Tony, like Eloise, lived in a hotel . . . and right there any similarity between the two children comes to an end. In fact, right there any similarity between this delightful story and any other one you have ever read comes to an end—with the possible exception of GORILLA SUIT, *(F&SF, May, 1958). This last told of the problems of a talking gorilla who was unable to find employment. The author then lived in Rome, now lives in New York City, and is named John Shepley. We know no more about him than this (but mean to learn), and that he is a writer we are prepared to strain our gussets for in order to keep appearing in F&SF. But enough of this vain mumbling: to The Kit-Katt Klub! Enjoy, enjoy.*

THE KIT-KATT KLUB

by John Shepley

ALL AFTERNOON TONY WAITED in the hotel room for his mother. He did his arithmetic and spelling lessons, he read a comic book through twice, he looked up Florida in the geography book and wondered why it was pink and shaped like a cigar. For an hour he lay sprawled on the satin coverlet of her bed, re-arranging his collection of animal pictures; still she didn't come. There was something hard under the pillow; he lifted it—sure enough, it was a pint bottle of Scotch, half-empty. "Not one of the better brands, not even White Horse or Haig & Haig," Tony said to himself. "We must be running out of money again."

He searched the room, but it was the easiest game in the world. There was a bottle of whisky in the lower right-hand drawer of the dressing table, another hidden under folds of pink lingerie in a drawer of the bureau, still another tucked away behind hatboxes on a shelf of the closet. "She's getting careless," he thought, "or else she really doesn't know how to hide things." At seven o'clock he debated whether to wash his face, agreed with him-

self not to, put on his jacket and went down to the lobby. On the way, he asked the elevator boy if he had seen her, but the elevator boy hadn't.

The lobby was pink and silver, with big mirrors, soft rugs, armchairs, and a paper palm tree. Tony went up to the desk and asked the clerk. But the clerk obviously didn't like small serious boys who asked stupid questions —he gave a chilly smile and said he hadn't the faintest idea where Tony's mother was. Tony went into the cocktail lounge, where the bartender, the one called Mike, was a friend of his.

Mike was on duty, but busy; Tony climbed up on a barstool and waited. The cocktail lounge was more mirrors, pink draperies, green leather; over the bar was a long painting of a lot of naked people chasing each other. At one of the circular glass tables was a noisy party, three men with cigars and tuxedos, and three women. The men were drunk and ugly, the women drunk and silly. One had little blue stars in her hair like Christmas tinsel; one had freckles on her back; the third, a plump giggling blonde, had neglected, Tony noticed, to shave her armpits. He turned away from them—none of them was his mother.

Mike was mixing them martinis. "Have you seen my mother?" Tony asked.

"No."

"Let me have a ginger-ale."

Mike set aside the shaker, poured out a glass of ginger-ale and handed it across the bar. "But you better get out of here. You know where to take it."

"I know. I wish I weren't a minor, Mike."

"So I wish I weren't no bartender," said Mike as the six people began chanting in chorus for their next round. "Yessir, ladies and gentlemen, coming right up!" He waved the cocktail shaker high in the air and winked downwards at Tony. "Go on, kid, beat it."

Carrying his glass, Tony slipped behind the bar and through the door that led to a labyrinth of dark, damp passageways. He knew the way perfectly. One turn to the right and two to the left, straight ahead, then right again, and he came to a dirty little alcove with a leaking toilet, a row of steel lockers and a wooden bench, for the waiters, bartenders and bellhops of the hotel. He sat on the bench and drank his ginger-ale.

Then he decided to go up and have dinner. Even the dining room was pink, except for its white tablecloths and the black coats of its waiters. A waiter brought him a telephone book so he could sit high enough to the table—Tony was counting all the pink things there were in the

world: lingerie, strawberry ice-cream, the map of Florida, paintings of naked people . . . "Well?" the waiter demanded, pad and pencil poised. "Shrimp cocktail . . ."—but no, that was pink, too. He ordered chilled grapefruit instead, filet mignon with no vegetables, and chocolate ice-cream.

