was a bright day, and at five the western sky was aflame. Mr. Gupta turned up promptly on the hour, but he had to wait in the hall while Miss Rosenblatt explained why she could not defend her thesis in the spring as she had planned. She was expecting a baby, she

said. It would come in August sometime. Her introduction was not quite finished, and there was the bibliography. She would type the final draft herself, and that would take time. She had hoped to have it typed professionally, but the fees for that sort of work were now astronomical, and frankly—and what with the baby—she had already notified the dissertation secretary.

Wheeler made sympathetic sounds, conscious of the fact that Mr. Gupta was hovering impatiently in the corridor. There was no special hurry, he said; the fall would do as well as the spring. The important thing was to write a good book, do a good job, something she could be proud of. Miss Rosenblatt looked suddenly anxious. Her eyes grew large. Did he think, she ventured, that some publisher might be interested? A trade publisher, maybe, or even a university press. There was no telling, said Wheeler, who knew he was lying and was not ashamed. It was certainly possible. In any case, there would be time to worry about that when the book was finished. Miss Rosenblatt thanked him profusely, gathered up her gear, and left. Mr. Gupta elbowed his way past her and sat down in his overcoat without waiting to be asked. He was still wearing his rubbers, although for two days the streets had been dry. Without a word, he clicked open the locks on his case, and produced a worn quarto bound in old calf.

"Ah," said Wheeler, "you have it. Splendid. Let's have a look."

Mr. Gupta sighed deeply and relinquished the book. The title page was by no means a masterpiece of the printer's art, but the paper had the solid feel of a bygone age when men built for eternity: *El peregrino en su patria. De Lope de Vega Carpio. Dedicado á D. Pedro Fernandez de Cordoba, Marques de Priego, Senor de la Casa de Aguilar.*

There was no date, but in the end papers there was a colophon: "*Impresa en Sevilla por Clemente Hidalgo. Año 1604, 4^o.*"

Wheeler turned back a few leaves. There was the list of plays, but no sign of *El Gran Duque de Florenza*.

"I don't seem to find the extra pages," he said.

"No," said Mr. Gupta. "They are not there. This is the first edition. The edition of 1604. The pages I copied are in the 1618."

"But this is not the book we need," said Wheeler. "It's the other I'd like to see. Where is it?"

Mr. Gupta looked as if he would burst into tears. He swallowed twice.

"The other," he said, "has vanished."

"Vanished? How could it vanish? It was there last week, you said."

"Vanished," said Mr. Gupta.

"How was that? Did someone take it? Did you inquire?"

"Of course. It is a disaster. For me, a real disaster. A disaster."

"Come now. People vanish. Not books."

"Books. Books, Professor Wheeler. You have no idea. At Kosciusko Community College whole shelves vanish as if by magic. And yet everybody who goes in and out is searched."

"Did you ask at the desk, Mr. Gupta? Did they remember seeing the book?"

"Naturally I did so."

"Well?"

"The clerk remembered seeing the book. He remembered putting it on the wheel-rack to be returned to the shelves. That was the last time anyone saw it."

"It must have been put in the wrong place. Those boys are not too careful. Or perhaps it fell behind somewhere."

"Dr. Wheeler, I have searched every shelf in that part of the stacks. I've looked behind the books. I have looked on the floor. I have looked high and low. Believe me, I have looked."

"What about the binder? They may have sent it out for repair."

"There is no record."

Professor Wheeler made a face. Mr. Gupta clutched his ears between thumb and forefinger, and shook the lobes violently.

"What am I to think?" he cried. "A priceless volume! A unique copy! The only one! But enough—I have no one to blame but myself. I should have made sure of it. I should have asked them to put it in the safe. Or else somewhere. But how was I to know?" His face cleared suddenly. "All the same," he said, "nothing is lost. I took my precautions. I have the Xerox."

"You should have the book," said Wheeler. "The Xerox has no value without the book. How do you expect to identify these pages? They might be anything."

"I am not an irresponsible person," said Mr. Gupta. "I am a teacher of English. A member of learned societies. It is true I am at present no more than an instructor. But in Trinidad I was a professor. I have published articles abroad."

"I know," said Wheeler. "That's not the point. I don't doubt your word. But the Lope de Vega canon has been discussed for years, for centuries even. They have worried the question like dogs with a bone. And there has been a good deal of barking and snarling."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Gupta. "Chorley. Rennert. Ticknor. Fitzmaurice Kelly. Menendez Pelayo. And now there is this new edition. Definitive, they call it. In the advertisements."

