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Opening Extract from...

Mildred Pierce

Written by James M. Cain

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James M. Cain

Mildred Pierce



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In the spring of 1931, on a lawn in Glendale, California, a man was bracing trees. It was a tedious job, for he had first to prune dead twigs, then wrap canvas buffers around weak branches, then wind rope slings over the buffers and tie them to the trunks, to hold the weight of the avocados that would ripen in the fall. Yet, although it was a hot afternoon, he took his time about it, and was conscientiously thorough, and whistled. He was a smallish man, in his middle thirties, but in spite of the stains on his trousers, he wore them with an air. His name was Herbert Pierce. When he had finished with the trees, he raked the twigs and dead branches into a pile, carried them back to the garage, and dropped them in a kindling box. Then he got out a mower and mowed the lawn. It was a lawn like thousands of others in southern California: a patch of grass in which grew avocado, lemon, and mimosa trees, with circles of spaded earth around them. The house, too, was like others of its kind: a Spanish bungalow, with white walls and red-tiled roof. Now, Spanish houses are a little outmoded, but at the time they were considered high-toned, and this one was as good as the next, and perhaps a little better.

The mowing over, he got out a coil of hose, screwed it to a spigot, and proceeded to water. He was painstaking about this too, shooting the water all over the trees, down on the spaded circles of earth, over the tiled walk, and finally on the grass. When the whole place was damp and smelled like rain, he turned off the water, pulled the hose through his hand to drain it, coiled

it, and put it in the garage. Then he went around front and examined his trees, to make sure the water hadn't drawn the slings too tight. Then he went into the house.

The living-room he stepped into corresponded to the lawn he left. It was indeed the standard living-room sent out by department stores as suitable for a Spanish bungalow, and consisted of a crimson velvet coat of arms, displayed against the wall; crimson velvet drapes, hung on iron spears; a crimson rug, with figured border; a settee in front of the fireplace, flanked by two chairs, all of these having straight backs and beaded seats; a long oak table holding a lamp with stained-glass shade; two floor lamps of iron, to match the overhead spears, and having crimson silk shades; one table, in a corner, in the Grand Rapids style, and one radio, on this table, in the bakelite style. On the tinted walls, in addition to the coat of arms, were three paintings: one of a butte at sunset, with cow skeletons in the foreground; one of a cowboy, herding cattle through snow, and one of a covered-wagon train, plodding through an alkali flat. On the long table was one book, called 'Cyclopedia of Useful Knowledge', stamped in gilt and placed on an interesting diagonal. One might object that this living-room achieved the remarkable feat of being cold and at the same time stuffy, and that it would be quite oppressive to live in. But the man was vaguely proud of it, especially the pictures, which he had convinced himself were 'pretty good'. As for living in it, it had never once occurred to him.

Today, he gave it neither a glance nor a thought. He hurried through, whistling, and went back to a bedroom, which was filled with a seven-piece suite in bright green, and showed feminine touches. He dropped off his work clothes, hung them in a closet, and stepped naked into the bathroom, where he turned on water for a bath. Here again was reflected the civilisation in which he lived, but with a sharp difference. For whereas it was, and still is, a civilisation somewhat naive as to lawns, living-rooms, pictures, and other things of an aesthetic nature, it is genius itself, and has forgotten more than all other civilisations ever knew, in the realm of practicality. The bathroom that he now whistled in was a utile jewel: it was in green tile and white tile; it was as clean as an operating room; everything was

in its proper place, and everything worked. Twenty seconds after the man tweaked the spigots, he stepped into a bath of exactly the temperature he wanted, washed himself clean, tweaked the drain, stepped out, dried himself on a clean towel, and stepped into the bedroom again, without once missing a bar of the tune he was whistling, or thinking there was anything remarkable about it.

After combing his hair, he dressed. Slacks hadn't made their appearance then, but grey flannels had: he put on a fresh pair, with polo shirt and blue lounge coat. Then he strolled back to the kitchen, a counterpart of the bathroom, where his wife was icing a cake. She was a small woman, considerably younger than himself; but as there was a smear of chocolate on her face, and she wore a loose green smock, it was hard to tell what she looked like, except for a pair of rather voluptuous legs that showed between smock and shoes. She was studying a design, in a book of such designs, that showed a bird holding a scroll in its beak, and now attempted a reproduction of it, with a pencil, on a piece of tablet paper. He watched for a few moments, glanced at the cake, said it looked swell. This was perhaps an understatement, for it was a gigantic affair, eighteen inches across the middle and four layers high, covered with a sheen like satin. But after his comment he yawned, said: 'Well – don't see there's much else I can do around here. Guess I'll take a walk down the street.'