He charged the bill to his mother's account, and out of his own pocket tipped the waiter three cents. He asked the waiter if he had seen her, though he knew what the answer would be. He sat for half an hour in the lobby looking at picture magazines, then decided to try the cocktail lounge again. Mike was yawning behind the bar and all the tables were empty, except one where a beautiful lady with greying hair and tired eyes sat by herself, drinking an old-fashioned and scratching futilely at a box of matches. She was Tony's mother.

He sat down with her, took the matches from her hand and lit her cigarette. "Who is it?" she said in a slurred voice.

"It's Tony."

"Oh—Tony—?" She reached out an unsteady hand to smooth his hair. "Do you want the cherry from Mother's drink?"

He ate the cherry and the orange slice—it was a ritual. He said, "It's time to go to bed, I think," though he knew she would want another old-fashioned. Mike served it and Tony again helped himself to the fruit—or the "garbage," as it was called in the parlance of bartenders. "Put it on the bill, Mike," he said, and Mike winked as always and saluted like a soldier. Tony's mother was powdering her nose, but she had trouble holding her compact and spilled powder on the table. Tony held it for her.

Crossing the lobby, she steadied herself on his shoulder. Once she stumbled and lost a shoe—Tony retrieved it, while the desk-clerk watched aloofly. The elevator boy kept his face averted as he took them upstairs, but Tony saw his shoulders quiver and knew he was laughing.

In the room, she kicked off both shoes and sat down on the bed. Tony went into the bathroom and soaked a towel under the faucet, brought it to her and stood watching as she wiped her face and neck. Her dress was unhooked at the sides, her skirt above her knees; she felt under the pillow and found the bottle. "Mother's just going to have one tiny sip," she announced, "because Mother's so very very tired." Then, as he still stood and watched, "Oh, for God's sake, go to bed!"

"Goodnight," said Tony, and kissed her obediently.

His room was connected to hers by the bathroom. He wondered how much longer they

would be able to afford one or two rooms in this pink and silver hotel. It had been an evening like any other; vaguely, insistently, he knew it was all his own fault. He wished for once he could do something about it.

So when the crack of light disappeared under the bathroom door, he tiptoed outside. The corridors were full of people, some going to their own rooms, some looking for other people's rooms, waiters hurrying with trays of ice, soda and whisky. He walked to the back stairs. At the door of one of the rooms, a couple in evening clothes, a man with a red, perspiring face, and a chalk-white girl, were kissing and giggling as they tried to fit the key into the lock. Tony ignored them. On each landing of the stairs, he paused to listen, but no one came to stop him. When he reached the bottom, he knew he was free.

The back of the hotel was different from the front. The front opened on an avenue with trees and expensive shops, had a neon sign and floodlights, a canopy, noiseless glass doors and a doorman in a uniform. The back had an iron door that creaked on rusted hinges and it opened on an expanse of dirty concrete where there were hundreds of garbage cans full of orange peels and empty bottles. There was just enough space between the cans for Tony to walk, and just enough light from a flickering street lamp for him to see his way; he walked and walked and finally came to the edge of the concrete, where two sullen workmen in overalls were loading the garbage cans into a truck. He stood watching for a moment, as the truck drove away and another took its place. The men went on loading.

Tony walked on. It was a part of the city unfamiliar to him, a slum of soot-covered tenements with broken windows and rusted fire-escapes, but free and inspired, he knew the way. One turn to the right and two to the left, straight ahead, then right again, and he found what he was looking for: a little bar on a sidestreet. Three steps led down to a doorway with a fly-spotted electric bulb; with difficulty, Tony spelled out the wooden sign:

KIT-KATT KLUB

It looked disreputable, evil—it was exactly the sort of place he wanted.