"That's it," said Wheeler. "A dozen scholars have worked on it for several years. They've solved all the puzzles. They've said the final word. The work is in the press. And now you come along."

"The final word, Professor Wheeler, has not been said. My discovery—"

"Exactly. Exactly. At the critical moment a doctoral student pops up out of left field and spoils everything, and—"

Mr. Gupta smirked.

"I know. I know. My list is dynamite."

"Not dynamite, Mr. Gupta. This is not going to shake the world, I assure you. Not dynamite, no. But it's a fly in the ointment."

Mr. Gupta seemed disappointed. "A fly in the ointment?" he said.

"Provided you can authenticate it. Provided you can produce the book. Produce the book, Mr. Gupta, and your name will sparkle like a diamond in the footnotes—"

"And if not?"

"Then my advice would be to keep quiet about the whole thing. Until the book turns up, at least. This list could be anything. There is no proof whatever that is Lope's list of plays."

"But I told you, Professor, I held the book in my hand. I took it to the Xerox machine. With these hands. And therefore I am morally certain that Philip Massinger—"

"It's no longer a question of that, Mr. Gupta. Forget about Massinger. At the moment nobody gives a damn about Massinger. Anyway, you have nothing to go on, even if you find the book. Is there any extant copy of the Spanish play?"

"Not that I know of. No."

"Well, then—how can you hope to prove that Massinger saw it?"

"The title—"

"The title proves nothing. What does the title prove? Did Massinger know Spanish?"

"There is no evidence that he did not."

"Nor any that he did. And anyway, as I told you, Massinger just now is as dead as a doornail, and nobody cares where he got his damned play. But Lope de Vega, that's something else. Lope is a sacred cow. People have invested time in Lope, reputations, not to say money. Have you any idea how much this edition will cost?"

Mr. Gupta rose to his feet with a gesture that approached majesty.

"Professor Wheeler," he said. "I refuse to be intimidated."

"Aha," said Wheeler.

"Whether the book comes to light again or not—and you may be sure I shall leave no stone unturned—I shall include this list of plays in my dissertation. In an appendix, if necessary. If necessary, in an appendix. And I am fully prepared to defend it."

Wheeler nodded gravely.

"O.K.," he said. "By all means, Mr. Gupta. If that's how you feel about it. O.K."

"O.K.," said Mr. Gupta.

The examination took place in the spring, in room 402 Stallmeyer, which, for reasons that no one had ever fathomed was on the first, or ground floor of that venerable building. The room, in spite of its huge windows, was dark, but there was a magnolia in bloom outside the open sash, and from the campus came the twittering of birds.

When Mr. Gupta was safely ushered out of the room at the close of the session, the committee sat down again around the old oak table, seven aging men, all feeling, for the moment, the exaltation of power as well as the ennui. At the head of the table Professor Grauber, the chairman of the examination, fussed with the papers in front of him, all of which would eventually require signatures in various places. His colleagues sat back in various postures indicative of the languor of spring, each of them waiting for someone to speak. From the open window came the terrifying sounds of a motorcycle backfiring. The chairman spoke.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "what is your pleasure?"

Professor Schneidermann pulled the box of manuscript toward himself and peered at the label.

"Rabindranath Das Gupta," he said. "What sort of name is that?"

"He's an Indian, said Wheeler. "From Trinidad."

"Ah. So. A West Indian."

"No," said Wheeler. "Not a West Indian. An East Indian."

"I see," said Schneidermann. "A West Indian East Indian." They all laughed politely. Professor Schneidermann pursued his inquiry.

"Is this candidate considered black?"

"No," said Wheeler. "He's not black."

"Because," said Schneidermann, "if he is to be considered black—"

"I know," said Wheeler, "I understand. But he's not a black. He's an Indian." Professor Schneidermann went on inexorably. He had, and carefully maintained, a reputation for stubbornness, which served him well.

"If he is not to be considered black," he said, "then some questions arise."

Professor Beale, a large man with an apoplectic face, put both palms on the table, and pushed back his chair noisily.

For my part," he said, "I do not question the candidate's conclusions, which are in any case not startling, far from startling, in fact, banal. It is perfectly clear that much Spanish material found its way in one way or another into English drama in the seventeenth century, and I thought what he wrote about *The Revenger's Tragedy* was not

without merit. Also *The Maid of Honor*. O.K. But there is one thing. This list of plays in the appendix. Supposedly by Lope de Vega. Where is the authority for that?"

Professor Kipnis snorted. "Ah," he said. "I wondered. Where does that come from?"

Wheeler shifted his feet uncomfortably under the table. His knee was aching again. He stamped his foot lightly on the floor, bringing on a sensation of pins and needles, together with a vague feeling of depression.