'You going to be home for supper?'

'I'll try to make it, but if I'm not home by six don't wait for me. I may be tied up.'

'I want to know.'

'I told you, if I'm not home by six—'

'That doesn't do me any good at all. I'm making this cake for Mrs Whitley, and she's going to pay me three dollars for it. Now if you're going to be home I'll spend part of that money on lamb chops for your supper. If you're not, I'll buy something the children will like better.'

'Then count me out.'

'That's all I want to know.'

There was a grim note in the scene that was obviously out of key with his humour. He stood around uncertainly, then made a

bid for appreciation. 'I fixed up those trees. Tied them up good, so the limbs won't bend down when the avocados get big, the way they did last year. Cut the grass. Looks pretty nice out there.'

'You going to water the grass?'

'I *did* water it.'

He said this with quiet complacency, for he had set a little trap for her, and she had fallen into it. But the silence that followed had a slightly ominous feel to it, as though he himself might have fallen into a trap that he wasn't aware of. Uneasily he added: 'Gave it a good wetting down.'

'Pretty early for watering the grass, isn't it?'

'Oh, one time's as good as another.'

'Most people, when they water the grass, wait till later in the day, when the sun's not so hot, and it'll do some good, and not be a waste of good water that somebody else has to pay for.'

'Who, for instance?'

'I don't see anybody work around here but me.'

'You see any work I *can* do that I *don't* do?'

'So you get done early.'

'Come on, Mildred, what are you getting at?'

'She's waiting for you, so go on.'

'Who's waiting for me?'

'I think you know.'

'If you're talking about Maggie Biederhof, I haven't seen her for a week, and she never did mean a thing to me except somebody to play rummy with when I had nothing else to do.'

'That's practically all the time, if you ask me.'

'I wasn't asking you.'

'What do you do with her? Play rummy with her a while, and then unbutton that red dress she's always wearing without any brassieres under it, and flop her on the bed? And then have yourself a nice sleep, and then get up and see if there's some cold chicken in her icebox, and then play rummy some more, and then flop her on the bed again? Gee, that must be swell. I can't imagine anything nicer than that.'

His tightening face muscles showed his temper was rising, and he opened his mouth to say something. Then he thought better of it. Then presently he said: 'Oh, all right, all right,' in what

was intended to be a lofty, resigned way, and started out of the kitchen.

'Wouldn't you like to take her something?'

'Take her—? What do you mean?'

'Well, there was some batter left over, and I made up some little cakes I was saving for the children. But fat as she is, she must like sweets, and – here, I'll wrap them up for her.'

'How'd you like to go to hell?'

She laid aside the bird sketch and faced him. She started to talk. She had little to say about love, fidelity, or morals. She talked about money, and his failure to find work; and when she mentioned the lady of his choice, it was not as a siren who had stolen his love, but as the cause of the shiftlessness that had lately come over him. He broke in frequently, making excuses for himself, and repeating that there was no work, and insisting bitterly that if Mrs Biederhof had come into his life, a guy was entitled to some peace, instead of a constant nagging over things that lay beyond his control. They spoke quickly, as though they were saying things that scalded their mouths, and had to be cooled with spit. Indeed, the whole scene had an ancient, almost classical ugliness to it, for they uttered the same recriminations that have been uttered since the beginning of marriage, and added little of originality to them, and nothing of beauty. Presently they stopped, and he started out of the kitchen again, but she stopped him. 'Where are you going?'

'Would I be telling you?'

'Are you going to Maggie Biederhof's?'

'Suppose I am?'

'Then you might as well pack right now, and leave for good, because if you go out of that door I'm not going to let you come back. If I have to take this cleaver to you, you're not coming back in this house.'

She lifted the cleaver out of a drawer, held it up, put it back, while he watched contemptuously. 'Keep on, Mildred, keep right on. If you don't watch out, I may call you one of these days. I wouldn't ask much to take a powder on you, right now.'

'You're not calling me. I'm calling you. You go to her this afternoon, and that's the last you've seen of this house.'

'I go where I goddam please to go.'

'Then pack up, Bert.'