He opened the door and went in. The ceiling was low, the lighting bad, there was a smell of stale beer. There were no mirrors, no shiny leather, nothing that was pink—everything indeed was the same dirty brown, the walls, the bar, the wooden tables stained with rings of liquor and scarred with cigarette burns. But the display of bottles behind the bar was as lucent as anywhere: ice-blue

gin, pale vermouth, whisky, crème de menthe, and many others that even Tony didn't know the names of, all crystalline, clear and potent. There was no picture over the bar, only a sign in black letters: *No Minors Allowed*. Tony sat down at a table.

He was very pleased to be here. He recognized Mrs. Kit-Katt at once—grey with tabby stripes, she was crouching behind the cash register and licking her paws. Her eyes narrowed to complacent slits, she gave him only a glance, but the bartender, a bedraggled blue and orange parrot, looked over at him in a friendly, inquiring way. Tony noted with interest that he was half-blind, his left eye glazed with an opaque white film—then quickly the bartender turned his head, winking nervously with his single good eye, as a sooty grey pigeon fluttered over to the table. Tony ordered an old-fashioned and waited while the parrot, with shambling slowness, mixed it, and the pigeon brought it to him.

"You pay now," said the pigeon. "We don't allow nobody to charge things, we don't give credit, we don't let people run up big bills."

"How much?" Tony asked.

"Twelve cents."

Tony reached in his pocket and brought out a handful of pennies. "Your drinks are awfully expensive," he said, counting out twelve.

"Listen, you—you don't like our prices, you can go someplace else,"—and Mrs. Kit-Katt, from behind her cash register, echoed in a malevolent hiss: "Tell him to go someplace else." Tony handed over the twelve cents, with an extra penny as a tip, and the waiter, seemingly mollified, fluttering and cooing, carried it off to the proprietress, who rang it up on the cash register and resumed licking her paws.

Surreptitiously Tony poured the whisky on the floor and began to eat the cherry and the orange slice, as he gazed around at the other customers . . . there were only three. At another table sat two mangy-looking monkeys, drinking beer and with a chessboard between them; while one deliberated over his move, the other leaned forward and with quick busy fingers picked lice from his opponent's head. And in the shadows of the darkest corner sat an aged turtle. His shell was encrusted with dirt and cobwebs; his eyes were tiny and dull, heavily lidded and surrounded by scaly creases. From time to time, slowly, ponderously, he opened his blunt beak, then snapped it silently shut. He had a glass of greenish liquid before him which he scarcely touched.

Tony finished his old-fashioned and ordered another. His first flush of pleasure had passed, leaving him settled and gloomy.

There was hardly a sound, only once in a while a click when one of the monkeys moved a chess-piece or cracked a louse between his teeth, now and again a tinkle of ice and glass, the infrequent ringing of the cash register, the flutter of a parrot or pigeon feather. The stillness was getting on his nerves—it was not a very interesting bar after all. Free as he was, nothing was happening; yet he knew he had no desire to go away. He wished that something would happen. Then the door opened and a new customer came in.

A jaunty new customer, a white fox-terrier, with black ears and muzzle as though he wore a mask, and he pranced on his hind legs up to the bar and announced in a shrill voice, "I'll have a martini, if you please." Mrs. Kit-Katt's hackles rose, her eyes dilated and flashed, but she held her ground behind the cash register; the parrot, turning one flat, questioning eye on the newcomer, uttered a little squawk of assent and began mixing the martini. The monkeys looked up once and went on with their game, the turtle made no sign at all, as the fox-terrier with a supercilious gaze surveyed the bar-room. The ribbon around his neck was bright pink.

Suddenly he was standing on all fours at Tony's table. "Mind if I join you?" Tony hesitated—he was really in no mood to talk to anyone—but the fox-terrier's tone was insistent, and he even sat down without waiting for an answer. "Why so sad tonight?"

"I'm not sad. I like it here."

"Do you really?" There was a note of commiseration in the fox-terrier's voice, and not a little pitying condescension. "I think it's rather a dump myself."

"Then why do you come here?"

"I don't if I can help it. I like something more high-class . . . well, what do *you* want?"—this to the pigeon, who was standing there expectantly.

"You ain't paid for your drink."

