

Laughing House

by

WARWICK DEEPING

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LAUGHING HOUSE

BOOKS BY WARWICK DEEPING

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TWO IN A TRAIN
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SEVEN MEN CAME BACK
TWO BLACK SHEEP
SMITH
OLD WINE AND NEW
THE ROAD
SHORT STORIES
EXILES
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OLD PYBUS
KITTY
DOOMSDAY
SORRELL AND SON
SUVLA JOHN
THREE ROOMS
THE SECRET SANCTUARY
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SECOND YOUTH
COUNTESS GLIKA
CORN IN EGYPT
UNREST
THE PRIDE OF EVE
THE KING BEHIND THE KING
THE HOUSE OF SPIES
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FOX FARM
BESS OF THE WOODS
THE RED SAINT
THE SLANDERERS
THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT
A WOMAN'S WAR
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BERTRAND OF BRITTANY
UTHER AND IGRAINE
THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE
THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE
APPLES OF GOD
THE LAME ENGLISHMAN
MARRIAGE BY CONQUEST
JOAN OF THE TOWER
MARTIN VALLIANT
THE RUST OF ROME
THE WHITE GATE
THE SEVEN STREAMS
MAD BARBARA
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS
THE MAN WHO WENT BACK
THE DARK HOUSE

I LIVE AGAIN
SLADE
MR. GURNEY AND MR. SLADE
REPRIEVE
THE IMPUDENCE OF YOUTH

*Laughing
House*

by

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1947

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LAUGHING HOUSE

I

THIS is the story of a House, a house which was born in more spacious days, and sat placidly for many years like a white bird in a green nest, a house that suffered one war and grievous sorrow, and survived to suffer in yet another war. Its history is human history, as a house's history should be, if it has strength and breadth, beauty and dignity. Many such houses are doomed to die. Some will survive to live strange, new lives, for the new rhythm—like jazz music—is not of the age that created them.

To me old houses are alive; they are persons, impregnated with the memories of those who have dwelt in them, old farmhouses, old cottages, old mansions. They are not mere boxes of brick, hygienic but hideous, in which people seem to live like hens in a "Battery." My prejudices, if they can be called prejudices, are those of an old man, and to the young the old can be boring.

I understand that to some of the young we are known as "Bumbles." Well, this is the book of a Bumble.

Beech Hill was built by my great grandfather in the year of Waterloo, a white and spacious house, always suggesting to me that if Nash had designed country houses this might have been one of them. It stands on the lower slope of a hill, facing south-east, and looking over its high blue railings at a pool walled with local stone, a great wreath of rhododendrons, and a steep green valley rising to the splendid beeches of Beechhanger Wood. A country road from Framley Green to Roman Heath runs between the railings and the pool, a quiet road not well known to weekend motorists. All about the place the ground rises steeply, green fields and woodland, yet the house catches all the sunlight.

It stands on a gentle slope, with the great white pillars of its portico-porch set solidly and almost defiantly in massive paving. A semi-circular drive linked two fine iron gates, but they went to the war, poor dears, like the iron railings. My earliest recollections are of those two great white portico pillars, and of my father standing there after breakfast and saying good morning to the beech trees on the hill. I remember swarming up one of the pillars, and sliding down with a precipitancy that left my backside sore for a week. The broad, flat paving of the portico provided a parade-ground for my lead soldiers, horse, foot and artillery. It was about the most inconvenient spot I could have chosen so far as the rest of the household were concerned, but it pleased me to see all that coloured soldiery, red, blue, green and white embattled on the old grey stones.

Beech Hill was built in the shape of an L, with broad, low gable ends, and a slated roof with a generous overlap which gave a deep shadow-band. Attached to the rearward wing was a little orangery in the classic style. The great sash-windows showed white between green shutters. Back of the house was a base-court, and beyond it the stables and outhouses in stone and old red brick, with a little belfry and clock and wind-vane rising above the coach-house. You could stable a dozen horses here, and four carriages or gigs. Two cottages housed my chauffeur and his wife, and the Potters, my gardeners. All the doors were painted a soft blurred blue.

The garden sloped upwards in lawns and terraces to the glass houses and walled fruit garden and orchard. The terraced borders were filled with flowering trees, roses, and herbaceous plants. Below lay a tennis court and a croquet lawn. Beyond and above the fruit and vegetable garden towered the Scotch firs and oaks and cypresses of High Wood.

From the front windows you could see the pool, glassy and black and still, with its old stone wall, lilies and bulrushes and yellow flags, and the moorhens paddling. In the spring its great wreath of rhododendrons filled it with reflected colour. Beyond, the narrow green valley rose steeply to Beechhanger, gorgeous in autumn, with its stately trunks like the pillars of some temple. We had two other meadows—South Mead and Upper Mead, which I let off for hay or for grazing. It was—indeed—a lovely and a peaceful spot, sheltered in winter, and living a serene life of its own with the clouds sailing over its high woods, and the sunlight playing hither and thither as it pleased.

Our association had been so intimate that I and the house felt one.

I have suffered sorrows, and the house had shared them.

My wife and I had lost both our sons in the first great war, and the house had seemed to age without them.

Sibilla died five years after the loss of her beloved boys, and I, left alone, became an old man—perhaps old before my time.

Yes, it was an old man's house, the home of a placid potterer.

I had a dog, Billy the Cairn, two excellent maids—Ellen and Emily—a chauffeur-valet—one Grylls, and old and young Potter the gardeners. I dabbled in watercolours, scribbled in a diary, fussed over my roses, fancied myself as a grower of superfine fruit. I had a cellar which still contained port laid down by my grandfather, and I kept every bin stocked with champagne, Burgundy—especially Chambertin—good claret, Hock, Madeira, Sherry. Once a week I was driven up to London, and looked at pictures, and shopped, and lunched at my Club, and met other old fellows. Twice a year I went to visit semi-derelict cousins, spinsters of the Victorian tradition who were partly dependent upon me.

Yes, we Mortimers were dying out, like the world we had lived in.

I will quote one simple figure to demonstrate how utterly I was out of touch with social tendencies.

The House had twenty bedrooms!

We had shut up three-quarters of them, though twice a year they were cleaned and aired, and yet it never struck me that this was so much waste. A house with twenty bedrooms and one old man! Moreover I had at my service a dining-room, a large hall, a drawing-room, a study, a library, and a billiard-room, all spacious and filled with fine old furniture. As a mere Bumble I will not bore you with a list of my antiques, pictures, china, furniture, bric-a-brac. My wife had loved all this, not out of possessiveness, but because of the beauty and harmony of her home.

I had no near neighbours, and you may not believe me when I say that I did not need much neighbourliness. I was living in the past, and the house and garden and woods were the past to me. Almost I could feel the presence of those dear people who had lived here, and especially so could I feel the nearness of Sibilla. She sat by the winter fire with me. If I went up to the high seat on the edge of High Wood and saw all the little valley spread below me, she seemed to be there with me. I felt myself talking to her.

“The valley is very lovely to-day, dear”—or “The beech trees are beginning to colour.”

And I could fancy her beside me, smiling as a woman can smile at some lovely thing or at small children.

I dare say that people thought me an eccentric and selfish old codger, but my servants stayed with me. The fact was that the House was more than a house; it was a kind of sacred place permeated by a Presence, and scented with memories that conjured up pictures of the

past. It was my father, and it was my mother, and the two poor lads who had died in France, but essentially it was Sibilla, and all that she had been to me.

Rumours of War. They drifted round my London “Club,” but I cannot say that I attached much importance to them. It was just club gossip, the idle chatter of old men. Moreover, I will confess that I was somewhat pro-German and pro-Hitler at that time, for I believed that Germany could teach this casual, lazy country of ours valuable lessons. Ours was a very amateur show, and I did know that we were utterly unprepared for war, and that any man who had the courage to utter a warning was howled down as a war-monger by silly women, and cocksure ignorant men.

Then came Munich, and a country that had grown cowardly and soft cheered a false reprieve. I had one friend at the “Club” who knew. He assured me that Chamberlain had played for time, that ultimate war was inevitable. The Germans were too strong, and too set upon dominating Europe.

I will admit that I regarded the future seriously, so much so that I took various precautions. If this fool country was to starve, as starve it might, forethought might be valuable. We should be short of all those things which had come to us from overseas, tea, sugar, meat, petrol and what not. England’s shirt might well be hanging through its breeches, even if it had a shirt.

Wise as to the future I may have been, but I did not foresee the destruction and the mess and the upheaval that would descend upon the quiet corners of the land, or that figures in khaki would swarm like brown lice over the places that had been loved.

So, the war came, and I—a self-absorbed old man, was not greatly disturbed by the crisis. Here were we, in the wilds of Surrey, for Surrey can be wild, capable of living like some old religious house upon the food we might produce. Beech Hill could confront a war, a war that would leave it undisturbed in its green valley. The house seemed to stand firmly and defiantly upon its two white legs, daring Hell and Hitler to harm it. And in my blindness I did not foresee that the house’s enemies might be Englishmen, not Germans.

II

SIX months or so of mock war, and a grim winter. I must admit that I was more concerned about my flowering shrubs and my more tender plants than about what appeared to me to be pantomime. Germany had grabbed what she wanted, and we could only pull ugly faces at her, and curse Russia, though the whole fantastic business was not pantomime for Prague and Poland.

There was six inches of ice on the pool, and we had to break it daily for the moorhens and the fish. The hillsides and tree tops were white with snow or glistening with frost. We had cut dead bracken and piled it over the cistus, rosemary, and santolina. The wall-flowers looked like bunches of withered herbs. Daily I fed the birds outside the porch, and my congregation was mixed and multitudinous. Even two green yaffles joined the chorus. The blackbirds and the sparrows would come right to my feet, and one robin would perch on my hand.

The old house was snug and warm, for we had central heating and plenty of fuel, coal, coke, anthracite and logs. I had laid in a reserve stock of fuel, and had piled it to the window in one of

the coach-houses and in an empty stable. Logs we had in plenty from the woods, and a circular saw which Grylls operated. He and the gardeners had their share of logs.

I was shrugging my shoulders at the war. This fierce winter seemed much more with us. Hitler had his plunder and his gangster pact with Russia, and our helplessness was obvious, though I was worried about our shipping.

What a spring 1940 gave us! It was both lovely, and disastrous in the havoc it revealed. In spite of their protecting bracken many precious things were dead, withered and dry and only asking for the bonfire. Lavender, rosemary, santolina, and our cistus bushes had to go up in flames. The grass had a grizzled greyness until rain and sunshine set it growing. Never had a spring been more welcome and more lovely, though it was to be a harbinger of the blackest days this country has ever had to face. Oh—that month of May, with the apple blossom falling, and the thorns in flower, bluebells thick and scented under the beeches, blackbirds singing, and then—Dunkirk! A strange sense of unreality was with us. Surrey in the spring, and disaster so very near! Even the blackbird's song had a note of tragedy.

Then—the collapse of France!

My men were mute. There was dumb dread in them. Grylls, the most conversational of creatures, did not utter a word as he drove me into Melford. I—too—had been shocked out of my country calm. We were alone, utterly alone. What was to be done? I felt in me a desperate urge for action, but I was an old man and useless.

Food? Yes, one could grow food. We might be in desperate need of it.

I remember strolling up to Beechhanger Wood that June evening, with Billy at my heels. Even the dog seemed sobered. Grylls and young Potter had gone off to Framley Green to be enrolled in the new Home Guard. I sat on a root of one of the beeches, and looked down at the House, so white and solid and calm, with the stout legs of the portico defiant and unyielding. A poignant feeling of unreality possessed me. It did not seem credible that this English scene was under the edge of tragedy, with the evening sunlight on the woods and valley. I could hear the moorhens on the pool. A little plume of smoke rose placidly from a chimney. I could see old Potter in the fruit garden, busy with the sprayer, though he should have knocked off two hours ago. He, too, was restless and trying to comfort himself with doing things.

I remember thinking—"I have a couple of guns, a rook rifle and an old service revolver. We could make some sort of futile fight of it. And then? If a German bullet had not got one—a bullet through one's own head."

What a prospect on a summer evening such as this, with the English scene so peaceful and perfect! I looked at the dog, and I looked at the house. To do the job thoroughly I should have to shoot poor little Bill, and set fire to the house before shooting myself. How history repeated itself! I could picture a Romano-British country gentleman having to make that choice when the barbarians swarmed butchering and burning into these British valleys.

Yet, there was a strange illusion of peace pervading our landscape. The sun rose and set; Emily and Ellen were busy about the house; chickens were fed; we picked strawberries, and Ellen made jam. The two Potters were digging up part of the valley field for war-crops, winter greens and garden swedes, etc. Never had I seen them sweat so hard. I was drawing out plans upon paper for turning much of the grass land into arable. The Home Guard paraded on Framley Green with seven shot guns, my rook rifle, and one old service rifle. I heard that one or two families had fled for prolonged holidays in Devon or Scotland. I was told that trenches and anti-

tank ditches were being dug along the Downs, and strong-points built, and I walked up to Roman Heath one morning, and was able to see the white chalk-scars in the green hillsides. Somehow it seemed incredible. Always, at the back of one's mind was that strange feeling of unreality.

For weeks I did not see a single figure in khaki. The local territorials had gone, no one knew whither. Conscription was with us, and I began to realize that I might lose two out of three of my men. I did. Grylls, grown restless, went off to munitions, and young Potter disappeared as a volunteer for the army.