His face went white, and their eyes met for a long stare. 'OK, then, I will.'

'You better do it now. The sooner the better.'

'OK . . . OK.'

He stalked out of the kitchen. She filled a paper cornucopia with icing, snipped the end off with a pair of scissors, and started to ice the bird on the cake.

By then he was in the bedroom, pitching travelling bags from the closet to the middle of the floor. He was pretty noisy about it, perhaps hoping she would hear him and come in there, begging him to change his mind. If so, he was disappointed, and there was nothing for him to do but pack. His first care was for an outfit of evening regalia, consisting of shirts, collars, studs, ties, and shoes, as well as the black suit he called his 'tuxedo'. All these he wrapped tenderly in tissue paper, and placed in the bottom of the biggest bag. He had, in truth, seen better days. In his teens he had been a stunt rider for the movies, and was still vain of his horsemanship. Then an uncle had died and left him a ranch on the outskirts of Glendale. Glendale is now an endless suburb, bearing the same relation to Los Angeles as Queens bears to New York. But at that time it was a village, and a pretty scrubby village at that, with a freight yard at one end, open country at the other, and a car track down the middle.

So he bought a ten-gallon hat, took possession of the ranch, and tried to operate it, but without much success. His oranges didn't grade, and when he tried grapes, the vines had just started when Prohibition came along and he dug them out, in favour of walnuts. But he had just selected his trees when the grape market zoomed on the bootleg demand, and this depressed him so much that for a time his land lay idle, while he tried to get his bearings in a dizzily-spinning world. But one day he was visited by three men who made him a proposition. He didn't know it, but southern California, and particularly Glendale, was on the verge of the real-estate boom of the 1920s, such a boom as has rarely been seen on this earth.

So, almost overnight, with his three hundred acres that were located in the exact spot where people wanted to build, he became a subdivider, a community builder, a man of vision, a big shot. He and the three gentlemen formed a company, called Pierce Homes, Inc., with himself as president. He named a street after himself, and on Pierce Drive, after he married Mildred, built this very home that he now occupied, or would occupy for the next twenty minutes. Although at that time he was making a great deal of money, he declined to build a pretentious place. He told the architect: 'Pierce Homes are for folks, and what's good enough for folks is good enough for me.' Yet it was a little better, in some ways, than what is usually good enough for folks. It had three bathrooms, one for each bedroom, and certain features of the construction were almost luxurious. It was a mockery now, and the place had been mortgaged and remortgaged, and the money from the mortgages long since spent. But once it had been something, and he liked to thump the walls, and comment on how solidly they were built.

Instead of putting his money in a bank, he had invested it in A. T. & T., and for some years had enjoyed daily vindication of his judgment, for the stock soared majestically, until he had a 350,000-dollar 'equity' in it, meaning there was that much difference between the price of the stock and the margin on which he carried it. But then came Black Thursday of 1929, and his plunge to ruin was so rapid he could hardly see Pierce Homes disappear on his way down. In September he had been rich, and Mildred picked out the mink coat she would buy when the weather grew cooler. In November, with the weather not a bit cooler, he had had to sell the spare car to pay current bills. All this he took cheerfully, for many of his friends were in the same plight, and he could joke about it, and even boast about it. What he couldn't face was the stultification of his sagacity. He had become so used to crediting himself with vast acumen that he could not bring himself to admit that his success was all luck, due to the location of his land rather than to his own personal qualities. So he still thought in terms of the vast deeds he would do when things got a little better. As for seeking a job, he couldn't bring himself to do it, and in spite of all he told

Mildred, he hadn't made the slightest effort in this direction. So, by steady deterioration, he had reached his present status with Mrs Biederhof. She was a lady of uncertain years, with a small income from hovels she rented to Mexicans. Thus she was in relative affluence when others were in want, and had time on her hands. She listened to the tales of his grandeur, past and future, fed him, played cards with him, and smiled coyly when he unbuttoned her dress. He lived in a world of dreams, lolling by the river, watching the clouds go by.

He kept looking at the door, as though he expected Mildred to appear, but it remained closed. When little Ray came home from school, and scampered back for her cake, he stepped over and locked it. In a moment she was out there, rattling the knob, but he kept still. He heard Mildred call something to her, and she went out front, where other children were waiting for her. The child's name was really Moire, and she had been named by the principles of astrology, supplemented by numerology, as had the other child, Veda. But the practitioner had neglected to include pronunciation on her neatly typewritten slip, and Bert and Mildred didn't know that it was one of the Gaelic variants of Mary, and pronounced Moyra. They took it for a French name of the more exclusive kind, and pronounced it Mwaray, and quickly shortened it to Ray.