"So I haven't—how absent-minded of me! Be a good fellow and put it on my account, will you?"

"You ain't got no account. Nobody's got an account here."

"See what I mean about this place?" said the fox-terrier to Tony. Then to the waiter, "The embarrassing truth is, chum, that I seem to have come out tonight without any money. But I'm sure my old friend Mrs. Kit-Katt will vouch—"

"Tell them to pay or get out!" shrilled the proprietress, so loudly that the parrot, frightened, flapped his shabby wings, while the monkeys, disturbed at their game, pounded their fists on the table and cast disapproving glances at Tony and the fox-terrier. Even the turtle seemed agitated—he stretched his neck

towards them, opening and closing his beak twice.

"—vouch for me," continued the fox-terrier imperturbably. "Or else—perhaps—" And he gazed winningly at Tony.

"Oh, I'll buy you a drink," Tony offered. "How much? Twelve cents again?"

"Martinis are fifteen," said the waiter nastily.

Tony counted out fifteen pennies and tipped him an extra one. The waiter took it and fluttered away; Mrs. Kit-Katt smugly rang up the amount. Indignation subsided—the monkeys resumed their chess-game and louse-hunting, the turtle retracted his neck, the parrot looked only abashed.

"That was very kind of you," said the fox-terrier, but his tone continued insolent. "Did I notice you tipping him? I wouldn't bother to tip such creatures, not in a cheap joint like this. The service is dreadful anyway."

"But we always leave big tips, wherever we go," Tony explained. "Even when we can't pay our bills, we always leave big tips."

"An interesting way of life, I wish *I* could afford it. But my manager is a beast and keeps me on a very small allowance."

"Your manager?"

"I work in the theater—I should think you'd have realized it by this time. By the way, you wouldn't have a cigarette?"

"I'm a minor—I don't smoke," Tony apologized, but he reached in his pocket anyway and was reassured to find that he had both cigarettes and matches. It was turning out to be an interesting evening after all. "What do you do in the theater?" he asked, extending a lighted match across the table.

"What does *anyone* in the theater do? I jump through hoops, I balance rubber balls on my nose, I dance on my hind legs—all that kind of stuff. I come from a distinguished line of theatrical dogs. My grandfather, if you'd like to know, was an international celebrity—he played before the King of Hungary and all sorts of important people like that. Maybe you've heard of the great Krakowski Circus?"

"I read about it just the other day!" said Tony, happy to show himself informed.

"Well, that was my grandfather's circus, that is until Krakowski came over to Brooklyn and went broke. As you know, he was an alcoholic—I mean Krakowski, not my grandfather."

"No, I didn't know *that*," Tony admitted sadly.

"He died of the d.t.'s, and served him right!" the fox-terrier declared indignantly. "Selling his whole troupe of performing dogs, one by one, including my grandfather, to keep himself in cheap schnapps! I call it worse than ir-

responsible, I call it criminal! Uh —by the way—" his eyes brightened—"I see your glass is empty, and so, it seems, is mine. Shall we have another?"

"I don't know . . . I don't think I really . . ." Tony faltered.

"I'll of course repay your generosity sometime," his companion promised. "Mind if I help myself to another cigarette?—thanks. *Another round!*" he barked out at Mrs. Kit-Katt. Tony saw her eyes dilate and glow, her lips curl upward in a silent snarl, but she sent the waiter fluttering over to the table with another martini and old-fashioned. The monkeys chattered in annoyance, the bartender watched with one woeful eye, as again Tony counted out the money.

"I think we're disturbing everybody," he said uneasily. "And Mrs. Kit-Katt sure doesn't like us at all."

"Her tough luck!" said the fox-terrier. "We drink her lousy liquor and we pay for it, don't we? I've known her for a long time, and let me tell you, she'll do anything for money. Personally, I think she's a—why, *what are you doing?*" he demanded, horrified, as Tony began pouring out his whisky.

"Oh, I'm a minor. I'm not supposed to drink."