Yet I continued to cherish the illusion that I and the House would be one. We should stand the siege together and tighten our belts, and confront whatever fate might have in store for us. Old Potter, Emily and Ellen were all of an age that would not render them liable to war service, and I managed to engage another old man who had been left derelict by one of the fugitive families. I was getting out nice plans on paper, and taking off my own coat and handling tools that were more potent than trowels and secateurs. I was proposing to plant more fruit, get the South Mead ploughed by one of my farmer friends, and grow corn and potatoes. I would buy in more poultry, and lay in a reserve store of grain. Geese would do well in the Valley Meadow if part of it was wired against foxes, and I had several hundred yards of wire netting in store. Mrs. Grylls had gone factorywards. I bought in bottles for fruit, an Auto-Culto with reaper attachment, and a small hand-mill for grinding meal. I even managed to purchase a small portable thresher, and installed it in an empty loose-box. I will confess that I enjoyed all this planning. It took my mind off the war, and made me feel somewhat useful. In my innocence I did not foresee how futile all my planning would prove, and that the House and I were to be parted.

Oh, by the way, I have forgotten to mention our evacuees. The authorities scheduled us for ten children, but when I put it before them that my maids were elderly and determined to leave should children come, my complement was altered to three nursing mothers. So, in place of Emily's "Dirty little beasts," we had three very unclean, prospective mothers, one of whom got drunk at "The Crooked Billet" at Framley on her first night. These good ladies remained with us for a little over three weeks. It appeared to be a very crooked billet so far as they were concerned, and bored and quarrelsome and utterly unhelpful, they all sneaked back to London. I cannot say that we were sorry.

For, let us be candid. I could be classed as a selfish, and unpatriotic old curmudgeon, but when we have cut the sentimental cackle, one has to confess that you cannot mix classes that are as different as chalk and cheese. These women from the East End were much less clean than animals, and far less likeable. They were lazy lumps of flesh, coarse, vulgar, noisy, ignorant. You could hear their hideous voices and their obscene laughter all over the house. And you could smell them. Blame our social scheme, if it pleases you, but the fact was incontestable, they were no better than unclean savages in our lovely house.

I think it must have been in August that I received my first warning. I had gone shopping in Melford, and I met Gibson in the ironmongers. He was looking worried and cross.

"Been requisitioned yet?"

"Requisitioned?"

"They are taking my place over next week. I expect you will be."

I think I gaped at him.

"Turning you out?"

"Yes, lock, stock and barrel. The Army, you know."

I was staggered. Somehow, it had never occurred to me that such upheavals could happen

in our quiet world. To be driven out of the house in which one had lived all one's life, and for an indefinite period! And what of the House? I felt shocked and scared. The magnitude of the disaster grew as I contemplated it, for a disaster it would be both to me and the House. I was pretty wise as to what such an invasion would mean, for pack men into a herd and they are apt to develop the habits of a herd. It was as though the House was to become a whore at the beck and call of any half-educated lout.

I should have no home. I should lose my loyal staff. I should have to move all my furniture and gear, my wine and stores, and house them somewhere. All my nicely conceived plans would go to pot, and no doubt there were people who would chuckle and say that I had received rough justice.

“There's a war on, you old hoarder. Get out. Pantaloon like you don't matter.”

Which was true.

But I was frightened for the House. It would become a casual billet for a succession of casual men, most of whom would have no feeling for beauty, and some of whom might take pleasure in doing wanton damage. Dirt and devastation might be the House's lot, broken windows, walls scribbled on, paint worn away, floors and woodwork damaged. It might become a derelict house, unloved and uncared for. And what of the garden? I saw it as worse than a wilderness, trees broken, plants trampled on, huts stuck here and there, lorries sitting on the lawns, the accumulating mess of casual man smearing the whole place.

Yes, I was scared. That which had happened to Gibson might very well happen to me.

Lawton & Smith of Melford had done legal work for me, and I turned in for a talk with Lawton. If I received a requisition notice could I do anything about it? He was benignly cynical, and almost I could hear him saying: “My dear old idiot, don't you realize the inevitableness of all this? Once you let the machine loose it smashes and crashes through everything. A country that has played the fool as ours has done, must take the consequences.” But he gave me one hint. “You might try to find other accommodation for yourself—that is if you wish to stay in the neighbourhood.” I did wish to stay. It might prove a painful experience, but I was not going to desert the House.

I was lucky—I found an emergency home, “Rose Cottage” on the outskirts of Framley. Its owner had been called up, and his wife had joined one of the women's corps, and the cottage was for sale. In fact, Lawton put me on to it, and I bought Rose Cottage. It was less than a mile from Beech Hill.

The blow has fallen.

I found an ominous looking envelope on my breakfast table, and when I had opened it and unfolded the official form I knew that I was to be homeless.

To the owner and occupier of the land and buildings described on the reverse hereof:

I, Major General So and So, being one of a class of persons to whom the Secretary of State as a competent authority for the purpose of Part IV of the Defence Regulations, 1939, has in exercise of the powers contained in that part of the said Defence Regulations delegated the necessary authority, give notice that I, on behalf of the Secretary of State, take possession of the land and buildings described on the reverse hereof.

A.B.C. So and So. Lieut. Colonel.

What verbiage! It would have been much simpler to say "Get Out."

The form was dated and issued in duplicate, and I was to acknowledge the receipt of the notice.

I did so. I knew there was no appeal, but I wrote a letter asking for a date to be fixed, and I also asked what I was to receive in payment. And should I have the right to inspect my own property from time to time?

I received a curt reply. I was to be out in three weeks. I could not be given authority to enter my own gates. The place would be the property of the War Office.

Well—well!

A representative would call on me for a valuation.

The official gentleman arrived. He was brisk and impersonal, and to me he had the face of a fish.

I was informed that I should receive two hundred pounds a year, paid quarterly.

I could renew the fire insurance, but the company would demand a higher premium.

I should say so!

Well, in the modern parlance—"That was That."

If I tried to pass through my own gates I could be treated as a trespasser.

I realized that all this was inevitable, but I was angry and flustered, for at my age adaptations were not easy. I was being hustled out of my home, ruthlessly and without ceremony. There was no suggestion of help or of sympathy. I was just ordered to get out instanter with all my belongings.

I was a little more fortunate than Gibson, in that I was given three weeks in which to clear out, and how hectic were those twenty-one days. Even my forethought complicated the crisis for I had all my reserve stores and wine to deal with. I could hear people saying: "Serve you bloody well right." Ellen agreed to move with me to Rose Cottage, while Emily took a temporary place.

The obvious moral was that too many possessions can be a curse, and that the man who has nothing to lose has less to worry about, but all my old furniture, china and glass, pictures and carpets were heirlooms and part of the house. They were even part of myself, and I hated the idea of their going to strangers. I managed to get transport, and a few of the more precious things were transferred to Rose Cottage. We crammed two unwanted bedrooms full of linen and blankets, and reserve stores. The cottage happened to possess a small cellar, and I moved the most precious of my wines into it. I was lucky in finding a firm of furniture removers at Melford who could store all the rest of my belongings, and we managed to clear the House two days before the Army arrived. Our circular saw and machines I locked for the time being in the garage, and gave Potter the key. The authorities had agreed to allow him to remain in his cottage to work upon the growing of vegetables and fruit.

Property, property, property! The new world might pretend to despise it and its possessions, but all this mass of material was to prove itself constructive and useful in the lean period after the war. Beauty has its own blessing, and its right to survival. That which I had salvaged from destruction was to become of supreme value in a future that I did not yet foresee. Without it we should have been helpless.

I remember that evening before the House and I were separated.

I had kept my particular treasures to the last, pieces that were associated so poignantly with Sibilla. I had seen the rest of the house cleared, and my particular treasures collected in the drawing-room for the last journey to Rose Cottage, the William and Mary black and gold lacquer cabinet which my wife had loved, her winged armchair with its French embroidery in faded blue and Rose du Barry, her piano, six Sheraton chairs and a sideboard by the same artist, her china cabinet with its lovely things packed in cases, a Chinese carpet, two painted trays, a flower piece by Baptiste, a Constable, and Sibilla's portrait. I sat in the midst of these familiar things, and felt forlorn, yet somehow glad, for I think it would have broken Sibilla's heart had she been driven from the House. I could see the marks on the walls where the pictures and mirrors had hung, and I wondered what those walls would look like six months hence.

I heard the big van crunch up to the house. The men came in, and I asked them to be very careful with these last pieces. No doubt they thought me a foolish old fusspot. The emptying of that familiar room so saddened me that I left them to the job and went wandering over the empty house. My footsteps echoed through it, and I think it felt as forlorn as I did. I stood for a while at one of the windows of our bedroom, and suddenly I felt like some lost and forgotten child, crying: "Mother—mother."

For, to an old man like myself, as to a child, there were so many intimate things about the house, its tricks and mannerisms, its moods and familiar features, that I should feel lost without them in a new home. There was the mark on the polished handrail where I set my hand on beginning to climb the stairs, the radiator in the hall which I touched in winter to see how the furnace was behaving, the Persian rug on the landing which had a playful way of curling up and trying to trip you. Each window had a particular picture of its own. Even the bath-taps were individual, and the cistern of the lower lavatory less willing to work than its fellow up above. There was the pattern on the hall wall where the barometer had hung, to be tapped and cursed on occasions. It seemed so strange to see the library empty of its books, and minus my desk and chair, and the place where the waste-paper basket had stood. The House's lower windows had white shutters, and someone had left one of them hanging half open in the drawing-room. I went and closed it, and the sound was as familiar as some friendly voice, a plaintive voice.

"Why must you leave me to strangers?"

And suddenly I felt that I could not bear to linger here any longer. I locked the great white front door after me, and went to hand the key to old Potter. I found him smoking a pipe and cleaning his boots outside the cottage.

We two old men were laconic.

"Here's the key, Tom. I've locked up."

He did not look at me, but took the key and pocketed it. He was feeling no more welcoming to the Army than I was.

I walked out of the lower gate and closed it after me. I did not look back, for the eyes of the House might be those of a deserted dog. The valley road brought me to Rose Cottage. The men were carrying in the last of my belongings and I went and sat in the little orchard. It was a homely little house in old red brick and tile, its garden full of flowers, and its white fence neat and obvious. Sad and forlorn I might be, but this little place was a bit of England, the England that I knew. I should be near the House.

Then Ellen came out to me, plump, rosy, capable Ellen.

"Dinner, sir. I've laid it in the little back room."

Dinner! I blessed Ellen.

III

IN MY un wisdom I went up to the high beech wood next morning to watch for the invasion. It would have been much better if I had kept away.

It was a perfect summer morning, with the sun full on the House, and it looked white as a swan on a nest, peaceful and unsuspecting. I had brought a pair of glasses with me, and I sat at the foot of a beech tree and waited. The pool gleamed below me, and there was no wind in the rushes.

About half-past ten I heard the noise of a motorbike. It came from the direction of Framley Green, and it stopped outside the lower gate. I could see a brown figure in its hideous crash helmet. The fellow nosed the machine up against one leaf of the blue iron gates and pushed it open, and rode up to the house. He dismounted and propped his machine against one of the white portico pillars.

I said: "Damn him!"

A small car followed and drew up outside the house. Three brown figures emerged. Officers. I had my glasses on them. The car moved on and parked itself on the tennis lawn. Why on the tennis court?

Then the invasion arrived in full strength, a long convoy of lorries, brown backed beasts filling the valley with the noise of their engines. One of the officers came down to the lower gate and swung both leaves wide open. The first lorry pulled in with careless rapture, and I saw the gate crash and stone come crumbling from the pillar.

Clumsy brute! I was angry. I got on my feet, but sat down again. I told myself that I would go and have a word with those fellows later. Lorry after lorry roared in, to park on the turf of the tennis court. Why there, damn them! When the lawn was full of them, they lined up on the drive, while some of them rolled round to the stable yard. Brown figures began to swarm everywhere. I heard their loud voices, ugly, common voices. The lorries were being unloaded, blankets, mattresses, stores and what not. The white porch was piled high, and the stuff began to hide the pillars. I thought it about time for me to go down and register a protest.

And what a reception I got, and what a lesson! I went by the field path to the gate just above the pool, nor did I know then that the pool was to become the receptacle for all the Army's rubbish, old tins, bottles and what not. I made for the upper of the two gates, and was about to enter when a brown figure intervened. It was a man on guard, and he stopped me.

"What d'yer want?"

Had it occurred to me that I might be forbidden to enter one of my own gates?

I said: "I'm the owner of this house."

The soldier had an unpleasant and unfriendly face.

"War Office property. What's yer business?"

I felt hot about the ears.

"I think I told you that I am the owner of the house. I want to see your C.O."

He gave me a leery, hostile look, and I can only suppose that he was one of those to whom a man of property was an offence.

"The Major's busy. Better buzz off, old lad."

I stood my ground. I said: "My man, the Army does not seem to have taught you manners. I think you had better take my message. I prefer to deal with gentlemen."

That brought me an ugly look, but he took my message. He marched up the drive and I

heard him shout:

“Hi, Sarge—there’s an old toff wants to see the Major.”

Old toff—indeed! The atmosphere of this unit did not suggest discipline, but a casual and slap-you-on-the-back familiarity.

The sergeant came down to the gate. He was a clean, tall, fair lad, and superior as a human product to his private. He even called me sir. I explained that I wanted to see the C.O. and that though the house was requisitioned I did retain some interest in it.

“Have you your Identity Card, sir?”

I produced the card, and he examined it.

“O.K., sir. The Major is somewhere about. Will you come with me.”

