

Those who say, with more vigor than originality, that if they want a message they can call Western Union, may object to this story of Mr. Tompkins, Mrs. Tompkins, and the rowk bird. Classical scholars may murmur or mutter something about panem et circenses. And those who wish nothing more than to enjoy something short and which may pass for light can dig right in and dig this, too. Maybe multi-levelled is the word we are groping for. Tweet-tweet!

DIALOGUE IN A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DINING ROOM

by Robert F. Young

ORDINARILY, CONVERSATION IN the Tompkins apartmenage went something like this:

MR. TOMPKINS: In the cafeteria this noon I heard over Teevy that they've taken another one of those radical malcontents into custody.

MRS. TOMPKINS: They have? What was this one doing?

MR. TOMPKINS: The same thing as the others—going around saying mean things about ordinary people like us. This one said we've become 'a government-subsidized juggernaut of destruction bent on wiping every last vestige of truth and beauty from the face of the earth'. Can you imagine anyone having the nerve to make such a sarcastic remark? Why, the president himself said just the other day that if it wasn't for people like us faithfully going about our daily tasks and keeping our noses clean, the world would come apart at the seams!

MRS. TOMPKINS: And he's right, too. People like us are the salt of the earth, and if you ask me I think those malcontents are jealous of us. What should I dial for supper—baked ham or roast beef?

MR. TOMPKINS: If it wasn't for ordinary people like us keeping the boat steady, people like them would have overturned it long ago, and then where would everybody be? . . . Isn't there anything else on the menu besides baked ham and roast beef?

MRS. TOMPKINS: What's the matter with you, Arthur? You know today's Thursday and that on Thursday all apart-o-matic developments ever serve is baked ham and roast beef.

MR. TOMPKINS: That's right—I forgot. Roast beef then, I guess.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Baked or mashed potatoes?

MR. TOMPKINS: Mashed. While you're up, turn Teevy on, will you?

On the evening before the arrival of the Bartlett Bird, conversation in the Tompkins apartmenage went like this:

MR. TOMPKINS: I see by the paper that Grimbel's have got a big sale on Martian rowks. Seems they bought up a whole shipment of them so they could sell them at half price.

MRS. TOMPKINS: What's a rowk?

MR. TOMPKINS: You mean to tell me you don't know what a rowk is?

MRS. TOMPKINS: Sounds like some kind of crazy bird to me. What should I dial for supper—baked beans or chop suey?

MR. TOMPKINS: It's a talking bird, not a brazy bird. Something like a parrot, only smaller and a thousand times smarter—never forgets anything it hears. They have purple feathers and their breasts are covered with pink polka dots, and they sleep hanging upside down from their perches . . . Isn't there anything else on the menu besides baked beans and chop suey?

MRS. TOMPKINS: What's the matter with you, Arthur? You know today's Monday and that on Monday all apart-o-matic developments ever serve is baked beans and chop suey.

MR. TOMPKINS: That's right—I forgot. Baked beans then, I guess. Think we should buy one of

them? I could stop in after work tomorrow afternoon.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Sure, why not—as long as they're on sale. It will give me somebody to talk to during the day while you're at work. Should I dial the beans with salt pork or with bacon?

MR. TOMPKINS: Salt pork. While you're up, turn Teevy on, will you?

MR. TOMPKINS: How come there's only one rowk left? The paper said you bought a whole shipment.

THE BIRD CLERK: Certainly we bought a whole shipment. You don't think Grimbel's would lie, do you?"

MR. TOMPKINS: Then how come there's only one left?

THE BIRD CLERK: What did you expect? The paper said 'sale', didn't it? Why, with all the people coming in here today and buying rowks like crazy, you're lucky there *is* one left.

MR. TOMPKINS (pointing to the feathered occupant of a lone cage standing on the counter): If you had so many people buying them, how come nobody bought *that* one?

THE BIRD CLERK: Because we of Grimbel's, being honest people, couldn't in all honesty put that particular one up for sale till all the others were gone. It was overexposed—probably by one of the members of the crew of the Mars-Earth freighter that brought the shipment in, to some book-tapes. Mr. Grum, our book-tape department consultant, wasn't able to identify the tapes positively, but he is of the opinion that one of them must have been Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*.

MR. TOMPKINS (wisely): I'm familiar with that one. It's about pears, isn't it?

THE BIRD CLERK: Not according to Mr. Grum. According to him, it's a collection of old poems and sayings. You've heard of 'walking encyclopoedias', haven't you? Well this rowk here is a sort of 'flying encyclopoedia', if you know what I mean, only instead of being filled with useful facts and figures, it's filled with a lot of impractical words and phrases. Say something to it, and you'll see what I mean.

