

## Short Stories

### Taxi

Like a sultan of old in his harem choosing a companion for the night, John W. Hutchinson paused to deliberate in his dressing room before a vast array of ties. As he reached for a burgundy tie with polka dots, it swished coquettishly from its hook and into his hands with the joyful snap of a silky whip. He ran it around his neck, and grasping the broader end, drew it over, behind and around the narrow end. Lifting it up to his Adam's apple he then passed it through the resulting ring and slid the knot towards his shirt collar to lodge it firmly against the mother-of-pearl button. This done, he glanced at the mirror and congratulated himself on yet another perfect knot. Small, oblong and impeccably formed, it was, he knew, precisely three centimetres high. Not one iota more or less. The secret lay in both the thickness of the tie and the precise height at which it was knotted. Too thick the tie and your knot would be too fat, too flimsy and it would be too thin; start knotting it too low down the front of your shirt and your knot would be too small, knot it too high and it would be too large. John W., who was extremely careful never to purchase too broad or too reedy a tie however much he might have fancied the colour and the pattern, always started knotting his tie between the second and the third button-hole of his bespoke shirt, and the resulting Kent knot was always top-notch.

As sometimes happened as he dressed, his mind turned to his brother Roscoe and the Bolo ties he favoured – thin leather braids held by a silver ring set with a precious stone, which went so well with his huge Stetson hats. John W. had soon realised that he could never compete with Roscoe on Texan terrain and so had taken the opposite path. Based on genealogical research of doubtful accuracy that identified the Houston Hutchinsons as Plantagenet descendants of King Henry II through his mistress Ida, Countess of Norfolk, from his youth John W. had sought to cultivate the image of an English aristocrat. He attended Yale where his brother Roscoe had studied in Austin, Texas, ordered double-breasted suits and shirts with a Bengal stripe while Roscoe preferred seersucker jackets and short-sleeved button down shirts, and patronised London boot-makers on American tour where Roscoe remained faithful to his pointed cowboy boots. So his joy knew no bounds when his father, a gruff self-made-man to whom this always immaculately turned-out son appeared effeminate and morally suspect, decided to get rid of him by packing him off to manage the London office of Hutchinson Oil.

So it was that John W., now answering to the simple name of John (he had dropped the W. as too Texan), found himself in the England of his dreams, with a splendid flat in Mayfair, a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace – and, it turned out, from his office in Park Lane – and membership of a gentlemen's club that had once had Beau Brummell on its roll. Being at heart a perfect English gentleman, he felt like a fish in water. Nor did appearances deceive: he deployed the entire panoply of bespoke suits, shirts and shoes in keeping with the character. One thing alone was missing, he felt, which he had little needed in Texas but which, in England, proved indispensable, and this was some (but not any) form of protection against inclement weather.

Hat or umbrella? The decision proved tricky. A hat offered the advantage of lengthening the silhouette. It also epitomised gallantry on being doffed to acknowledge a lady's presence, or tipped in courteous greeting in the street. And it further conferred a measure of authority by bestowing the dignity of a dress uniform upon a lounge suit.

So a hat had its advantages, and he was on the point of purchasing half a dozen (from Lock's, of course), when he was brought up short by the sight of a man with an umbrella striding along on the other side of the road. An umbrella, he now realised, gave a man of the world that air of insouciance without which there can be no true elegance – particularly when it was flicked smartly up and down to beat time on the pavement, as this particular gentleman was doing. Having once more considered the pros and cons of umbrellas and hats, he decided that, in the end, bearing outweighed a fine silhouette, poise mattered more than gallantry, and a swagger trumped authority. And so he opted for an umbrella, which for him naturally meant a Brigg.

Swaine Adeney Brigg, umbrella makers since 1798, had for Hutchinson the considerable advantage of having traded by appointment to numerous British monarchs, and the equally considerable convenience of being located within the magic circle formed by Mayfair, Pall Mall and St James's, which contained his flat, his club, his barber, his tailor, his shirtmaker, his bootmaker and his wine merchant. To be on the safe side, he nevertheless decided to first pay a visit to James Smith & Sons, the other major London name for umbrellas, at a somewhat less central and far less exclusive address in New Oxford Street.

He thus set off for James Smith & Sons with a certain lack of conviction. But on entering the shop's timeless atmosphere he found himself so taken that he immediately forgot its dreadfully humdrum, almost suburban location, and the lack of any armorial crest. When it came to references, James Smith & Sons could, it seemed, offer no better than Gladstone.

What appealed so strongly to Hutchinson was that, unlike Swaine Adeney Brigg, which, in addition to canes and umbrellas, also offered its customers an entire range of clothing (as well as travel accessories), James Smith & Sons sold nothing but canes and umbrellas. These were apparently James Smith & Sons' sole *raison d'être*, and Hutchinson, whose belief in specialisation as a guarantee of quality was unshakeable, and who would never have dreamt of ordering a suit from a tailor who also sold shirts, ties and pyjamas, reflected that he had been right to come here.

After a happy hour and more during which his eager hands were employed in caressing different varieties of lustrous wood and pommels in leather, silver, bone and ivory, and having also engaged in lengthy discussions with a fitter who showed him a multitude of umbrellas in his size, each finer than the last, he finally settled on a splendid African hardwood, with a handle ending in a small ivory hook. This hook, he was assured, would enable him to easily spot his property among the multitude of black umbrellas with which his club's stand would inevitably be cluttered.