It was a strange experience being conducted up my own drive to my own door by a lad I had never seen before. The place was a turmoil of men unloading and carrying in stores and equipment. I could smell them, for it was a sweating day, and the smell of human bodies was like a hang-over from the last war. The hall was piled high with stores, and I saw that the walls had begun to suffer, and it hurt me. I was beyond being angry, for I think this moiling mass of crude, strong humanity made me shrink and feel like an unwanted dog. One fellow bumped into me with a roll of blankets, and grinned, and I gave him a feeble smile.

My sergeant paused near the library door.

“Mind waiting a moment, sir?”

I nodded, and got out of the stream of traffic. Youth was strong and urgent, and *esprit de corps* was in my nostrils. The sergeant half closed the door, but I could hear what was said.

“Excuse me, sir, an old gentleman wants to see you.”

A turgid voice answered him.

“What for?”

“It’s the owner, sir.”

“Oh, all right, Mills, show the old blighter in.”

Such was my introduction! I found myself in the familiar room, confronting three officers who were sitting on cases with a central case for a table. I saw a whisky bottle, a syphon, glasses. The crown upon a shoulder-strap marked out the Major for me. He was a florid, stout young man with a fleshy nose and unpleasant blue eyes. Arrogance oozed from him.

“Yes?”

That was all he said, and it was a curt if casual challenge.

“Are you in charge?”

He nodded over the glass in his hand.

“I am the owner of the house.”

“Sorry. Not quite correct.”

I smiled at him.

“I was—and may be again. May I suggest that I regard unnecessary damage as——”

He took me up at once.

“There’s a war on, my dear sir. We don’t go about in kid gloves.”

“No,” said I, “but is that any excuse for clumsy driving, and a complete lack of—consideration. Why park your lorries on the lawns?”

He had lit a cigarette and was at his leisure.

“Look here, we have a job to do, sir, and may I remind you—that—you have no right here. And where do you think we are going to park all our lorries? In the billiard room?”

There was a giggle from one of the juniors, and I felt hot and helpless.

I said: "Thank you for your courtesy. I think that any complaint I have to make had better be made to higher quarters."

He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"It will come to me, and I'll put it where waste paper goes."

Another giggle, and I turned about and walked out of the room. I heard laughter behind me, and a voice that said—"Got the old geezer in the guts, what!" The incredible rudeness with which I had been met had shocked me. Had I done anything to provoke such florid insolence? I edged my way out of the house which was like a stewpan boiling with brown fat, telling myself that I had been a fool to trespass. Trespass! And was that turgid and offensive young man a symbol of the new world? I did not believe it, could not believe it. I had been unfortunate in having been bounced off by a lusty young cad full of whisky and the loud grease of authority. I went out by the lower gate, the one which the lorry had crashed, and I did not look at it. Something that was mine had been mauled, and maybe I was too full of the business of possessions. Well, reality had been rubbed into me, and was to be rubbed in yet more forcefully. I was just a superfluous old man, and I felt it.

Rose Cottage seemed to be a little haven of peace after what I had experienced, but I did not feel at peace. Moreover, I had not been back more than ten minutes when I saw old Potter at the gate, a hot and seething Potter.

I went out to him.

"Well, Potter?"

He took off his hat and mopped.

"I'd like you to come up, sir, and see——"

I smiled wryly.

"I've been, Potter. Not much use."

"But, sir, they be all over the old place. Broken one of the gates they have, and the coach-house doors. There be lorries on the lawn."

I felt very tired.

"I know, Potter. I have seen. The young gentleman in charge isn't exactly—friendly. Nothing to be done, I'm afraid."

"D'you mean, sir, they can smash about as they ruddy well please?"

"I'm afraid that is the situation, Potter."

"Well I be danged," said he.

And then he rubbed his hands reflectively on the seat of his trousers.

"I don't know, sir, as I want to stay up there and see the ol' place knocked to pieces."

"Just as you please, Potter. I am feeling just as you do."

So, Potter and his wife found lodgings with a brother who rented a lonely cottage in the woods on the way to Roman Heath, though I persuaded him to go on working in the glass-houses and fruit garden. These had been graciously assigned to us, but as for the fruit, it did not come our way. Potter locked up the glass-houses, but the Army broke in and purloined every peach and nectarine, and in grabbing grapes tore the vines to pieces. He reported the thefts to me and I wrote a letter of protest, and put in a claim for the value of the fruit.

I received a reply from the O.C. of the Unit.

Dear Sir,

Yours to hand. Men will be men. May I remind you that but for—men—neither you nor your fruit might be here. I will pass your claim to the proper authority.

It came to my ears later that much of the glass-house fruit reached the Officers' Mess. I should not have minded had their manners been less unripe. In satisfaction of my claim I ultimately received the sum of thirty-one shillings and sixpence.

And that, I suppose, was what authority thought I was worth.

IV

BUT this rough treatment stung me like a bunch of nettles. I had been humiliated, treated as of no account, and the reaction in me was positive. I would try to show the world's young men that I have some guts and initiative left in me. I had land and some equipment, and I could command the services of two other old men who were both hard workers. For hard and steady labour give me a man over forty.

I took Potter off the garden, for I realized from what he told me that any work there was so much waste. Even the green apples were going, and Potter picked less than a bushel of plums. Vegetables, too, were plundered, and the position there was hopeless.

Potter called the Army "A plague of ruddy brown emmets," and I put it to him that we had land which could be farmed, land—which if growing food crops—the plundering of which could be severely punished. We could grow cereals, potatoes and perhaps fancy crops for marketing, and keep poultry and ducks. Potter was sceptical about poultry. They two-legged foxes would steal both birds and eggs. But he was ready to fall in with my idea, for his life was the land and growing things, and the destruction and frustration up yonder had got his dander up.

Yes, we old men would show these youngsters that we could do a thing or two, and were not quite finished. I arranged with a farmer friend to plough for us in the autumn, and I managed to buy two second-hand wooden buildings. Restrictions were not as yet so completely thwarting as they were to become later.

But—speaking of huts. The whole countryside seemed to spawn huts, and also those horrible black corrugated contraptions which looked like headless elephants couchant. From High Wood and Valley Meadow I could observe the splurge of the hutment world about the House. Some of the lorries were removed from the lawns and parked in the pinewoods towards Roman Heath, and in their place wooden huts were erected. One morning I saw that the old yews by the service gate had been hacked down, and that a large black Nissen was being put up. This so angered me that I drove into Melford to see my lawyer and discover if this destruction could not be halted. I took my agreement with me.

Lawton was not encouraging. He pointed to a certain vague clause—one of those cunning paragraphs beloved of officials—and pointed out that the clause gave the Army the right to do much as it pleased. Yes, I might protest, but it would be like prodding a rhinoceros with a meat skewer.

I did not protest, for I realized that some of these things had to be. They were the wounds inflicted upon a country that had been cowardly and feckless, and thought of nothing but pleasure and safety first. Moreover, the bombing attacks upon the ports and London were in full blast and the position looked pretty desperate. Those horrid black beasts crouching under tree cover all the way to Roman Heath were necessary for the storing and concealing of munitions. Invasion was in the air, and though the old House was suffering dreadful things, it

was sharing in the country's tragedy.

Yes, the orangery housed the army's latrines; its glass and woodwork had been splodged over with black paint.

I could see broken glass in the House's windows and in the glass-house. The army had fitted wooden black-out panels, but why break the glass? A vast dump of corrugated iron and barbed wire, etc., decorated the semilune between the House and the road. The stable clock had given up the ghost when its hands had stood at seven minutes past three. Its voice ceased to fill the valley. Using my glasses one day I saw that the gilded clock-hands had gone, and that the clock-face was scarred. Some of the lads had amused themselves by throwing stones at it.

As for the garden it was ceasing to be a garden, and becoming a wilderness, rank grass, weeds, broken shrubs. I missed three of the fine Lawsons on the upper terrace. They had been cut down for fuel. There had been a big fig tree in a corner of the walled garden, and that too had gone. What idiocy! Of what use would green logs be when a coal dump decorated part of the tennis-court? I could understand that old Potter did not want to watch the death of a garden.

But I had plenty more to worry me.

Finance. Income tax at ten shillings in the pound; some of my investments gone to pot. Wages and the cost of living rising. The future looked pretty black, even if we were to survive the war.

I had been told that if I was to be a farmer I should have to register, otherwise I should not be recognized, and supplies, etc., would be denied me. I knew that this portended official interference, but there seemed to be no help for it. My farmer friend put me wise as to all this. The Agricultural Committees were in being, and the land being surveyed, and we were to be directed as to crops we should grow. Restrictions would be numberless. We might be ordered to do all sorts of silly things, and some wise ones. Also I was worried about High Beech Wood. I feared that the Army might requisition it for lorries and munitions, and make another sanguinary mess there, but it was saved by its height and its steep and boggy trackway. The gradients were too stiff, and I thanked God for it.

Another savage winter lay before us, but Rose Cottage proved a cosy little place. We were well off for fuel, as I had moved several tons of coal, coke and anthracite from the House, and it was dumped in the cottage orchard under sheets of corrugated iron, and we had a supply of logs in one of the outhouses. Ellen, good soul, seemed happy and contented, and not tempted to rush off in search of pay-plunder, nor was she of a fit age. She could do her shopping at Framley Green, or I would drive her into Melford, and we managed to get an old woman to come in twice a week and help her to do chores. And Billy was with us, devoted to Ellen, and sleeping in his basket at the foot of her bed. I had found it impossible to take the Cairn anywhere near the house, for he could neither understand nor tolerate strangers there, and utterly refused to make friends with anything in khaki. On one occasion when we were passing the service gate, Billy trespassed before I missed him. I always went by the house without looking at it and ignoring the men. I heard sudden growls, and bad language, and Billy came out into the road with half a brick bouncing after him. After that incident I never took the Cairn with me when I had to pass the house. He was a one-man dog, and the most ferocious of individualists.

Having written to our Agricultural Committee I had a visit from a representative. It was a bitter day, and the official—he was a youngster—seemed to be feeling the cold. My farmer

friend had put his tractor to work and ploughed both South Mead and Upper Mead, some eight acres in all. I had done this without orders, and felt rather pleased with myself.

My young friend appeared to be in a congealed mood. I told him that I proposed to grow oats, maize, and perhaps buckwheat, sunflowers and some fancy crops, partly to feed the poultry I intended to keep in Valley Mead. I had plenty of wire and we had been putting up runs. He looked, he listened, and said nonchalantly: "I'll schedule you for potatoes."

I suspected that the verdict did not rest with him, but that he was feeling full of authority.

I said: "Why—potatoes?"

"Easy," said he, "and safe."

"You mean, my experience does not justify——?"

He lit a cigarette and took his time about it. Was I always to be so superfluous to the young?

"Not worth while putting little patches like this down to wheat."

I tried mild sarcasm.

"But don't you appreciate the fact that if I am to keep a couple of hundred laying hens, and feed should be short, there is some sense in my growing some cereals?"

He had his answer pat.

"We regard the hen as an inefficient food-machine. Do you know how much she eats in a year?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

"Our opinion is that the eggs she produces do not justify—in food value—her consumption of grain and meal."

He was a very formal and opinionated young man, and aloof and cold as the weather.

I put another point to him.

"I have two old men and myself. Have you ever lifted an acre of potatoes, much less eight?"

He was quite unmoved.

"We could send a 'Digger' in, and you could get school children to help with the picking up. You would have to clamp. Your men capable of doing that?"

"I dare say we are."

"And you could feed the chats to your chickens."

He left me, driving off in a neat and clean little car, and I had noticed that his hands were soft and white and showed no sign of wear and tear. Not a bad job for a youngster, hectoring other folk into doing the hard work. I wrote again to the committee, and received another visit, this time from a working farmer and a brother landowner. They were much more courteous and sympathetic. After all—I was a kind of volunteer. The ultimate verdict was that I should grow three acres of potatoes, two acres of greens, and that the rest of the land should be cropped as I pleased.

I thanked them.

We had got our huts up at the bottom of Valley Mead, and I had managed to buy a number of second-hand chicken-houses from a poultry farmer who was going out of business. We had to wire the runs against foxes, and Potter put another point to me.

"What about them young thieves over yonder?"

I saw his point. We had several hundred weights of barbed wire in hand, and we cut chestnut posts and strung barbed wire all along our side of the road where the Pool did not defend it. I knew that a man with wire-cutters could get through the fence with ease, but such marauding might be too obviously planned and blatant. Our netted runs would be an additional

protection. A couple of R.A.S.C. privates strolled across while we were at work, Potter straining the wire and I stapling it. They were facetious.

“Expectin’ Jerry, what?”

Potter replied to them.

“No—them there fruit thieves. Can’t be too careful these days.”

“Sez you!”

They looked sulky, and mooched off.

My friend the Major happened to pass by a little later, and he stopped and was floridly saucy.

“Who are you fencing against, if I may ask?”

I was curt with him.

“The defenders of England.”

We got our runs and houses up, and I had bought in a hundred Rhode Island pullets from the same poultry farmer who had been feeling the draught. They were four-month birds and expected to lay early in November. Feeding them was going to be a problem, though we had salvaged part of the potato crop, and in earlier days I had laid in half a ton of oats and half a ton of maize. We had a small hand-mill for grinding meal. When I made application a mild quantity of feeding stuff was allocated to me. I knew that I should have to market all the eggs, but I had installed a dozen hens at Rose Cottage. Later, we managed to buy and collect other people’s scraps from Framley, and I was moved to wonder at all the pre-war fuss about poultry. The birds did well on their war rations, and I had very few deaths. So much for the poultry pundits who stuffed text-books full of elaborate nonsense!