MR. TOMPKINS (*facing the cage*): Pretty boy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Blessings on thee, little man, Barefoot boy with cheeks of tan!'

THE BIRD CLERK: There, you see? It doesn't repeat things the way it's supposed to—it comes back with something original.

MR. TOMPKINS: Gimmee a kiss, pretty boy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Jenny kissed me when we met, Jumping from the chair she sat in!'

MR. TOMPKINS (*gaping*): Who's Jenny?

THE BIRD CLERK: Search me. Look, just before you came in, the floor manager gave me the authority to knock off twenty percent on this one, so if you want it you can have it for four fifths of the regular price—plus the price of the cage, of course.

MR. TOMPKINS (*dubiously*): I don't know . . .

THE BIRD CLERK: Twenty-five percent off.

MR. TOMPKINS: Well . . .

THE BIRD CLERK: Fifty percent, and that's as low as I can go.

MR. TOMPKINS: You've made a sale.

THE BIRD CLERK: And you, sir, have made a bargain.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'But in the way of bargain, mark ye me, I'll cavil on the ninth part of a hair!'

On the evening of the Bartlett Bird's arrival, conversation in the Tompkins apartmenage went like this:

MRS. TOMPKINS: I see you got one. Did it say anything yet?

MR. TOMPKINS (*closing the door and setting the cage on a nearby table*): It's said plenty, but none of it amounted to very much. It's a Bartlett bird.

MRS. TOMPKINS: A Bartlett bird! I thought you were going to get a rowk.

MR. TOMPKINS (*removing his coat and sitting down beside her on the viewing couch*): It is a rowk. But it got overexposed to a bunch of book-tapes, and every time you say something to it, it comes back with part of a poem or a saying.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Well all I got to say is, they saw you coming.

MR. TOMPKINS: But I saw them first. I got it for a song.

MRS. TOMPKINS: But what good is it if you can't teach it to talk?

MR. TOMPKINS: Oh, I'll teach it to talk all right. Just give me time.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Imagine, a bird trying to be different from other birds. Just who does it think it is! What should I dial for supper—pork chops or liver?

MR. TOMPKINS: It's not really trying to be different. It just got overexposed, like I said.

MRS. TOMPKINS: It's the same difference.

MR. TOMPKINS: How come pork chops and liver again? Seems to me they were on the menu just the other day.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Oh, they were not, Arthur! They haven't been on the menu for a whole week. The way you talk, sometimes I think you're getting to be one of those radical malcontents who think our civilization isn't good enough for them!

MR. TOMPKINS (*hastily*): Pork chops.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Wheat bread or white?

MR. TOMPKINS: White.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Bread and circuses! Bread and circuses!'

MR. TOMPKINS: Little bird, it's high time somebody brought you up to date.

THE BARTLETT BIRD (*hopping up and down on its perch*): *Epigoni! Epigoni!*

MRS. TOMPKINS: Now it's calling us pigs.

MR. TOMPKINS: .It said `epigoni', not `pigs'.

MRS. TOMPKINS: `Epigoni'? What's that?

MR. TOMPKINS: I don't know—it's Greek to me.

MRS. TOMPKINS (*sniffing*): Some bird! Can't even speak plain English.

MR. TOMPKINS: Just you wait till after supper—I'll teach it some good old plain English!

MRS. TOMPKINS (*getting up and going over to the dial-o-meal*): You'd better!

Later:

MR. TOMPKINS (*setting his empty plate on the serve-o-matic supper table and facing the Bartlett Bird's cage*): And now, little bird, it's time for your first lesson.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: "The time has come," the Walrus said, "to talk of many things—"

MRS. TOMPKINS (*re-activating the serve-o-matic supper table and sending it rolling back into the serve-o-lift whence it had come*): Ha ha.

MR. TOMPKINS: Shut up! (*To the Bartlett Bird*): If you know what's good for your own welfare, little bird, you'll straighten up in a hurry, and start flying right!

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare, and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.'

MR. TOMPKINS: Now see here!

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'The sea of faith Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd . . .

MRS. TOMPKINS (*laughing*): Who's teaching who?

THE BARTLETT BIRD: `Ah, love, let us be true To One another, for the world, which seems—'

MR. TOMPKINS: I'll show it! I'll wring its confounded neck!