And when, having handed over the tidy sum of three hundred pounds, he finally took possession of the umbrella, which the fitter had that instant shod with a small metal ferrule, he eagerly ran his hand over its canopy's silky curve and admiringly observed, "It's impeccably rolled!"

"Indeed, sir," said the fitter, accompanying him to the door.

"It can't be easy to roll it as well as that."

"It does take dexterity, sir," replied the fitter, holding the door open. "And a great deal of experience too."

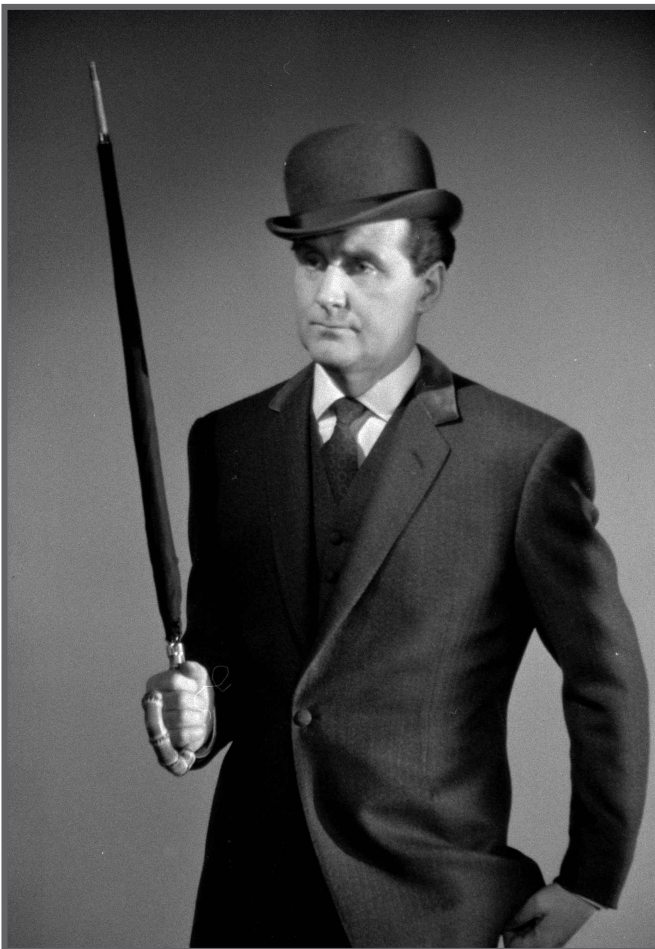
"Could you perhaps teach me to roll it correctly?"

"Teach you to roll it, sir? Do you not think it sufficiently well rolled as it is?"

"It is rolled to perfection," said Hutchinson, lingering on the threshold, "but I should like to be able to roll it myself after it has been opened."

"Is the umbrella to be *opened*, sir?"

"Why of course," said Hutchinson, not without irritation.



"If I may be permitted to pose an indiscreet question, why would sir wish to open it?"

Hutchinson could no longer contain his exasperation. "What else would I do with an umbrella when it's raining?" Gesturing towards the sky, which was darkening in tandem with his mood, he went on, "I notice, moreover, that it is starting to rain."

"I see, sir," said the fitter, with the air of someone for whom the penny has finally dropped.

"I shall have to open my umbrella to protect myself from this shower," Hutchinson went on, driving his point home.

"I doubt that will be necessary, sir."

To emphasise his meaning, he stepped out of the doorway and into the rain, holding the rolled umbrella.

“If you will permit me, sir,” said the fitter, joining him on the pavement, “I shall demonstrate.”

Taking the umbrella which Hutchinson held out in puzzlement, he walked to the kerb, adopted a solid stance on both feet, placed his left hand on his hip in the manner of a fencer, then rising on his toes, he waved the umbrella above his head and shouted, “Taxi!”

As if summoned by a magic wand, a black cab came to a sudden stop beside him.

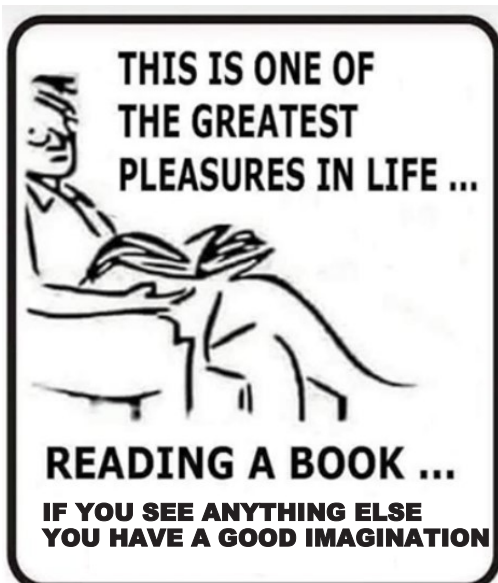
“There you are, sir,” he said to the astounded American, handing him back his property. “That is how an umbrella is used in the rain. I wish you a very pleasant stay in London, sir,” he added, holding the cab door open.

As he climbed into the cab and out of the rain John W. Hutchinson the Texan oilman’s son thought to himself that three hundred pounds was a lot to pay for an umbrella that would not shield him from the rain. But John Hutchinson the debonaire gentleman and man about town reflected that, all things considered, panache was priceless.

This short story was first published in French  
3 June 2006 issue of *Le Monde*.



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Our gift of eyesight does not mean  
That what we see is being seen  
Too often we won't recognise  
What's really there before our eyes

We're much too busy, we insist,  
To think about what we have missed.  
And that is where the problem lurks  
We have to think to see God's works.

- Richard Williams