The House began to look very forlorn that winter. Its white face was feeling neglect and the weather, and I could picture her—poor dear—peering in her mirror and feeling sad. No powder puff, no make-up, and incipient wrinkles. Sometimes I turned my glasses on her, and saw the peeling walls, and the woodwork of the windows showing through the perished paint. I noticed a greenish-black streak down one wall where a gutter had been stopped with leaves and the rainwater was spilling over. Many windows were broken and plugged up with black-out material, though why the asses who had to live in a cold house must break windows was beyond me. Also, some slates had come loose and slid down over the gutters, but nothing was done about it. So much for private property! The State might requisition it, but it took no trouble to keep it in repair. There were dozens of men loafing about the place who could have put those trifles right.

As for the poor garden, it had become almost unrecognizable, dirty and shaggy and trampled. The glass-houses might have had a bomb near them, and the peaches and nectarines might be dead or growing rampantly through the glass. I saw that some ten yards of the fruit-wall had toppled over, and since it had been in fair condition I concluded that it had been pushed over. The sheer, wanton mischief of adult urchins! Two more huts had been erected on the ground above the stables, and the House now looked like an iceberg surrounded by brown rocks. The paths and drive were a mass of weeds, and more trees broken.

About that time, too, came the shout for old iron. A lorry arrived one day with a gang of men and they proceeded to smash down the old blue railings and to remove the gates. I had received no warning, and when I protested I was given to understand that the place was Government property, and that I had no say in the matter.

JUST when we had thought our defences secure a hard spell set in; the pool froze, and our friends across the road took to sliding on the ice. Our only protection here was a mass of rhododendron, and anything that could be hacked down was no barrier against the lads in brown, so we had to rake up some old iron posts and drive them into the frozen ground, and sling barbed wire along to link up with our other fences. Potter or I went round the houses at night; we kept them padlocked, and inspected the lock by the light of a torch. The black-out was a confounded nuisance, and so was the weather. The drinking fountains froze, and had to be thawed out over an oil stove in one of the sheds, and water was a problem. We tried running a length of hose to the pool and fitting a semi-rotary pump, but the hose was cut twice. After that I carried water up by car in a budge, having removed one of the front seats. I fitted Potter out with an old leather golf jerkin, some riding breeches and leggings, and a heavy overcoat. He was a dogged old man, and he was as hard set as I was to keep the barbarians at bay. Incidentally, the frozen pool became decorated with old tins and bottles and what not which the Army cast upon it, I suppose, as an adventure in malicious humour. Or it may have been just oafishness.

But I will admit that I was rather enjoying myself. I was much fitter for the hard work, and happy in the idea of being somewhat useful. Our pullets had come into lay, and the egg production was good, in spite of the hard weather. Life was austere, especially at the table, and I was becoming almost a vegetarian. Potter got his cheese, but our rations were meagre compared to the food issued to the lads across the way. My farmer friend was collecting the army's leavings for his pigs, and he told me that the wastefulness of this particular unit was scandalous.

Well, they were badly officered, especially in the matter of their C.O. and such cynicism spreads downwards and can debauch a whole unit. I was to discover later how immense the difference could be when those in control were of a far higher quality.

A word as to old Potter and Tom, our help. Both these veterans were to prove their wisdom and loyalty when the plunder-period arrived, and anything that called itself a gardener was demanding a pound a day. Most of them would have been dear at ten bob, when output was considered, and "Perks," that wonderful word which justifies various forms of thieving. Neither Potter nor Tom proved greedy when I was hard put to it financially, and they did not suffer in the long run. I told them that they would not be let down, and apparently the word of a gentleman was still good security.

How we welcomed that spring. The frost held till well into March, and work on the land was delayed, but when the cold spell broke it was as though the sap was released in a night, and the earth began to go green. We rushed in early potatoes, and got a tilth ready for the oats. Maize and buckwheat and main crop spuds could wait. I became quite handy with the Auto-Culto, and scuffled the soil and ploughed out drills for the seed potatoes. Even the poor old garden across the way began to look less sad, and flaunted a wildness that had a beauty of its own. Nature can flout destructive man, and even a mauled tree will dress itself with blossom. Daffodils flowered in wild places, and I could see a great old flowering currant flushed with colour. I watched the buds swell, and heard the birds rejoicing.

That spring brought us other cause for rejoicing. Potter gave me the news. The Unit in possession was going, and another taking its place. I wondered what the change would bring

us. Anyhow the new could not be worse than the old. In the months ahead, when I talked the matter over with Peter Nash, we arrived at the same conclusion. The men who had made such a sorry mess of the old place had been townsmen, and not very likeable townsmen at that, and quite without feeling for the country, and hostile to any house that roused envy, hatred and malice. Peter was a Progressive, but not a Socialist. He had a ready wit, and for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity he substituted the slogan Envy, Hatred and Malice, all dressed up in second-hand surplices and wearing false haloes.

The common town-bred man can be quite insensitive to beauty. He just does not see it, having had his vision limited by bricks and mortar. I suppose that is yet another curse imposed upon us by too much industrialism. A large part of the population has become beauty-blind, and that in a country that had developed the most lovely domestic architecture in all the world. Graciousness passed with the Georges. It had been a gentleman's architecture, interpreted by craftsmen who were country-minded and had eyes, but with too much industrialism it became the product of the commercialist and the cad.

I remember Peter telling me that he had talked to some of the city bred men in his unit, and had discovered—to his astonishment—that not only did they not know the name of a single tree, but that they were incapable of distinguishing one tree from another. The country might have been all cabbage. They had eyes, but their brains were blind.

I have digressed. We were at work in Valley Mead when the army took the road. I don't know how many lorries rolled out through the gateless gaps, and left behind them scarred and piebald turf ornamented with black splodges of oil. It was a different world from ours, for in the other war we had foot-slogged, these fellows were given rides. We watched them go in the direction of Framley, and I remember the last lorry packed with grinning faces, and several of those faces might have had thumbs to noses and fingers spread. Such was their blessing upon three old men.

“Good riddance to rubbish,” said old Potter, “wonder what the next lot'll be like.”

I too wondered, but I had other designs in me.

For the House was alone with itself after all these months, and it seemed to call to me—“Come, look, I am free for a few hours. Come, see what I have suffered, and the scars I have won in the war.” Both curiosity and a shrinking fear possessed me, but I knew that I had to go.

I went. All the ground about the house looked as though it had suffered from mange. Most of the paint had been rubbed off the lower part of the two white pillars, but they stood. The big front door with its Requisition notice suggested that it had been kicked open by numberless army boots. The key had been left in the lock, but before exploring I toured the yards and garden. It was a scene of desolation and dirt. Old Potter's cottage had been broken into, and I found that some of the doors and the casing of the stairs had been torn down, to be used as firewood. It was the same in the stables. The match-board lining had been wrenched away and I suppose—burnt. What would the House be like? I went round the garden, or what had been a garden. I looked into huts, and saw their dirty floors. Rubbish lay around, old sandbags and what-not, in all sorts of corners. Shrubs and trees were broken, the glass-houses useless. The poor little orangery stank, and some of the latrine buckets had not been emptied. I found a great pit in the middle of the rose border which had been used as a midden, and the filth below camouflaged with a few shovelfuls of soil. Yet, there was growth; the flowering shrubs and trees were undefeated. The two big *Pyrus Floribundas* were masses of pink bud, and *Purpurea* was in full flower. I found my favourite *Daphne* broken off short. As for the fruit garden, it was

a wilderness. The great fruit-cage had been smashed, and the wire netting lay on gooseberries and currants.

I will admit that I shrank from entering the house, but its blind windows appealed to me. I unlocked the front door and pushed it open, and its hinges creaked as in pain. The hall was paved with squares of black and white marble, and in the old days had been rubbed over with a polisher. Now it looked all blurred and worn like ground glass, and one could trace a trackway across it where boots, boots, boots had gone to and fro. The walls were dirty, and in places the plaster had been broken. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and cornices. And then I saw the stairs. They had been painted white but now they looked grey, and halfway down the first flight the handrail and bannisters had gone. The great arched window on the landing had been boarded up.

I turned into the drawing-room, Sibilla's room. The glass doorhandle had gone. It would appear to have been used as a mess, and that described it, for the floor was stained and worn into splinters, and here and there the paper hung from the walls. Nails had been driven in, and the old cream surface scribbled on. Over the mantelpiece some wag had scrawled a rude caricature of Hitler.

I felt profoundly depressed. I went elsewhere, and my depression deepened. Painted on the walls of the various rooms were large black letters—"Four Men"—"Six Men," etc. I found myself in Sibilla's room staring at something on the wall where her bed had stood, an obscene picture, and on the opposite wall a crude study of a woman. And there were obscene scribbles here and there. This angered me, and moved me to a poignant disgust. Need the beasts have so fouled a room that was full—for me—of sacred memories and anguish. My wife had died in this room.

No rambling record such as this plans to be dramatic, but my trespassing here was to produce a touch of drama. I must have been so absorbed in the House's tragic state that I did not hear a car pull in. I had reached the first floor landing and was looking at the gap in the handrail when I became aware of a brown figure standing in the hall below me. He was a tall, slim lad and I could see his face quite clearly, a rather pale and sensitive face with dark eyes and well marked eyebrows.

For a moment or two we looked at each other in silence. He had two pips on his shoulder, and I guessed that he was an officer of the new unit.

I spoke first.

"Good morning. I suppose I'm a trespasser. I was the owner of this house. I wanted to see what it had suffered."

He saluted me.

"Quite so, sir. You are Sir John Mortimer?"

I nodded. His dark eyes were scanning me with peculiar seriousness, and I imagined that he might have been told that I was an awkward old curmudgeon.

I walked down the stairs and held out my hand. I said: "Even old houses have to suffer war wounds."

He was a lad who looked you straight in the eyes.

"I can see that, sir. It must hurt."

Hurt? I smiled at him. He was a pleasant contrast after that boozing, bumptious Major.

"Houses have souls of their own, sir. Those other fellows seem to have been a casual crowd."

“Very casual.”

“I should like to look round with you, sir. I am the advance officer. My name’s Nash.”

We wandered through the lower rooms, and I could see scorn on his sensitive face. He did not say much, but I could divine his feeling about the damage that had been done. And then I took him up the stairs and into that particular room and let him see that obscene emblem. He stared at it, tense and frowning.

I said: “My wife died in this room. Her bed stood just there.”

He did not look at me, and I liked him for that.

“The dirty beasts. I’ll have that painted out at once, sir.”

We went out together into the garden and up the steep path through the terraces. A high seat had stood in a little recess sheltered by clipped yews and the wall of the fruit garden, but the seat had gone. We found it later doing duty in the sergeant’s mess. The view across the valley here was very lovely, especially so on a spring day such as this, and as we stood side by side I somehow knew that I had a lover of such things beside me.

He said: “What a damnable mess! Had you been here long, sir?”

“All my life. My great grandfather built the house. I had two boys, both killed in the last war.”

He was silent, gazing, and a little shimmery look came into his eyes.

“That beech wood up there. Yours, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Marvellous, the way the valley rushes up to those great trees. Have we——?”

“No. No lorries there.”

“That’s good. There’s such mystery—green gloom and great grey trunks. And that—pool. Pure Maurice Hewlett.”

I was surprised.

“You—read Hewlett?”

“Yes.”

“I thought he was dead—to the young.”

He gave me a quick, laughing glance.

“I must be one of the old young. By the way, sir, I think we can do better than the last crowd. My C.O. is what they used to call a sahib, and the men are a decent crowd.”

“Thanks—perhaps—to their officers.”

He did not laugh at that, but took it with dark seriousness.

“Well, we try to set a standard. After all—character does count.”

“More than—cleverness?”

“Much more,” said he.

So, that was how we met and became friends, and what he had said proved true. His crowd were a decent lot, many of them country lads, and his C.O. a gentleman.

“We will do some clearing up here,” was one of the first things he said to me, “and if you care to, come and look round whenever you please.”

I thanked him, and he asked me to dine in the mess.

I WILL not be so foolish as to declare that one Army unit was wholly bad, and that the second was made up of honest, English lads with speedwell blue eyes, but the House was happier with Peter Nash's crowd, and so were we. The hutments could not be helped, nor the lorries, nor the many, booted feet, but Peter's C.O. made some speedy alterations. The orangery ceased to be a latrine, and litter became less evident; broken doors and windows were repaired, and I gather that the men were forbidden to cut or break down trees. In fact some of them volunteered to work in the garden, and to rescue it from weeds, and since there were trained gardeners among them the place became far less of a wilderness. The fruit-cage was repaired, and fruit trees cut back and nailed to the walls, and the vegetable garden once more grew spuds and peas. Old Potter was so reassured that he used to go pottering round in the evening, hobnobbing with kindred souls in khaki.

Moreover, our barbed wire defences became superfluous while this unit was with us. We even got help from some of the lads on summer evenings in hoeing and cutting rough grass, and earthening up our potatoes. I laid in a barrel of beer, keeping it and a dozen glasses in one of the huts, and I dispensed it to our volunteer workers. It seemed to make me somewhat popular.

But my great discovery was Peter. I think he grew to love this deep green valley with its steep woods almost as much as I did. He was a reader, and something of an artist in black and white, and he liked to wander about when he was off duty and forget the war. He was a good soldier against his inclination. I lent his brother officers my gun and got them to help keep the rabbits down, but Peter was not a gunman. He preferred to sit and stare and think, and let the peace of the place seep into him, for the war-world was not very lovely to the sensitives among the young.