"He explains that quite fully," he said, "in his introduction, and again in the appendix."

"Yes," said Schneidermann. "And all over again in the notes."

"Well," said Wheeler. "I tried to make him take that out. But he wouldn't."

"I know he explains it," said Kipnis. "But what sort of an explanation do you call that? The book he found it in, according to him, cannot be found again. It disappeared. It disappeared, you mean, just like that?"

"Just like that," said Wheeler.

"Professor Beale leaned forward. "Has anyone else seen this book?" he asked. "Did you yourself ever get to see it?"

"No," said Wheeler. "No. I never did. I asked to see it. But by that time the book was gone."

"Just like that," said Schneidermann.

"That's how it was."

"All I can say," Schneidermann said. "It looks damn fishy."

The two professors who had not so far spoken, Kierney and Salter, nodded gravely, and in unison. Kierney had brought with him a long list of minor corrections which he had intended to read aloud to the candidate, but he had unexpectedly developed a headache and had contented himself with pushing them at him across the table. Now he spoke.

"Unkosher," he said. Kipnis looked at him sharply. Kierney blushed. He cleared his throat. "Unkosher," he said, with emphasis. "Very."

From somewhere in the dignified internal arrangements of Professor Grauber there issued a series of visceral gurgles which announced to the world that it was past his lunch time. They were pleasantly rhythmical sounds like the ripple a brook makes when its current is strong in the spring, but Kierney hoped that nobody but himself could hear them. To make sure, he coughed loudly.

"Well, gentlemen," he said again, "what is your pleasure?"

"I move," Kierney said, "that the dissertation be accepted with minor revisions. I have already handed the candidate a list of notes which I hope—"

"Just a moment," said Beale, "before we vote on this. I have a letter here from California which I think should be considered before we come to a decision. Maybe the chairman would like to read it to the committee." He passed the letter along to the head of the table.

"I also have a letter," said Schneidermann. "From Cambridge."

"And I," Kipnis said, "got one last week from New Haven."

"Me too" said Salter. "Mine came from a colleague in Barcelona."

Papers were produced and passed along. Grauber added one of his own.

"That makes five," he said. He added, "I have never seen anything like it."

"I think," said Wheeler, "it is unnecessary to read these letters. They're all about the same. I have one too somewhere. It seems we have all been similarly favored."

"Not me," said Kierney. "What are all these letters? What's it all about?"

"You didn't get one?"

"No. What is it? Outside pressure?"

"I wouldn't call it that," said Grauber. "No. Friendly suggestion, at the most." He shook his head. "In all my years of academic life I cannot remember any such barrage as this. Over a matter so trivial."

"You call this trivial?" said Beale.

"What I would like to know," said Kipnis, "is how the devil they all got to hear about it."

"The grapevine," said Salter.

"They have spies everywhere," said Schneidermann.

"Yes," said Kipnis, "the C.I.A. We're bugged."

Wheeler grinned. "Nothing like that," he said. "It's only that Mr. Gupta took the precaution to write to each of the men involved with the new edition, enclosing a copy of his discovery. He intended also to write to the *Times*, *TLS*, and the *New York Review of Books*. But I told him not to waste the postage. They wouldn't know what he was talking about."

"The whole thing sounds insane," said Kipnis.

"But what sort of a guy is this?" said Schneidermann. "Is he all there?"

"Oh, definitely," said Wheeler. "Bit paranoid, maybe. But no more than usual. He's convinced there's a conspiracy against him. Maybe there is."

"Like whom?"

"Oh, everybody. The whole world. They're all in cahoots to keep him down. Us included, of course. And especially me. Look—the guy is over fifty. He's worked hard all his life and he's got nowhere. Even in this place where he teaches, people with half his qualifications have been promoted over his head."

"He's not black?" said Schneidermann. "Are you sure?"

"No. He hasn't that advantage."

"He teaches somewhere, you say? Some college? In the Bronx?"

"Staten Island. Some community college. Six years and he's still an instructor. His chairman doesn't like him, he says."

"Does anyone like him?"

"No," said Wheeler. "I'm afraid he's a pain in the neck. A schlemiel."

"A schlimazel," said Kipnis. "I know the type."

"I feel sorry for him," said Wheeler. "He's a good student. A scholar you might say. But I've struggled with him for two years, and I'd love to get him off my back finally." Kierney smiled sympathetically.

"I move," said Kierney, "that we accept this dissertation with minor revisions."

"Second," said Kipnis.

"O.K.," said Beale. "Fine. But what about this damned appendix with the list of plays. It has nothing to do with anything, so far as I can see, and it's causing all the trouble. I move we recommend its elimination."