"But that's no reason to pour it on the floor! Here—" and he snatched the glass from Tony's hand and gulped it down himself. "It's a *sin* to waste it," he said, hiccoughing. "So you only eat the garbage, eh?"

"You shouldn't mix whisky with gin," Tony warned him.

"Superstition, my friend—where was I? Oh yes, I was giving you the lowdown on Mrs. Kit-Katt. She's a—well, let's say a menace, they're *both* a menace, she and her friend over there, that turtle. You may think you know Mrs. Kit-Katt and the others, but the turtle is something you can't explain. He's been sitting in that same corner for years, getting dirtier by the minute with dust and cobwebs, and drinking slime. Don't look now but he's watching us, he's opening his mouth, stretching his neck right in our direction—he knows we're talking about him. He knows everything, but nobody knows anything about *him*. There are only rumors, that he's the real owner of the place and Mrs. Kit-Katt herself only a front, a disguise—"

"A disguise for what?" Tony cried anxiously.

The fox-terrier looked suddenly coy. "Some sort of crooked business, I suppose, the usual thing. I'd rather talk about my grandfather. He was a celebrated circus dog, you see—he worked for Krakowski—"

"You already told me that," said Tony impatiently.

"But did I tell you about his comedown? For it was a come-

down, you'll admit, from the great Krakowski and the King of Hungary to a vaudeville theater in Newark, New Jersey. You're familiar with Newark, New Jersey?"

"Sure I am, we lived there for a while. One of my stepfathers was a lawyer or something there."

"Then you no doubt know the Gaiety Theater?"

"I've walked past it lots of times. It had big pink pictures of naked women outside. Tell me more about Mrs. Kit-Katt . . . and the turtle. Please"

"And *inside* in the flesh. I believe they took their clothes off to music—it was the main attraction. My poor grandfather, who could balance a plate sideways on his nose while hopping about on one hind leg to the tune of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody, was only a boring interlude so far as *that* audience was concerned. He couldn't take it for long. It's my theory that he died of wounded pride—yes, wounded pride and a broken heart. Ah, your glass is empty again. Tell you what, I'll play you for the next round."

"But you don't have any money," said Tony, trying to control his irritation. "Even if I win, I'll have to pay."

"True, but this makes it more sportsmanlike. Waiter!" he barked, waving both front paws. "Dice!"

The pigeon brought the dice and they rolled them, everyone in the bar-room watching disapprovingly. Tony lost and paid.

"My father carried on the family tradition bravely," the fox-terrier resumed, sipping in turn his martini and Tony's old-fashioned. "Naturally he turned his tail on my grandfather's milieu, scratching up dirt on the whole business, the Krakowskis, the Kings of Hungary, not to mention the Gaiety Theater in Newark, New Jersey. My father, you see, had an arrogant manner, there was something sarcastic and unpleasant about him, but I don't doubt for a minute that he was a very great artist. Intuitive too: he had a gift for determining the direction of the wind and pointed his nose westward to the movie industry. It wasn't easy, it took great discipline for him to learn to look soulful and melting, as they'd expected of him in the first place. They beat him and kicked him and wheedled him, and finally he got his one big role: he played Rexie in *Rexie, Come Home,* all in Technicolor and Cinemascope, with Stereophonic barking and whining—"

"But I've seen it, I've seen it!" Tony cried. "It's all about a little boy who loses his dog, and at the end they find each other again! It's the most beautiful picture I've ever seen in my whole life!"

"Yes, two hours of agony, but I must admit it was a triumph for my father. For weeks he got more fan-letters than any other actor.

They gave him a gold and silver collar, his own swimming pool and a pink plastic kennel. But he took to despondency, strange fits, foaming at the mouth. He bit an actress and they shot him. He has a marble tomb now, at which crowds gather—but why am I telling you this? You know all about it, you had a stepfather or something in Hollywood. But who's your *father?*" he demanded.

Tony tried to state it as simply as possible. "My father was one of my mother's husbands. I don't remember which one."