He was a Public School boy, and I was surprised to find that he had been training as an hotelier before the war. He had spent time in Paris and Vienna. His father, now dead, had been a somewhat famous hotelier, and Peter appeared to have inherited the paternal interests. He made me think of the "Chocolate Soldier," and those Swiss or French fellows who could treat hotel-keeping as an art, an art so rare in England.

He showed me a photograph one day of a pretty, fair young thing of the name of Sybil. The name moved me like a memory. Sybil was a Wren, and Sybil and Peter had young dreams of their own, but like most of the new young their dreams were practical.

In fact Peter and his brother officers re-educated me in some of the tendencies and aspirations of the post-war world. They were nice lads, and they did not talk about the Idle Rich, or bore one with slogans about "Cap-it-alism." Maybe they regarded me as a likeable old boy who was not to have his feelings and prejudices hurt and offended, but from what they read and talked about, and from what Peter told me, they contemplated the creation of a new world of planned justice and efficiency.

Why not so? These lads were good England, but what would they make of the rough, lewd lot who had preceded them?

So, the war and the world went on, and there was for me and the House a happy interlude. It was a good year for the land, and the orchard trees were carrying heavy crops, and I came to an agreement with Peter's crowd. We would share the produce if they would help us with the picking. I proposed to market my share of hand-picked Coxes, Bramleys, Laxtons, Monarchs, and Lanes, for already I was beginning to be worried about finance. Even in a small way I should have to be a merchant, and put the fruits of the earth to use. Was I to become a poultry-

farmer and fruit-grower? If my profits could pay the men's wages, that would be something.

But I was worried.

About harvest time Sybil had a week's leave, and since she and Peter wished to be together, I invited her to Rose Cottage and gave her the spare room. She was a sturdy little person with a broad and pleasant face, a wonderful set of teeth and a lovely smile. Her fair hair curled all over her head, and her blue eyes could be infinitely serious and just as infinitely merry. Peter had chosen well, for this child had wisdom and integrity, and a way with her, and her sincerity was such that I—an old fellow—could listen and feel good.

Sybil was both the old and the new. She could do that which had been the pride and the prerogative of man, and yet be woman, and she and Peter made a comely couple. Almost I felt that I had adopted two children. When Peter came down to the cottage I left them alone together, and they would lie side by side in the orchard, and I used to wonder what they talked about. Not as Sibilla and I had talked, but with the young tongues of the new world. But Peter was a devout lover, and not of the casual, slangy, slap and tickle brigade, and I think Sybil would have smacked him had he been cheap and nasty. Nor would he have been her Peter.

I liked the child's helpfulness. She was not like so many of the young who appear to assume that household chores are the business of the elderly. She made her own bed; she helped to lay a table and to clear it, and was *persona grata* to Ellen. Sometimes Peter joined us for the evening meal, and I brought out a bottle of wine and we were merry. I did not mind being teased by either of them. At the end of her week's leave Sybil was calling me Uncle.

I remember the evening after she had left us. Peter came down and sat with me in the orchard. He was silent, but not with the silence of aloofness. I smoked my pipe, and pretended to read the *Times*. If he wanted to talk, he could—if it pleased him.

It did please him.

He asked me a question.

"Do you think I have been right, sir?"

"About what?"

"Not marrying."

I laid my paper down on the grass.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes, and no, but not till this beastly business is over."

"And Sybil?"

"She said she would marry me to-morrow."

"That would be Sybil. But I rather think you are right. If I may say so, you are a lucky lad."

"I am that, sir. What's more, I'm thinking of the afterwards. Life is not going to be easy for the ex-officer. Sybil hasn't a bean, and I've got only just a little capital."

"Be careful of it."

"But one has to take a risk. I'm doing a lot of thinking these days."

It was early next spring that I received the bad news. Peter's crowd were going. I was more than sorry to lose Peter, for I had grown fond of the lad, and I was a lonely old buffer, and feeling more so as this dreary and difficult war dragged on. Also, the House would be sorry to lose Peter's crowd, and to be once more at the mercy of strangers. It would be Africa, Sicily and Italy for Peter and his people, or that was their guess.

I remember so well the evening before they left us. Peter was coming to supper with me, but

happening to stroll up to Beechhanger late in the afternoon I saw a brown figure sitting like Pan on the edge of the wood, a sad and contemplative figure, legs drawn up and arms wrapped around them. It was Peter taking a last look at the valley in the spring, with all its young greenness and promise. I wondered for a moment whether he wished to be disturbed, and I was standing there hesitant when he turned and saw me.

I remember the half smiling, half poignant look in his eyes. His arms came unwreathed; his legs straightened.

“Don’t get up,” said I.

I moved on and sat down beside him, and for a minute we looked in silence at the valley and the woods, the pool, and the old white house. The sheen of sunlight was upon them. I glanced at the lad, and saw a shimmer in his eyes, and profound sadness. He was going into exile. He might not return. The thought hurt me. I was fonder of this lad than I had suspected.

Suddenly he spoke, while looking at the house.

“It’s all so good—something to remember.”

The English are apt to be mute or monosyllabic when emotion moves them.

I said: “It has been good having you here. If Sybil wants anywhere to spend her leave, I’d be glad to have her.”

“She’d love it. Thanks ever so much, sir.”

“Oh, that’s all right. You young things have done me good. I was getting rather crusty.”

He gave a little and almost soundless laugh.

“Like old wine? Well, we haven’t mixed so badly. I hope the next crowd won’t be as nasty as the first.”

“I hope not.”

It has been a kind of home here, even for the chaps. I’d like to see it again.”

“You will.”

He was silent, and I knew what he was thinking.

“You’ll write to me?” said I.

“I will. I want to.”

“You had better copy Sybil, and call me Uncle.”

The House was empty for two days between Peter’s going and the arrival of the new people, and I was able to go all over the place at my leisure and appreciate the difference between the then and the now. The House was clean, and some of the rooms had been distempered, and there were no obscene scribblings on the walls. Worn stair-treads had been replaced and the gap in the bannisters repaired. In fact—the House seemed happier than it had been for a year or more, and I could call this period the Season of Recovery after the foul winter it had suffered. It was the same in the stable-quarters and the outhouses. There was no mess here, and broken doors had been repaired and rehung, and windows mended. Nor was the garden a mass of weeds; some of it had been dug over, and early crops were in, crops that others would enjoy.

I looked into some of the huts. They too were clean, and I took my hat off to Peter, his C.O. and his crowd. Here were cleanliness and decency, symbols of a new world. Peter might be sensitive and something of a dreamer, but he could do the job, and from what I had heard he had a great reputation with the men.

I stood between the two porch-pillars and looked about me. What of the future? What the devil was to be done with all these huts? When—if ever—would the place be cleared and in its right mind? I will confess that the problem frightened me. Should I—an old man—live again and

alone in the House? Could I afford to live in it? And what sort of life would it be?

For I too had changed like the House. I had my contact with youth in the persons of Peter and Sybil. I was younger, more fit, less crabbed and self-centred. In some ways I was leading the life of a working-man, using my hands and my wits, and the head my forefathers had given me. Change and transformation were in the air, and I knew that after all the devastation of this war we should have to toil and reconstruct and try to keep our tempers sweet. Was I to share in the labour, or just sit and sneer?

I strolled down to where the blue railings had stood, and turned to look at the house. A little battered and decayed it might be, but it was a House; a solid and courageous house, and its eyes looked out upon beauty. My House! But how much was it my house? There was a little less of the I in my contemplation. Could a house with twenty bedrooms be rationally mine? Were the house and I out of date unless we adapted somehow? But how? I felt worried and uneasy, but I could find no answer to these questions.

The new lot are in. Not a bad crowd—I think. I strolled across and made contact with their C.O. and asked him to dine with me at the cottage.

Rather a sallow, solemn fellow, but with guts and character.

I said to him: “The last unit here were a good crowd. We got on very well together. They put a lot of things straight.”

He looked me in the face and said that he hoped the new relationship would be the same. He would see to it that no wanton damage was done.

I liked the man. We spent a friendly evening together, and I managed to draw him out. In civil life he was a lawyer, and his relaxations were gardening and music. He was a pianist, and I persuaded him to play some Delius and Debussy to me on Sibilla’s piano.

My feeling was that we should get on very well.

We did.

He took a personal interest in the poor old garden.

I am becoming quite a farmer, and learning a devil of a lot. Nothing like doing things yourself. You can neither criticize nor praise adequately unless you have personal experience. Our poultry are laying well, and it is one of my jobs to deliver eggs to the collecting centre. Basic petrol has gone long ago, but I have a small supplementary ration for egg delivery, and shopping in Melford. Very rarely do I go up to London, for London depresses me. It is a shabby, restless city, or so it strikes me, and the London I loved was passing even before the war. I visited some of the bombed areas, St. Paul’s and the City, and what I saw in the city gave me furiously and gloomily to think. Here—it seemed to me—was a force that was finished, and all those sinister ruins were like the dried bones of a civilization that had received its death blow. Poor old London might take it, but the power that had been London might pass in the future to New York, Moscow, or even to Berlin.

My Club had been bombed, and was out of action, and every month it became more difficult to eat or to get one’s hair cut. My tailor I never saw. My simple shopping was completely domestic, and largely under instructions from Ellen. I searched for such articles as saucepan cleaners, aluminum kettles, sieves, mops, fibre washing-bowls, and what-not, and often not with much success. London tired and depressed me, and it had macabre moments that made me glad to get back into the country. You were too haunted by forebodings amid those battered buildings. In the country there could still be peace.

We had much the same quota as to crops, and my Committee treated me somewhat benignly

and as an enthusiastic amateur. Provided I grew my quota of potatoes I was left alone, and no one worried me about my oats, buckwheat and maize. I had managed to obtain a sample of the new maize seed, and I found it to mature early and crop well in the damper portion of Vålley Mead. As to buckwheat—I discovered that in my innocence I had struck a winner. A local seed-merchant put me wise. Did I know what parrot food was fetching? At that moment I did not, and he told me, and when to sell. Our buckwheat patch proved a little gold mine. Nor do I know what we should have done without our portable thresher, and the little old “Diesel” I managed to buy second-hand. I had been wiser than I knew in thinking things out. Moreover, Gibson and I bought a half share each in a mysterious cow, and milk was ours. Old men need wine and milk.

I had heard silly people complain of the luxurious living in the country. They appeared to think that we had masses of secret butter, milk, poultry, fruit. Bosh! As a matter of fact the farm labourer was far worse off than a factory hand. All he had was his cheese, and a few extra greens and spuds. He had no canteen, no British Restaurant, no shop round the corner, and he worked harder and for about half the pay of a munitioner.

Service—not profit! What utter bunkum! Who are the profiteers in this war? Whose pockets have benefitted? And who will go on shouting and striking after the war for more hard cash? The workers. Service indeed! I have to confess that when I hear the word “War-Worker” I am moved—if not to laughing scorn, to a spasm of benign cynicism.

I have had three letters from Peter, the last of them—I gather—from Sicily. He speaks guardedly of the hotel that took a tumble down the cliff. That must be Taormina. Poor, macabre, fantastic old Taormina. Sibilla and I spent part of a winter there at the delightful little Hotel Timeo. Peter writes happily. Thanks to “Monty” all our tails are up.

And Sybil has spent a weekend with me. She came with her pretty, solid little face rather severe and set, but after a day’s loafing and fruit picking her sun came out. She is tired, tired of dealing with a batch of awkward young women who had been added to the unit, and were inclined to giggle and play pert. Sybil is an officer, and for the first time I saw her in uniform, her hat prettily cocked and legs neat in black stockings.

Her first words were: “I’ll get out of all this, Uncle.”

She reappeared looking flowery, to relax in a deck chair and smoke a cigarette. She told me about the saucy and sometimes sulky recruits.

“I could slap the lot. But we’ll teach ’em. It’s the first casual crowd we’ve had.”

I could see Sybil smacking them, and with gusto.

Over a cocktail that evening she let go about her feelings. She said—that after the war she would want to go all flowery and flouncy, yes pretty pretty and sentimental. Discipline was all very well for yourself, but rubbing it into others was not much fun. I put it to her that the one thing the country might need after the war would be discipline. Envy, hatred and malice could not be allowed to go native.

Did I believe that? She frowned at me.

“Well, human nature, and years of repression. Your reaction, my dear, may be somewhat—admirable—but——”

“No leg-pulling, Uncle.”

I glanced at her pretty legs.

“No, not for old gentlemen, though they are pretty ones. I rather think Peter will approve.”

“Of what?”

“Your—going all flowery and romantic.”

She was more troubled about the ultimate future than about the war, and even the magic word “Planning” which was so much in the air, did not reassure her. Ex-officers did not belong to some union which could exert mass pressure, nor were they domestically essential like plumbers and painters, cooks, carpenters and what-not. They could not hold the community up at the point of a pistol. And Peter was sensitive and dreamy, and the world would not be for the dreamers.

I was not so sure, either about Peter or dreams. Translate dreaming into inspiration of some sort, and the dreamer is leagues ahead of the common man. They are not in the same class. Moreover, I had a pretty good opinion of Peter’s practicability. He was a success as an officer, and could manage men.

I asked her a question:

“Is your idea—Peter’s?”

“Just—how?”

“I mean—the job. Would your serene young highness stoop to gain in running an hotel?”

“Don’t be—nasty, Uncle. Peter and I will be in it together.”

“Good girl.”

“But not some slovenly country pub where booze and the bar are all that matters, and the cooking and the manners are sub-human. I’ve ideas too.”

“A super guest-house?”

“What about it being flowery like my frock?”

Peter has been wounded.