Grauber shuffled the papers in front of him. "Well," he said, "what with all these letters of protest from all over the country...."

"From all over the world," said Salter.

"Come, now," said Wheeler. "There was just one apiece."

"Not even," Kierney said. "They left me out."

"Well, anyway," said Grauber, "a number of our colleagues have gone so far as to suggest, that is to say, they think that in the interests of good scholarship—or whatever it is—we might do well to suppress...."

Kierney sat up as if stung by a bee. "Suppress?" he said. "Did you say suppress? Is that what they want?"

"Well, no. Not exactly suppress. They don't say exactly in so many words suppress," said Grauber, staring at the papers in his hand. "Curtail. Withhold. Postpone. Postpone until the matter can be properly verified. Until the list is authenticated. That's not altogether unreasonable, after all. Is it?"

"I think we might ask him to leave the appendix out," said Beale. "The fact is it has nothing much to do with his dissertation, and it's bound to cause trouble. If he wants to write an article about it later, that's his business."

"He's already written an article," said Wheeler. "Nobody will publish it."

"Is that so?" said Kierney.

"None of the learned journals will touch it. He's tried five."

"Those boys have a long reach," said Kipnis.

"Well then," said Grauber, "are we agreed? We cut out the appendix?"

"Scalpel!" said Salter, grinning broadly.

"No," said Wheeler. "I'm afraid we can't do that."

"I don't see why not," said Beale. "The appendix is an irrelevancy."

"No," said Wheeler. "Not really."

"You're his sponsor," Kipnis said.

"I am, worse luck. And I've had it with him. But he's telling the truth. He's found the list just as he said."

"But you've nothing but his word for that. The list could be anything."

"I know," said Wheeler.

"Without the book he hasn't a leg to stand on."

"I know," said Wheeler.

"The book must be somewhere," said Schneidermann. "Sooner or later it's bound to turn up. If it exists."

"If it ever existed," said Beale.

"It existed," said Wheeler. "I have no doubt of that. It's just a case of hard luck."

"Is this dissertation going to be published?" said Kierney. "Will it get printed?"

"Not a chance in the world. Unless he pays for it himself. And he can't."

"It's not as if he were a black," said Schneidermann.

"Please," said Wheeler. "It's not a racial issue."

Kipnis laughed bitterly. "Not a racial issue? These days everything is a racial issue."

"At least if he was a woman," said Salter.

"It's a moral issue," said Wheeler. "It doesn't concern him. It concerns us."

"I don't see how," said Beale.

"It's bad for our character," said Wheeler. "I like to sleep nights."

"In thirty years of academic life," said Grauber solemnly, "I have never been faced with a situation like this. Never."

"There's always a first time," said Schneidermann.

"Well, then," said Grauber, "shall we proceed to the vote?"

"I move acceptance with minor revisions," said Kierney.

"Second," Kipnis said.

"And the appendix? What about the appendix? Does it stay in?"

"It stays in," said Wheeler.

"Now just a minute," said Beale.

"There's been a motion," said Wheeler.

"Second," said Kipnis.

Grauber stared a long moment into their faces, each in turn. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"O.K.," he said, "if that's how you want it. All in favor of acceptance?"

One after the other each raised a hand.

"Fine," said Grabuer. "It's carried. Don't forget to sign before you leave."

Ten minutes later, Mr. Gupta marched off in triumph, staggering under the weight of the seven boxes of manuscript he had wedged precariously under his chin, a small sad figure lightly touched with grandeur. Miss Rosenblatt, Wheeler reflected, would doubtless have brought a shopping cart. She would have no need to share the joys of the Via Dolorosa. The committee dispersed, making pleasant remarks, each man drawn to his separate destiny. Schneidermann and Wheeler took the elevator to the third floor.

"Well, that's over, thank God," said Schneidermann. "Too bad, though, he couldn't have been black. If he'd been black, by this time Lope de Vega would have had another 120 plays to his credit."

"130," said Wheeler.

"Right. By the way," said Schneidermann, "is it true they offered you the Sandra Nevins chair?"

"There was some talk of it," said Wheeler. "But I've heard no more about it. I guess it fell through."

"That's a shame," said Schneidermann. "You would have liked it. Nice place to work, Santa Barbara. Lovely climate. Nice beach. Plenty sunshine."

"Yes," said Wheeler. "So I hear."

He felt a sudden throb of pain, and bent down to rub his knee.

"Never mind," said Schneidermann. "I love New York."

"Yes," said Wheeler, "I know. And so say all of us."