The fox-terrier's eyes went shifty, with a sly little look of satisfaction. "That's smart of you," he said, "considering the facts. Consider the fact that with me the family is finished. Oh, I've played various places, Chicago, Vegas, Miami and so forth, but you've been in those hotels and you know how they are—" Tony nodded sympathetically; the fox-terrier went on: "—all pink, and liquor has ruined me. It's too bad because I'm a brilliant artist. Look what I've come to, scrounging drinks from strangers in a cheap dive like this. That Mrs. Kit-Katt, so-called, is a menace, I've said it once, I'll say it again, a menace and a disguise, she and her friend over there, that turtle who keeps looking at us and knows everything. Doesn't this interest you now, what I'm telling you? You were begging me to tell you and now you don't want to listen! Pay attention—it shows what a crooked business the world is and how little we can do about it, it shows what I'm reduced to. Because it's all a crooked business with its parrots and pigeons, all a disguise, a disguise for sorrow, a disguise for life. Even the monkeys, they're part of it, but a silly part, I say. They come here every night, but they're only interested in their chess and their beer and picking each other's lice—I don't call it life, I don't call it sorrow, I call it a very stupid sort of existence, don't you? For why should we come to such places but for sorrow, for shame, because life is too big, too complicated for us, because our hearts are broken and our pride wounded? Let me tell you something: I come from a brilliant family! My grandfather was an international celebrity and he worked for the great Krakowski and the King of Hungary, and my father was the toast of the nation and received more letters than anyone else, and when he died foaming at the mouth they worshipped at his tomb, and I'm a brilliant creature myself and even though I've come to this, I still have my pride and my broken heart and the memory of a glorious past. We had our little family scandals, of course, but we carried them off with elegance and manners—we never ate garbage, or drank ginger-ale

in toilets . . . we never made ourselves ridiculous in cocktail lounges or the lobbies of hotels . . . no desk-clerk ever had a chance to insult us, no elevator boy ever laughed . . ." He was gazing across at Tony with limpid, self-pitying eyes; the pink bow on his neck had come undone. "Another drink," he insisted tearfully.

But this time Tony refused, not only because he had spent all his money, but because now he had realized that *all* drunks were boring. And anyway at that moment there was a stampede of heavy feet at the door, and into the barroom burst a squad of policemen. *"It's a raid!"* barked the fox-terrier —the shock seemed to sober him. *"Run!"* Together they ran to the back window—Tony reached out to raise the sash, but the fox-terrier, yapping with terror, shoved him out of the way and leapt, crashed through the glass, and vanished up an alleyway into darkness, trailing his ribbon. Tony, rubbing a bruised knee, crouched under a table as one of the policemen, his terrible mustache black as shoe polish, stepped up to the cash register. "Mrs. Kit-Katt!" he thundered, pointing his club at her, "I hereby arrest you for serving minors in your bar! I hereby arrest everybody!" Tony watched from his hiding-place as handcuffs were clamped on the proprietress; snarling and spitting with rage, she was led outside to the wagon. The bartender shuffled out mournfully between two policemen, twisting his head from side to side in a vain effort to conceal his blind eye. The dirty old turtle refused to budge—he closed his beak with a vicious snap and retreated, head, legs and tail, into his shell—but two policemen hoisted him up bodily and carried him outside. The monkeys were handcuffed together and led away; the waiter went sulkily, ruffling his feathers. Tony followed them all out to the sidewalk, and stood watching while the wagon was loaded and locked and driven away.

Again he was free. But it was almost dawn, the streets had a lucid, unfriendly chill, and there was really no place to go except back to the hotel. He found his way easily. The two workmen were still loading garbage cans into trucks—they had taken away perhaps half, but the number remaining seemed always the same. He climbed up the back stairs. In the corridor, the drunken couple was still trying to unlock the door, the man crimson and frantic, the chalk-white girl exhausted, leaning impassively against the wall. Tony tiptoed into his own room, undressed and got into bed.

The crack of light was under the bathroom door. "And they would have arrested me, too," he thought guiltily, "if only I'd told them who I was."