I think it must have happened somewhere near Cassino. The taking up of stores and ammunition cannot be a pansy job. I had a scrawl from hospital. A smashed right leg. I hope to God the lad won’t lose it.

Sybil has written. A tender-hearted, motherly child this, behind all her sturdy composure. Sybil will wear well.

How damnable! Another letter from Sybil. They have had to amputate Peter’s leg. He is in hospital somewhere in Italy. It will be a long job.

Sybil writes: “Oh, Uncle, it makes me mad that I can’t go to him. I hate the thought of some strange nurse messing around him.”

What a touch of the feminine! And Sybil jealous, bless her! I can’t stand cold blooded people.

Poor lad, minus one leg, but it means that he will be out of the war so far as acute danger is concerned. And yet, I suppose, that a man with one live leg will be badly handicapped when the scramble for jobs begins.

These two young things seem to be getting more and more into my thoughts.

I have written to Peter. I have told him not to worry too much, and that constructive heads are more valuable than lost legs.

This business of living is becoming more and more difficult. But for our extra milk and our eggs and an occasional fowl and rabbit, and our fresh vegetables I don’t know how we could manage. The cost of everything is going up, and one’s income shrinking. Ellen, poor dear, is always telling me to go in search of fish. That means queueing, and I’m not fond of fish or of wasting my time in queues. I wonder how half the world lives, poor old people with small, fixed incomes. Buns and meat pies full of mysterious horrors! I look at my ration of cheese and sometimes I laugh. Well, we are alive, and but for “The Few” we should have been corpses.

I have been round the garden. I remember a picture called The Briar Rose—I think—by one of the pre-Raphaelites, and it might symbolize all that has happened here. Peter's crowd had cleaned up the productive ground, and the present lot had also done some work, but elsewhere my world had gone wild. It is extraordinary how quickly artifice surrenders to nature. The paths and borders are full of weeds, chickweed, dock, nettles, fat-hen thistles, sorrel, and I am sorry to say—couch. Brambles might have sprung up in the night and put out predatory suckers and rooted again in loops to catch your feet. I find them and bracken amid the rhododendrons and azaleas. The place is a wild tangle, and lovely in its way, but not lovely to the eyes of a gardener, though many of the herbaceous plants are making a fight for it, and the phloxes are in flower. I see that pretty pest "Golden Rod" putting up its plumes everywhere, even in some of the paths. Hedges have gone native, and the clipped yews and box trees have sprouted like hedgehogs. You can hardly tell where grass and borders meet. My God, what a business it will be cleaning up and recovering the place! Weeds seeding for years, brambles, bracken and nettles to be dug out. Both brambles and bracken are the very devil when they have got established. And the couch! The prospect frightens me not a little.

Moreover, I have become more and more scared of finance, and one evening I made myself sit down and do what I had funked doing—set credit and debit down on paper.

Firstly, what would it cost to put the house in repair and re-decorate it, also cottage and outbuildings? A thousand pounds—I thought—at post-war prices.

What should I claim and receive for dilapidations?

Probably about half the sum I should have to spend.

What would happen to the hutments? Would they be offered to me at a price?

I did not want the damned things.

Who would remove them, and when?

But my future income was the problem.

Some of my investments had gone phut, or been reconverted at a lower rate of interest. Rubber was non-existent and even if the companies recovered—if we beat the Japs, it might be years before they paid a dividend.

Even with income tax reduced to eight shillings in the pound my invested net income would have fallen to some twelve hundred pounds a year.

And what could I make? Perhaps two hundred pounds or so a year on eggs, poultry and fruit.

What of my expenses?

Rates, light, fuel. Say £200.

Two maids at £2 10s. each a week or more, say £300 a year.

Two gardeners at £4 each or so a week. Some £400.

Living for three at thirty bob a head a week, a conservative estimate, £4 10s. a week. £234 a year.

Personal expenses?

Subscriptions and Insurance, £150.

Car, tax, etc., £70.

Doctors' and dentists' bills?

Help to two old cousins, £200 at least.

Repairs and replacements, £100.

Travelling?

Roughly my expenses would amount to £1,800 or more a year.
I should be hundreds of pounds on the wrong side.
And what would have to be done about it?
Spend capital?
Or sell the House?

VII

WHEN I was faced with the possibility of having to sell the House, I was rather like a man who has walked into a lamp-post on a dark night.

I recoiled. I felt my forehead. Ought I not to have been wise as to the presence of the lamp-post? Where was my torch of prescience?

I'll confess that I was shocked. I and the House to be parted, a place that held all my memories, both happy and bitter? To be dug up and replanted at my age would be like trying to move an old tree. I was rooted here. All my interests and affections were here. All through these war years I had been labouring and enduring because I loved the place, and lived in the thought of returning to it. It was not a mere matter of possessions. The House and I were in each other's blood.

And what was the alternative? Rose Cottage, a series of hotels, or some damned villa at a place like Bournemouth where I should have nothing to do but read the paper, potter round the town and play a little bad golf. Such a prospect appalled me, especially so now that I had become a man of my hands. I should be nothing but a peripatetic corpse procrastinating outside the crematorium. Besides, all my old, lovely things, Sibilla's treasures, were waiting to go home. I wanted to see them in their accustomed places, and lie in my own bed and possess that immemorial vista of the steep valley and the high wood.

I was concentrating on cash, and for the moment I did not foresee those other complications, the ageing of my staff, their possible unfitness for the work such a house would entail, the almost complete dearth of domestic service and its dearness or its dishonesty, the rise in prices, the shortages, the hostility—political and otherwise—that might marshal themselves against me and mine. In fact, given an adequate income, I still saw myself back in the house with Ellen and Emily, and the two Potters in the garden, and Billy lying between the two white pillars of the porch and watching the road. I had planned all kinds of reconstructive adaptations and changes, a Thuja hedge where the railings had been, oak gates in place of iron, a simplification of the garden, oil for the furnace in lieu of coke and anthracite, one small car, a cutting down of all casual expenses. I proposed to keep on the poultry farm, and engage an ex-Land-Girl to help me with it. On paper, or in fancy, my plan seemed practicable.

But I continued to be haunted by the hiatus between future income and expenditure, and as time went on and the post-war difficulties and disharmonies began to manifest themselves I became more and more worried.

Peter is doing well, thank God! He is being sent home for further treatment and an artificial leg, but he is not to be discharged. They appear to think that he will be fit for some office job at home.

Poor Peter, he won't like being tied to a chair. He is much too active for such a job, but it will mean security for a time, and he and Sybil may be able to marry. I find that I am looking forward

greatly to seeing the lad again.

They say that this is to be the last winter of the war. God grant it may be, for we are getting shabbier and shabbier and more and more tired. One is sick to death of the black-out and restrictions and official fuss. The mean beasts tried to cut down my allowance of petrol, but I protested and asked them if they expected me to carry boxes of eggs on my back. Clothes are becoming both patchy and picturesque. I go about in an old flannel shirt, a shooting jacket and corduroy trousers. I spent some of my coupons on such trousers.

Ellen has been fussing about my wardrobe. Moths have been at my dinner-jacket and black trousers. Damn them! But shall I need such clothes again? Will Labour Ministers deign to wear dinner-jackets? Maybe they will become more dinner-jacketed than the King!

The poor old House is sharing in the increasing shabbiness, peeling and flaking, with its chimneys shedding mortar. The latest crowd expect to go before long, with Invasion in the air. They have been a good crowd, but you cannot have scores of men about a place without wear and tear, and life looking like a moribund sack. Nature's rubbish and man's accumulate. Leaves lie in great drifts. Trees and shrubs get tangled up. Fences rot, paint flakes away; tiles and slates slide down, and drains get blocked. Yes, the old House is looking very sad.

I have had more shocks.

I hear that Emily may not be coming back to us, and Ellen talks of retiring, or taking an easier place, and old Potter is feeling the strain.

How can I carry on without these valued helpers? Shall I be able to get substitutes, and at what a price? I am feeling more and more gloomy about the future.

If I were twenty years younger! One cannot take knocks like the young. Yes, oh—for youth, strong—urgent youth, ready to leap fences and laugh in the face of finality.

A wire from Sybil. Can she come to me for the weekend? By Jove, yes, Sybil is the medicine I need, a tonic in curls and black stockings. I wire her—"Delighted," and I am.

We kill a chicken for Sybil. She can have eggs and *my* bacon.

I have just come back from work, and am bending down to pull up a sow-thistle in a flower bed when I hear a voice.

"What posh trousers, Uncle!"

Sybil has caught me bending. She has tramped from Melford with her haversack. I straighten up and take one look at her pretty, solid face and those straight-shooting blue eyes. I am glad of Sybil. She is all sorts of things to a tired and depressed old man. She swings the gate open, and I kiss her, and she gives me back my kiss with affection. I feel better than I have felt for days. My old blood needs warming, and a dose of youth.

"Had tea, my dear?"

"No."

Sybil goes up for a wash and a tidy, and we have tea in the garden. Sybil pours out. Thank God she doesn't stain her finger-nails and make them look as though she had been dabbling in blood. Wrens don't. But Sybil is wearing a solemn face, and she is smileless.

"What news of Peter?"

Peter is doing well. He expects to be home before long, but that is not the end of the story. I can divine other developments, other compassions.

"I am going to marry him, Uncle. Peter wants helping. Besides——"

I light my pipe.

“That means that you will be—released.”

“Perhaps.”

She takes out her cigarette case.

“I’m worried about Peter.”

“You mean—his health?”

“No—the afterwards. You remember the last war, Uncle. I don’t. But I’ve heard tales. Ex-officers on the rocks, no jobs, going about trying to sell gramophones, or doing insurance touting. They got rather a raw deal, didn’t they?”

“I’m afraid some of them did.”

She taps her cigarette on her case.

“Pretty bloody—after you have done a job and lost a leg doing it. I suppose Peter will get some sort of pension. Just enough to tie him by the other leg. And then—even if he got an office job—he’d hate it.”

What a little mother-woman is this! I have always understood that the modern young woman is tough, and all bald forehead, lipstick and plucked eyebrows, and a gold-digger in her philosophy.

“Yes. Peter wouldn’t like a cage. I think he had adventure in his blood.”

For the first time she smiles.

“You—are—a—pet, Uncle.”

I feel coy and pleased.

“Well, I don’t know about that. But, adventure.”

“With only a fake-leg. Peter has a little capital, but I haven’t a bean.”

“You’ve got much more than cash, my dear.”

“Oh—well—I don’t mind wiring in. But one ought to be awfully careful about capital. Don’t you think so, Uncle?”

“I do.”

“You see—I’m not Red. All this tosh about equality and easy-osy makes me sick. Brains are going to count and guts, and taking risks.”

I smile upon her.

“Fancy Sybil among the die-hards.”

“Oh—I’m not that. I believe in a new sort of world, but not the world of the idiots who think everything is going to be oranges and bananas and no sweat.”

Sybil does me good. She seems to be a symbol of the new world in its pragmatical and generous sanity. On Sunday she helps me with the poultry. And what do you think her passion is? Cooking. Well, well, well!

Yes, I suppose that in spite of all our beneficent babble things will be much the same as after the last war, strikes, and disgruntled men who have lost the habit of work, shouts for more pay, political programmes which promise Utopia and deliver boiled rice, officers searching for jobs, much bad alcohol on the market. And yet I think we may profit by our past mistakes. There has been a fairer spirit abroad during this war; we have shared the danger and the rations, and if that spirit continues we may make less of a mess.

When Sybil had gone, Peter’s problem remained with me. I was to see it as my problem, for Peter and I might be in Queer Street together. I am beginning to think that the war has cured me of much of my curmudgeonry. I have had my life, a good life, even if it has had gashes of anguish in it, but these lads go out to die or to be maimed before life has flowered for them as it

had flowered for me. My own memories rise up and haunt me. I am thinking more of the two lads whom I lost, and of their mother.

So, the War goes on, and the House grows shabbier and shabbier. It will soon be an old beggar of a house, standing by the roadside and pleading for impossible things. It both hurts and worries me. I lie awake at night, thinking of ways and means, and feeling rather like a fly in a spider's web, if a fly does any thinking. This vast global—horrid word—catastrophe—makes one appear no more than a midge involved in a complex transformation scene that is pure Hardy. One's little struggles emphasize man's helplessness. One might be no more than a speck of cosmic dust whirled about impersonal and soulless space.

Perhaps I was rather proud of that last sentence, but when I re-read it a month later I saw myself posing in prose. Pompous old ass! And I have mixed up my pasts and my presents. Well, this is the hectic time of the year, seed-sowing and all that, with broody hens at a premium. I had managed to buy two second-hand oil incubators and a foster-mother, and I have scores of chicks on my hands.

The modern motto is—"Get on with the job," and every hour of the day one is getting on with something, though I still allow myself an hour's nap after lunch, and in fine weather I take it in a hammock slung between two old apple trees in the Rose Cottage orchard. Well, I am up soon after half past five, lovely hour, secret with the stealth and the slow sweet radiance of the daybreak. Also, would you believe it, I have taken to a bike. It saves petrol in my journeys to and fro, though I have to foot it up hills. And I mount in the old-fashioned way, from the step, and with some wobbling, and sit down with a bang on the saddle.

Well, let us cut the cackle.

D. Day, and then the Doodle.

One of the dastardly things lands on poor Hooper's poultry farm near Framley. It blows Hooper and his wife and his bungalow to bits, and leaves dead fowls, feathers and debris all over the place. Why did the damned devil-machine land just there?