His last bag strapped up, he unlocked the door and walked dramatically to the kitchen. Mildred was still at work on the cake, which by now was a thing of overwhelming beauty, with the bird sitting on a leafy green twig, holding the scroll, 'Happy Birthday to Bob', perkily in its beak, while a circle of rosebuds, spaced neatly around the rim, set up a sort of silent twittering. She didn't look up. He moistened his lips, asked: 'Is Veda home?'

'Not yet she isn't.'

'I laid low when Ray came to the door just now. I didn't see any reason for her to know about it. I don't see any reason for either of them to know about it. I don't want you to tell them I said goodbye or anything. You can just say—'

'I'll take care of it.'

'OK, then. I'll leave it to you.'

He hesitated. Then: 'Well, goodbye, Mildred.'

With jerky steps, she walked over to the wall, stood leaning on it, her face hidden, then beat on it once or twice, helplessly, with her fists. 'Go on, Bert. There's nothing to say. Just – go on.'

When she turned around he was gone, and then the tears came, and she stood away from the cake, to keep them from falling on it. But when she heard the car back out of the garage, she gave a low, frightened exclamation, and ran to the window. They used it so seldom now, except on Sundays if they had a little money to buy gas, that she had completely forgotten about it. And so, as she saw this man slip out of her life, the only clear thought in her head was that now she had no way to deliver the cake.

She had got the last rosebud in place, and was removing stray flecks of icing with a cotton swab wound on a toothpick, when there was a rap on the screen door, and Mrs Gessler, who lived next door, came in. She was a thin, dark woman of forty or so, with lines on her face that might have come from care, and might have come from liquor. Her husband was in the trucking business, but they were more prosperous than most truckers were at that time. There was a general impression that Gessler trucks often dropped down to Point Loma, where certain low, fast boats put into the cove.

Seeing the cake, Mrs Gessler gave an exclamation, and came over to look. It was indeed worth the stare which her beady eyes gave it. All its decorations were now in place, but in spite of their somewhat conventional design, it had an aroma, a texture, a totality that proclaimed high distinction. It carried on its face the guarantee that every crumb would meet the inexorable confectioners' test: It must melt on the tongue.

In an awed way, Mrs Gessler murmured: 'I don't see how you do it, Mildred. It's beautiful, just beautiful.'

'If you have to do it, you can do it.'

'But it's *beautiful*!'

Only after a long final look did Mrs Gessler get to what she came for. She had a small plate in her hand, with another plate clamped over it, and now lifted the top one. 'I thought maybe

you could use it. I fricasseed it for supper, but Ike's had a call to Long Beach, and I'm going with him, and I was afraid it might spoil.'

Mildred got a plate, slid the chicken on it, and put it in the icebox. Then she washed Mrs Gessler's plates, dried them, and handed them back. 'I can use practically anything, Lucy. Thanks.'

'Well, I've got to run along.'

'Have a nice time.'

'Tell Bert I said hello.'

'. . . I will.'

Mrs Gessler stopped. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Come on, baby. Something's wrong. What is it?'

'Bert's gone.'

'You mean – for good?'

'Just now. He left.'

'Walked out on you, just like that?'

'He got a little help, maybe. It had to come.'

'Well what do you know about that? And that floppy-looking frump he left you for. How can he even look at her?'

'She's what he wants.'

'But she doesn't even *wash*!'

'Oh, what's the use of talking? If she likes him, all right then, she's got him. Bert's all right. And it wasn't his fault. It was just – everything. And I did pester him. I nagged him, he said, and he ought to know. But I can't take things lying down, I don't care if we've got a Depression or not. If she can, then they ought to get along fine, because that's exactly the way he's built. But I've got my own ideas, and I can't change them even for him.'

'What are you going to do?'

'What am I doing now?'

A grim silence fell on both women. Then Mrs Gessler shook her head. 'Well, you've joined the biggest army on earth. You're the great American institution that never gets mentioned on Fourth of July – a grass widow with two small children to support.'

'Oh, Bert's all right.'

'He's all right, but he's a swine and they're all dirty swine.'