John Collier, The Chaser

Look up the term “chaser” in the dictionary. Store all the meanings in your mind and think about each of them as the story unfolds—sometimes a clever title can be the key to understanding a story with a twist ending.

Alan Austen, as nervous as a kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of Pell Street, and peered about for a long time on the dime landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, a rocking-chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty buff-coloured walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars. An old man sat in the rocking-chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given.

“Sit down, Mr. Austen,” said the old man very politely.

“I am glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Is it true,” asked Alan, “that you have a certain mixture that has—er—quite extraordinary effects?”

“My dear sir,” replied the old man, “my stock in trade is not very large—I don’t deal in laxatives and teething mixtures—but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary.”

“Well, the fact is. . .” began Alan.

“Here, for example,” interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. “Here is a liquid as colourless as water, almost tasteless, quite imperceptible in coffee, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of autopsy.”

“Do you mean it is a poison?” cried Alan, very much horrified.

“Call it a glove-cleaner if you like,” said the old man indifferently. “Maybe it will clean gloves. I have never tried. One might call it a life-cleaner. Lives need cleaning sometimes.”

“I want nothing of that sort,” said Alan.
“Probably it is just as well,” said the old man. “Do you know the price of this? For one teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less.”

“I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive,” said Alan apprehensively.

“Oh dear, no,” said the old man. “It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love potion, for example. Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion.”

“I am glad to hear that,” said Alan.

“I look at it like this,” said the old man. “Please a customer with one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more costly. He will save up for it, if necessary.”

“So,” said Alan, “you really do sell love potions?”

“If I did not sell love potions,” said the old man, reaching for another bottle, “I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential.”

“And these potions,” said Alan. “They are not just—just—er—”

“Oh, no,” said the old man. “Their effects are permanent, and extend far beyond the mere casual impulse. But they include it. Oh, yes they include it. Bountifully, insistently. Everlastingly.”

“Dear me!” said Alan, attempting a look of scientific detachment. “How very interesting!”

“But consider the spiritual side,” said the old man.

“I do, indeed,” said Alan.

“For indifference,” said the old man, they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady—its flavour is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cocktails—and however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude and you.”

“I can hardly believe it,” said Alan. “She is so fond of parties.”
“She will not like them any more,” said the old man. “She will be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet.”

“She will actually be jealous?” cried Alan in a rapture. “Of me?”

“Yes, she will want to be everything to you.”

“She is, already. Only she doesn’t care about it.”

“She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You will be her sole interest in life.”

“Wonderful!” cried Alan.

“She will want to know all you do,” said the old man. “All that has happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She will want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why you are looking sad.”

“That is love!” cried Alan.

“Yes,” said the old man. “How carefully she will look after you! She will never allow you to be tired, to sit in a draught, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she will be terrified. She will think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you.”

“I can hardly imagine Diana like that!” cried Alan, overwhelmed with joy.

“You will not have to use your imagination,” said the old man. “And, by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance you should, later on, slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She will be terribly hurt, of course, but she will forgive you—in the end.”

“That will not happen,” said Alan fervently.

“Of course not,” said the old man. “But, if it did, you need not worry. She would never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she will never give you the least, the very least, grounds for—uneasiness.”

“And how much,” said Alan, “is this wonderful mixture?”

“It is not as dear,” said the old man, “as the glove-cleaner, or life-cleaner, as I sometimes call it. No. That is five thousand dollars, never a penny less. One has
to be older than you are, to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it.”

“But the love potion?” said Alan.

“Oh, that,” said the old man, opening the drawer in the kitchen table, and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking phial. “That is just a dollar.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” said Alan, watching him fill it.

“I like to oblige,” said the old man. “Then customers come back, later in life, when they are better off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective.”

“Thank you again,” said Alan. “Good-bye.”

“Au revoir,” said the man.

Jane Austen, Chapter 1 from Pride and Prejudice

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?”

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“Do not you want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”
This was invitation enough.

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.”

“What is his name?”

“Bingley.”

“Is he married or single?”

“Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!”

“How so? how can it affect them?”

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” replied his wife, “how can you be so tiresome! you must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.”

“Is that his design in settling here?”

“Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.”

“I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party.”

“My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.”

“In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.”

“But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighborhood.”

“It is more than I engage for, I assure you.”
“But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general, you know, they visit no new-comers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him if you do not.”

“You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls: though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.”

“I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humored as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference.”

“They have none of them much to recommend them,” replied he; “they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls: but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.”

“Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way! You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.”

“You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.”

“Ah! you do not know what I suffer.”

“But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighborhood.”

“It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them.”

“Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all.”

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.