But our lads are ashore, and I feel rather a proud and cocky old gentleman and good English. We have unrolled the Bayeaux Tapestry. I have an old Union Jack and I hoist it on a chestnut pole near one of my huts. Tails up! Even if the old house must die this island lives—now and in history. Our "Monty" is the Iron Duke redivivus.

VIII

DAMN these Doodles!

One of the things rattled over us last night, while I lay listening and sweating, and hoping the bloody contraption would not cut out. Surely an old fellow should not be so afraid for his own skin, but fear is organic. It exploded some distance away, but I had a nasty feeling that it had come down near the House.

It had.

It crashed in the wood just above the Upper Mead, and the blast pushed over a part of the fruit-wall, and finished off the glass in the poor greenhouses. And worse than that. A whole section of slates at the back of the house slid off and crashed in a shaly mess in the yard.

Old Potter knocked me up at five in the morning. He was in a sanguinary mood. He had

been hoping to get back to his glass-houses, and now they were past present hope. I hurried into my clothes and joined him. He had biked down, and I mounted my own machine and we rode up to the House. For an old countryman who was laconic, Potter Senior was admirably eloquent. He would have taken pleasure in disembowelling fat Goering. And why didn't the Army get on with it and cut Germany's throat, including that of Lord Haw-Haw? I agreed with old Potter's forceful declamation, but when I saw the mess the damned Doodle had made, my stomach seemed to drop. I was profoundly depressed and discouraged.

Not that the damage done was serious so far as structure was concerned. The piece of roof could be re-slatted, and the mess cleared up, the fruit-wall re-built, and the greenhouses re-glazed. Yes, some day! I could obtain a certificate for the repair of the roof, or it might be the Army's business, but the mess and the mutilation of the poor trees in Upper Wood put me down in the doldrums. I could neither chuckle nor shrug cynical shoulders. The whole ruinous business appeared to be cumulative, piling up day after day in every sort of guise and detail, and reducing me to a feeling of forlorn finality.

Poor old place! I wanted to get away from people. I went and sat on a bin in one of the farm sheds, and I blubbed. Old men are not supposed to shed tears, but I felt lost and lonely and somehow convinced that the only corner in the world that I loved was being taken from me. I should be a homeless old potterer, unwanted by anyone, superfluous, finished, ignored by the young. In fact I felt like a small boy who was being pushed out into some strange school where no one knew him or cared.

A figure darkened the doorway. It was old Potter. He caught me blowing my nose. He must have seen, and known, but with a kind of innate niceness he neither appeared to observe my silly emotion, nor made any comment upon it. He went and rummaged in another bin, and ladled corn into a half bushel measure. I saw his creased neck, and fringe of grey hair, and the patch on the seat of his trousers.

I blew my nose again. I was heartily ashamed of myself.

Old Potter went out with his chicken feed, but he turned back in the doorway.

"I'll get 'ee a mug o' hot tea, sir. The lads have got a brew goin' over yonder."

A mug of hot tea! Old Potter was to give me more than that; loyalty and hard labour in the days that were to come. Maybe he had been shocked and moved by the sight of another old man's emotion.

The Army shovelled the broken slates into a corner of the courtyard, and rigged up a tarpaulin on the roof. My friend the O.C. reminded me that I could claim war damage. He was a fatherly sort of fellow, and I think he divined my profound depression.

"It may be a rather interesting job, sir."

"What?" said I.

"Getting the old place back into shape."

"I'm afraid it won't be my job. I shan't be able to afford it."

I climbed to Upper Wood and saw the devastation there. The F.B. had burst in the tree tops, and shattered the trees over a radius of some fifty yards. Torn stumps, scorched foliage, branches hanging, the ground a tangle of debris. And the wood had been in its full June beauty, rich and radiantly green. And now—this!

I stood on a fallen tree and looked down at the House and its garden. What a mess! Huts, dumps, the lawns like mangy pelts and spread with wire netting and chestnut fencing to give grip to the lorry wheels. Windows plugged up with black panels. Walls peeling. Oddments of broken brickwork; rotting sandbags. I felt my belly drop as I looked at it all. No, I couldn't cope

with all this ruin. I was too old, too tired. And what would be the use? One old man trying to confront the new world in a house that was out of date and dying.

The decision came to me as I walked back down the field. I should have to sell the place. There was nothing else for it, and even as I made this decision the blind eyes of the old house seemed to reproach me.

“You are deserting me, master, leaving me to strangers.”

I blew my nose once again.

The House and I would have to part.

I had some cases of eggs to deliver that afternoon. My old “Morris” now pulled a light trailer, and after I had done the job I parked the car in Melford and called on a firm of estate agents. I saw the manager, and put my case.

Would a sale be easy? He was a very tired man, and overworked, and he was not optimistic. He questioned me about the condition of the property, and I had to confess that a great deal of money would have to be spent upon it. Moreover, the date of its derequisitioning was problematical.

He advised me to wait. The demand was for small houses which could be run by the tenants. A house like mine might prove a white elephant, and not so white, poor dear.

I trundled home even more depressed. I sat down to tea, and I’ll confess to having a tot of rum in it. Then the telephone rang. I have managed to get a wire laid to Rose Cottage.

Now, I hate the telephone. Invariably it seems to produce fuss or bad news. I went to answer the ring, and heard a voice I did not recognize.

I and the voice were at cross-purposes, and I was feeling cross.

“How’s everything?”

“Who is speaking?”

“Army still with you?”

“Very much so. Who is it? I can’t hear you.”

There was a little laugh.

“Don’t you know who is speaking?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“It’s Peter.”

“Good God,” said I. “Well, I’m damned! Where are you, my lad?”

“In London. Two months’ leave. Can I come down, Uncle?”

“By Jove, yes. Come along. We can manage, though rations may be a little thin.”

“What about to-morrow?”

“Come along. That will be fine. Wire the train and I’ll meet it.”

I went and called to Ellen.

“Mr. Peter is home and coming down. We’ll kill a chicken.”

Peter’s voice had lifted me up and made me feel years younger.

How pleasant it is to break the law, and I broke it when I took the car to pick up Peter. In fact, the breaking of laws may become a civic duty if Bumble tries to stick to the seat of authority and to exasperate us to tears or fury with eternal interference. I parked the car in the station yard and in full view of one of the War Police, and went in to meet the train. It was late.

I had a picture of Peter in my mind, a tall, slender, agile lad, but the Peter whom I met was very different. I saw a first-class compartment door swing open and an officer emerge backwards. He was helping somebody, steadying another man. I had a glimpse of two crutches

making contact with the platform, one leg, and a neatly pinned-up trouser. Peter was on crutches!

“Thanks awfully.”

“Good luck. Can you manage?”

“Yes. I’m getting quite handy on stilts.”

Then he saw me, and his eyes lit up in a face that looked so much older. He came swinging to meet me, and I—well I—felt suddenly ashamed of being a puling pantaloon, and infinitely glad to see him. He stood poised on his crutches, smiling, and I just patted his shoulder. We said hardly a word.

He had a small kit-bag with him in the van. The guard had put it out on the platform, and I picked it up.

“You shouldn’t have to do that, Uncle.”

“Nonsense,” said I, “the old gentleman has cast walking-sticks and all that, and grown into a labouring man.”

He grinned at me.

“You do me good.”

We found the reserve policeman standing ominously by my car. Well, if the idiot wanted to make trouble. But when the man saw Peter and his crutches his face seemed to go soft. He opened the car door.

“Can I help, sir?”

“Thanks. If you will hold my crutches I can slide in.”

The policeman held the crutches while I steadied Peter. The crutches were passed in, also the bag, and the door closed. I went round to the off side, and slipped into my seat. The policeman saluted us. He was more man than official, and I raised my hat to him.

There was silence between us. I had to attend to the incredible carelessness of a crowd that had claimed the road as theirs, and Peter was looking at England. I glanced once or twice at his face. He was thinner, older, less of the lad, and in losing that limb he had lost intangible things. Not till we reached the open country did we begin to talk. I wanted to ask him about that leg of his, how it was that he was still on crutches, and yet—I don’t know how—I got the impression that his lost limb was the one thing he did not want to talk about.

“Seen Sybil?”

Of course he had seen Sybil, and I gathered that Sybil was more than crutches to him. His face had come more alive, and his glances were quick and eager as he looked at England in June.

“It’s so green, Uncle, incredibly green.”

We passed through Framley; and the cricket pitch on the green, protected by white posts and chains, had been mown. His eyes observed it.

“Cricket. That’s—strange, somehow. I wonder——”

“Yes, you will,” said I.

He gave me a quick glance.

“Yes, that’s the idea. My old stump has been playing tricks. Too green as yet for Auntie.”

“Auntie?”

“That’s what I’m going to call my Bader leg. What a lad!”

“Yes, what a lad! And I—like an old fool—wondered if——”

“You didn’t really, being you.”

“Thanks, my lad. I think I needed a war-cure, and I have had it.”

Ellen had tea for us in the garden, but I had a dreadful omission to make good. I got Peter into a long chair, and carried his bag indoors, and sought out Ellen.

“Oh—Ellen, we’ll have to rig up a bed downstairs. Mr. Nash is on crutches. Those stairs.”

Ellen was the instant mother. Thank God for such women. Well, she could manage. We could turn the small parlour into a bedroom. Mrs. Potter happened to be in the kitchen. They would manage. I was told to go out and have my tea, and to leave domestic details to the women.

“I can manage, sir.”

“You always do, Ellen. God bless you.”

As I filled Peter’s cup I must have had the feeling of being observed, for I glanced at Peter and found his eyes fixed upon me rather like the eyes of an interested child. Nor did he show any self-consciousness, or glance elsewhere, and I smiled at him.

“Taking stock of the old fellow?”

His eyes remained serious.

“You look younger, Uncle.”

I passed him his cup and a dish of scones, and as I filled my own cup I had one of those moments of illumination which come to one in a flash.

“Curious you should say that. Fact is, I have shed certain obsessions.”

“I’m not being cheeky.”

“No, just vetting the old fellow, eh? I’m no longer the correct fogley who used a walking-stick and wore his clothes just so, and was a kind of cultured potterer. All that is past and done with. I am living the life of a labouring man, and earning my appetite.”

He smiled at me suddenly.

“And liking it.”

“Yes, I think I am.”

“Hats off to you, Uncle. You can’t be an antique if you can adapt like that.”

I laughed. Peter was doing me good.

He was enjoying a slice of one of Ellen’s cakes when he asked me that question.

“Are—we—still with you?”

“You mean—the Army?”

He nodded.

“How’s the old house?”

“Rather sorrowful,” said I, “rather finished.”

IX

I HAD jobs to do on the farm, and I took Peter with me in the car. One had a good view of the old house from Lower Mead where the crops were showing promise, and when I had parked the car by the main shed and helped Peter out, he stood poised on his crutches and looked long and steadfastly across the bank of rhododendrons and the pool at the poor old place. Forlorn it was, and I seemed to read compassion upon his grave young face.

“God, what a mess!”

I stood by him, holding a bucket of chicken feed.

“Yes, I call it Sad House.”

He was frowning.

“That shouldn’t be. I always had a feeling——”

“Of what?”

“That it had a kind of happy richness of its own, association, and all that.”

“It had.”

“Well, when the war is over you will be able to——”

I was silent, and he looked at me questioningly.

“You will be able to, won’t you?”

“No,” said I, “I shall have to sell.”

“Sell?”

“Yes. Finance. I shan’t be able to afford to live there.”

He looked shocked, and I left him poised there and went off with my bucket to feed the fowls. There is something consoling in scattering grain to live creatures, and the way they gather round your feet. There was one particularly greedy hen which would try and fly up on to the bucket. They made contented conversation while they pecked up the corn and scratched. I was absorbed in the job, and when I had fed my flock and taken a look at the drinking fountains and collected eggs I found that Peter had gone. And then I saw him, swinging up the valley field on his crutches towards Beechhanger Wood.

I packed the eggs away into boxes, locked up the bins, for grain and meal can be too persuasive even to the best of men, and shut up the sheds. There seemed more noise than usual across the way, a burble of crude voices. A lorry came rumbling up the road, and there was a scrambling rush and loud cheering. Some of the lads began to sing “Roll Out The Barrel.” So that was it. Baron Bung was paying a visit to the house.

My mood was to get away from those animal voices, and the exultations of the thirsty, and I took to the road and entered the wood by the old trackway. It was profoundly still and restful here, and I made my way between the trees towards the summit and the evening sunlight, so it happened that I came upon Peter like some woodland ghost, and he neither saw nor heard me. He was leaning forward, his crutches laid beside him, and so still and intent was he that I paused and watched him. Here was young England looking down upon the new world as it was symbolized by my poor shabby old house. Did he feel as I did about it? How could he? That which was precious and poignant to me could be no more than progress to him.

I made a move and trod upon a dead twig, and the sound startled him. His brown body turned on its hips, while his hands—pressing upon the earth—gave him support and balance. I saw his profile, sharp and clear. He was head up, like youth suddenly inspired and laughing.

“Uncle——!”

“I’m afraid I have sneaked in upon meditation.”

“Oh, I’ve got an idea, a great idea.”

He was a little flushed, and his eyes were alive. I sat down beside him, unsuspectingly.

“Is it—for publication?”

He appeared to hesitate.

“Well, yes. To you in particular. But you may want to snub me.”

“Let us have the great idea.”

“Why shouldn’t you run the house as a country club and hotel?”

Good God, the old house an hotel, full of noise and of strange faces! All my memories somehow commercialized, and the house touting for custom? My face must have given me away, for he was quick to humour me.

