

CAMERA

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.37

Although a man with little interest in art, Peter Montignac bought a camera on a recent visit to London and has spent weeks traversing the grounds of Leyville, taking photographs of trees and wildlife. He sends the film to a chap in London who develops the negatives into glossy black-and-white prints, which are then framed and placed in his study. He's one of the first men in England to own a camera, a fact that he mentions every time he picks it up.

He caught his two children, Andrew and Stella, in the study a few hours earlier taking photographs of each other and, only for the fact of it being Andrew's birthday, he would have skinned them both alive. Instead he simply growled that it was not a toy and if he caught them with it again, there'd be hell to pay.

Later, they gather in the living-room for the birthday cake, Peter and Ann, the two children, and Owen, the nephew they adopted when his own parents were killed. They didn't do it out of charity, they felt they had a responsibility towards the lad and besides, if they didn't take him in his French relatives would have done so and that would never do. He's a quiet lad and they don't know what to make of him most of the time so treat him like a guest they can't get rid of.

'A photograph,' says Ann, clapping her hands together. 'We should take a family photograph.'

'Indeed we should,' says Peter, reaching for the camera and winding the roll on. 'I'm one of the first men in England to own one, you know. Everyone step close together.' He looks through the viewfinder and adjusts it slightly, ordering his family left a little, right a little, closer together, further apart, as if he's been taking classes from Bill Brandt about how to photograph the English nobility. 'That's perfect,' he says finally. 'Now everybody smile and say -'

'Oh Peter, no,' cries Ann, shaking her head. 'It won't be a family photograph if you're not in it.'

'Well I can hardly be on both sides of the lens, now can I?' he asks.

'No, but...' Ann looks around and catches the eye of her young nephew, the only member of the family who has shown no signs of interest in the new toy. 'Perhaps someone else could take the picture,' she adds tentatively. 'So it would truly be a *family* portrait.'

A few moments later and his small fingers hold the camera as he frames the four of them carefully, aware of the looks of jealousy on his cousin's faces. A family portrait.

'Smile,' he says, preparing to press the button but instead he loosens his grip ever so slightly and watches as the camera falls quickly to the ground, lands on its side, and with an insolent smack, the lens, shutter, body, aperture, viewfinder, and sprockets bouncing out to separate parts of the room. 'Sorry,' he says after a moment, biting his lip.