

A boy with a parrot on his shoulder was walking along the railway tracks. His gait was dreamlike and he swung a daisy as he went. With each step the boy dragged his toes in the rail bed, as if measuring out his journey with careful ruled marks of his shoetops in the gravel. It was midsummer, and there was something about the black hair and pale face of the boy against the green unfurling flag of the downs beyond, the rolling white eye of the daisy, the knobby knee in their short pants, the self-important air of the handsome gray parrot with its savage red tail feather, that charmed the old man as he watched them go by. Charmed him, or aroused his sense—a faculty at one time renowned throughout Europe—of promising anomaly.

The old man lowered the latest number of *The British Bee Journal* to the rug of Shetland wool that was spread across his own knobby but far from charming knees, and brought the long bones of his face closer to the window-pane. The tracks—a spur of the Brighton-Eastbourne line, electrified in the late twenties with the consolidation of the Southern Railway routes—ran along an embankment a hundred yards to the north of the cottage, between the concrete posts of a wire fence. It was ancient glass the old man peered through, rich with ripples and bubbles that twisted and toyed with the world outside. Yet even through this distorting pane it seemed to the old man that he had never before glimpsed two beings more intimate in their parsimonious sharing of a sunny summer afternoon than these.

He was struck, as well, by their apparent silence. It seemed probable to him that in any grouping of an African gray parrot—a notoriously prolix species—and a boy of nine or ten, at any given moment, one or the other of them ought to be talking. Here was another anomaly. As for what he had promised, this the old man—though he had once made his fortune and his reputation through a long and brilliant series of extrapolations from unlikely groupings of facts—could not, could never, have begun to foretell.

As he came nearly in line with the old man's window, some one hundred yards away, the