THE BARTLETT BIRD: To lie before us like a land of dreams—'

MRS. TOMPKINS: You'll do nothing of the sort. We're going to get our money's worth out of it if it takes all year!

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'So various, so beautiful, so new —'

MR. TOMPKINS: But how?

THE BARTLETT BIRD: `Rath really neither joy, nor love, nor light—'

MRS. TOMPKINS: I'll think of something.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain—'

MRS. TOMPKINS: Meanwhile, why don't you cover its cage and I'll turn on Teevy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'And we are here as on a darkling plain—“

MR. TOMPKINS (*unfolding the cover*): Good idea.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight—'

MRS. TOMPKINS (*pausing halfway to the television set*): Teevy! Why, that's it, Arthur—that's it!

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Where ignorant armies clash by night!'

MR. TOMPKINS (*covering the cage*): What's it?

MRS. TOMPKINS: Don't you see? If it got the way it is from being overexposed to book-tapes, maybe it can be cured by being overexposed to Teevy. Every night before we go to bed we can set the cage in front of the speaker and turn on one of those all-night programs. Or we can use the radio, for that matter.

MR. TOMPKINS: H'm'm.

MRS. TOMPKINS: Well it's certainly worth trying, isn't it? After all, you can't take the bird back, and it's no good the way it is.

MR. TOMPKINS (*with sudden decision*): All right, we'll do it!

On the morning after the Bartlett Bird's arrival, conversation in the Tompkins apartmenage went like this:

MRS. TOMPKINS: What should I dial for breakfast? Eggs or cereal?

MR. TOMPKINS: Cereal.

MRS. TOMPKINS: I wonder if the treatment did any good.

MR. TOMPKINS (*going over to the cage, uncovering it, and peering inside*): Pretty boy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Blessings on thee' . . . 'Blessings on thee' . . .

MRS. TOMPKINS: See?—it's starting to forget!

MR. TOMPKINS: Gimmee a kiss, pretty boy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD (*blinking rapidly*): Jenny . . . chukchuk . . . Try lipsnack, the protein-packed lipstick. Gives you pep while you pet—The most energized kiss-snack yet!

MRS. TOMPKINS: See?

THE BARTLETT BIRD: The sea of . . . of . . .

MR. TOMPKINS: I'll tell you what. Turn up the volume and keep it before the Teevy all day. By tonight, it ought to be cured.”

MRS. TOMPKINS: We'll get our money's worth out of it yet! Just leave the whole thing to me.

MR. TOMPKINS: Hurry up with breakfast, or I'll be late for work.

MRS. TOMPKINS (*dialing*): Do you want toast with your cereal or rolls?

MR. TOMPKINS: Rolls.

On the evening after the Bartlett Bird's arrival, conversation in the Tompkins apartmenage went like this:

MR. TOMPKINS (*closing the door and taking off his coat*): Well, how did it work?

MRS. TOMPKINS: Fine. The poor thing's still a little mixed up, but it won't be long before it's back to normal. I've been teaching it the wolf whistle, and it's almost got it down pat.

MR. TOMPKINS (*going over to the cage and peering inside*): Pretty boy.

THE BARTLETT BIRD: 'Blessings on thee' . . . 'Blessings on thee' . . . Pretty boy! Pretty boy! Pretty boy!

MRS. TOMPKINS: Quite an improvement, wouldn't you say?

MR. TOMPKINS (*sitting down beside her on the viewing couch*): Well I guess so!

MRS. TOMPKINS: What should I dial for supper—sauerkraut and frankfurters or spaghetti and meat balls?

MR. TOMPKINS: Seems to me—

MRS. TOMPKINS: We didn't have either one for a whole week! Honestly, Arthur, sometimes you

act as though you don't appreciate this wonderful world we're living in! Would you like to go back to the dark ages when ordinary people like us had to shift for themselves and didn't have government-subsidized jobs to work at and government-subsidized apart-o-matic developments to live and eat in? When 'welfare' was a dirty word? Would you, Arthur? Would you?

MR. TOMPKINS (*guiltily*): Of course not. Spaghetti and meat balls, I guess . . . Did you keep the rowk exposed to Teevy all day like I told you to?

MRS. TOMPKINS: Every minute, It just goes to show you that you've got to use your head, doesn't it? Why, we almost got stuck with something worthless, and just by applying a little common sense we turned it into something worthwhile. Do you want white or rye?

MR. TOMPKINS: Rye.

THE BARTLETT BIRD (*blinking furiously*): Bread and . . . bread and . . . *tweet-tweet!*
Tweet-tweet!