“Sorry, Uncle. It was just an idea. You see, if you can’t afford to stay on——”

He was so gentle with me, and so sensitive about it, that I could not feel peeved.

“That’s all right, Peter. New ideas—like the new world, can be a bit boisterous.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need. You were trying—adaptations, and for my benefit. I am not quite a stick-in-the-mud. Go on. Sketch out the idea.”

He was silent for some moments, hands interlocked, eyes gazing steadily at the house down yonder.

“I seem to have come back rather raw, Uncle.”

“Raw?”

“Well, let’s call it—sensitive to impressions. I suppose that when you come back to a country after going through hell, you may be quicker to feel and see—changes.”

I nodded.

“You see more than the folk who have been part and parcel of the transformation scene?”

“Yes. They say the young don’t feel and divine things, but they do. Am I boring you?”

“My dear lad, hardly so. Go on.”

“Well, what struck me was how damned tired this country is. People look bleached. There’s more patient apathy than bad temper. Everybody hard put to it yet carrying on. Old people left in the lurch. No help. Damned dull food, and not much future.”

I looked at him, but his eyes were on the English scene, and he spoke from within.

“That is what has come to me.”

“And you are thinking of—what comes afterwards?”

“Yes, because I am part of the afterwards, and perhaps that makes the problem more—hurting.”

Even as he spoke that tender stump of his must have pained him, for I saw him wince, and put a hand to the pinned-up trouser-leg.

“Just a reminder, Uncle. Like a kick in the pants.”

He smiled wryly, and suddenly I was moved to feel and to understand that which was in him, and to salute it. Suffering can quicken the insight of the spirit. His pain could be a purge to my crusty egoism, and make prejudice, and pride of possession appear inhuman.

“Go on, Peter. I’m more than interested. What follows?”

“That’s what I’m trying to get at. Ideas sometimes come through talking. Just look down there. Isn’t it lovely, in spite of everything. It ought to go on, but maybe it might go on differently.”

Suddenly I seemed to catch the idea toward which he was groping.

“Wait a moment, Peter. As you say—life is going to hurt; it’s going to be hard. Tired people; people without homes or help. What you are thinking of is——”

He turned to me quickly.

“You’ve got it. What a job—for a lovely old house to do. Give rest and peace and beauty—even for a week or two. Yes, smooth out crumpled souls.”

I looked into his young, bright eyes.

“My lad, you make me feel ashamed.”

“Oh, no, Uncle. I’m only——”

“Painting a picture? Well, I’m not so sure—your picture, isn’t it.”

His face lit up.

“What a sport you are. You see, if——”

I looked down at the house, and I seemed to see it as he saw it, not as a possession, but as opportunity.

“Let me think a moment. Twenty or so bedrooms. What an accusation! And what a devil of a job!”

“Uncle, I believe you are smitten.”

“Wait a bit; I’m getting ideas too. I know damn all about running an hotel.”

And suddenly he laughed.

“I—do. But I wasn’t playing puss-cat. No ulterior motive.”

I looked him straight in the face.

“I believe you. And supposing——?”

“What, Uncle?”

“We went into partnership?”

“Gosh! Do you really mean——?”

“It’s an idea, my lad. But would the job give you enough scope?”

He put out a hand to me.

“Oh, Uncle, let’s play with it; let’s think.”

I do not know whether it was his enthusiasm that lit up both me and the landscape, but as I sat beside him and looked at the shabby old house, it and its wild garden seemed to take on a strange glamour. I might have been seeing it anew, or for the first time, and the old place was pure fantasy. It made me think of the work of a master like William Nicholson, so complete, so touched with the brilliance of a super-consciousness, rich and mysterious and yet so vividly real. My feeling for landscape seemed to quicken, the soft shapeliness of trees, and the waywardness of some particular tree, and the more wayward waywardness of water. In this green and crumpled valley with its knolls and hollows the light was caught and held and etched with secret shadows. I saw more colour in the scene than ever I had seen before.

I must have gone into a sort of dream, for Peter’s voice brought me back to actuality.

“You’ve gone fey, Uncle.”

“My lad, it was you who started it.”

He gave a little laugh, and nursed his stump.

“Crackers, what! Maybe—when the office-boy thinks you a bit balmy—creation’s in the air.”

“Could it be done? Could I——?”

And then he broke loose and began to talk inspired reality. The thing would be to get a plan down on paper, how many bedrooms, how many bathrooms and W.C.’s, how many cars could be garaged, what staff would be needed, what cutlery.

I gave him credit for the W.C.’s!

“It seems to me, my lad, that we are both of us balmy. But, my God, where are towels and sheets and what-not to come from?”

“You once told me you had a pretty good stock.”

“I have.”

“So have I.”

“You!”

“Yes, it must have been inspiration. Put some of my cash into equipment. All safe, too.”

And then I asked him a most pregnant question.

“What about Sybil?”

“Sybil. She’d simply love it.”

I wondered about Sybil!

After dinner and a bottle of Burgundy Peter lay on my sofa with a writing-pad on his thigh, while I sat by the window and smoked a pipe. He appeared almost as familiar with the lay-out of the House as I was, but before we began the game of planning I had several questions to put to him.

“Let’s be ruthless, my lad, and do catechisms.”

“Righto, Uncle.”

“Firstly, you and Sybil have to live. Secondly, would this show offer you sufficient scope? I thought your idea was rather on the Dorchester-Mayfair scale.”

He gave me a solemn grin.

“Country for me, Uncle. I don’t want to be a Monte Carlo dude, complete with corsets and mascara eyelashes. Besides, our own show. Always one’s own show.”

“I should have to pay you both a salary.”

“Would you? Well, we shouldn’t be greedy. Just enough to carry on with while we got going.”

“Yes, my dear, but would there be sufficient scope?”

Again he grinned at me, but I had the feeling that he was vetting my mood, and its possible implications.

“Couldn’t we build, sir, if the results justified it?”

“Build?”

“Yes, extra bedrooms, out at the back, without spoiling the atmosphere?”

“I suppose we could. But when?”

“Well, that would be in the future, and when we felt it would be justified.”

“And the staff?”

“I have ideas about staff. It might be a kind of amateur show to begin with, but—dash it—our class has the guts and the brains to do as well or better than the so-called pros.”

“Yes, why not?”

“Then, Uncle, you’ve got the land. You’re a bit of an expert on food. Grow our own fruit and vegetables, and provide our own eggs and poultry.”

“That’s an idea. You seem to bristle with ideas.”

He laughed.

“Initiative, Uncle. There is so damned little of it, these days. Why shouldn’t our show be the most posh place in Surrey?”

X

I SLEPT on the proposition, and was surprised to find—on waking—that it piqued me. Maybe it was the sunlight on my window, and the feeling of youth in the house, and the consciousness of comradeship that saved me from playing the old buffer and resenting alarms and excursions. Moreover, as I lay there I realized that I was not the old potterer of four years ago, and that I was touched and perhaps flattered by the offer of youth’s partnership. And if I had changed, so had the House. In spite of multitudinous problems I felt that Peter’s plan was

not mad-cap, and that in the new world the House might play a part. As Peter had said, it would give service, and succour and beauty to the tired and the homeless.

It was my custom to go downstairs and brew my own early morning tea, for I was up soon after six, and I made tea for two, and knocked at the parlour door. The young sleep late and I found Peter sleeping, one arm under his head, and his young face strangely serene. I stood holding the tray and looking at him; his sleeping dreamy face did me good.

I touched him on the shoulder.

“Tea, my lad.”

He came awake with a startled stare.

“Hullo, Uncle.”

“Tea.”

He sat up.

“I say, you shouldn’t do this.”

“Why not? I like it. Not virtue.”

I had jobs to do between early tea and breakfast, and I took my bike and rode up to what I now called the farm. I’ll confess that I was taken with the idea of being a provider of food and of fruit, for it would give me a definite part in the adventure, especially so since food might be short for many years. As I rounded the corner below the pool I came upon a scene of crowded activity; lorries were being loaded, and brown figures jostling in and out of the house. What was in the air? I saw the O.C. standing near the portico, with a map in his hands, and I left my bike against the farm gate and went to speak with him.

“Are we losing you?”

He gave me a satirical grin.

“Will you be sorry, sir?”

“Well, you have been a good crowd.”

“Thanks. Yes, sudden orders. Move for embarkation.”

I could see that he was busy, but I had a question I wanted to ask.

“Do you know who is following you in?”

“No one. We have had no orders to hand over to a new crowd.”

“You mean—the house will be empty?”

“As far as I can tell. You might even get it derequisitioned, sir.”

“Well, I’m damned,” said I.

I rushed through my jobs and trundled back at full speed with the news, to find Peter leaning on the garden fence with his crutches beside him.

“I’ll give you a guess, my lad.”

I was hot and I had dismounted most ungracefully.

“What’s the excitement?”

“Guess?”

“Hitler has chucked?”

“No, not quite that. The troops are moving out, and no one seems to be coming in.”

He straightened up on his one leg.

“Gosh, it’s an omen! And we can go and prowl just as we please.”

We did.

I had not been inside the House for the best part of two years, and I will admit that I was scared, fearing what we should find. Those gentlemen who spend their lives debauching all

sentiment and lifting their legs over the cleanliness of human behaviour might have chortled over my reactions, for I had a feeling of eeriness and of ghostliness as we stood and looked at the house. Shabby it was, and sad, and now strangely silent, almost a dead house. Its shutters had been closed and they suggested the bleached closed eyelids of a corpse.

Peter was poised on his crutches.

“Not too bad,” said he. “Oceans of paint needed, and glass.”

Oh, sanguine youth! But I was glad of his youthfulness and its significance. We crossed the weedy gravel, and I saw that some careless or thoughtful soul had left the key in the great white door, though its surface was like a desquamating skin.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open, and its hinges gave a pathetic squeak. An unhappy omen—this!

Said Peter: “Perhaps you would like to go over by yourself.”

Now, how had he come by so sensitive and valid a thought?

“Yes, I think I will, and see the worst.”

“I’ll potter round the garden.”

There was a surprise in store for me. The old place was dark, and the first thing I did was to drop the bars and open the shutters. Light, and the light was more cheering than I could have believed. The hall was clean, surprisingly clean. I turned into what had been the drawing-room and let in light, and stood staring. The room looked as though it had been scrubbed, floor, skirting boards and window frames. The old Jacobean-patterned paper was scarred and faded, but it still gave to the room its pleasant, tapestried effect. I ventured into the other rooms, dining-room, library, study, billiard-room, and found them equally dean. By Gemini, this unit and its C.O. must have had consideration and a conscience.

But if these rooms reassured me, I was to be astonished when I explored the kitchen. In the old days it had been a great barrack of a place, with stone floors, and in my wife’s time we had reconstituted it, boarded the floor, and partitioned off a part of it as a storeroom. The Army had removed the partition to give the cooks more scope. But believe it or not, the whole place had been distempered and the ceiling whitewashed. The big Agar cooker was as bright as a new pin, and the old grate, which had been left in place, was no rusty ruin, but clean black lead. A first-class, house-proud cook might have been in charge here, a woman to whom squalor and the septic male were anathema. I screwed up my eyes. Yes, the thing was true. This Unit must have been well and cleanly fed by cooks who had fastidiousness and conscience.

Well—well—well! The scullery and butler’s pantry were equally clean, and when I looked out of a window I saw an incinerator smoking in the yard. The Army had collected and set fire to its rubbish. I was to discover later that old tins and jam jars had been buried in a neat grave behind the stables.

Greatly reassured I climbed the stairs. No obscene emblems, no lewd scribbles! The many bedrooms had suffered wear and tear, but they were clean, and some of the wallpaper was still passable. The seat of one lavatory had been broken and repaired. The baths were still baths, even if the taps were tarnished. Going below again I looked into the furnace-room and breathed a sigh of relief. The furnace was not rusty scrap-iron, and someone had smeared it over with motor oil.

I remember taking off my hat and scratching my head, a human and primitive gesture.

What a different crowd had this one been from the first lot. Decent fellows, and more than that. I very much doubted whether there was another house in the whole country which could show such cleanliness and consideration. My first thought was that I would write to the C.O.

and express my wonder and thanks, and that I would enclose a cheque for the benefit of the men's regimental fund.

I went out to find Peter sitting on a patch of rough grass, and I was aware of his eyes questioning me.

"Not too bad, sir?"

"It's a perfect marvel," said I, "the place has been cleaned up from top to bottom, and even the bath-taps are there."

What a morning we spent! Peter had a notebook, and he made notes of everything. He listed every room, and I—who had never counted up the number of cells in this beehive—was astonished at the number. Thirty-three. I will give the list: On the ground floor: hall, a large room in itself, cloakroom, downstairs lavatory with wash-basin, dining-room, drawing-room, morning-room, library, study, billiard-room, kitchen, scullery, butler's and housemaids' pantries, staff-room, laundry-room, coal cellar, wine cellar, staff lavatory. On the first floor: twelve bedrooms, one bathroom, one lavatory, and large linen cupboard. On the second floor: eight bedrooms, one bathroom and one lavatory. Yes, thirty-three rooms, with etceteras! And Peter had a joke with me.

"Did you know the number, sir?"

I did not.

"What—on earth—did you do with them all?"

I explained to him that in the good old days the House had served a large family and staff and given house parties of magnificent proportions, and that bebies of relations had come to stay, and that in my father's time he and the family were rarely alone. Peter grinned at me.

"Quite like an hotel, Uncle."

"Well, I suppose—in a way—it was."

"What's more, the house may have liked it."

I pondered that saying. Houses are to be lived in, houses may love to be lived in. The more the merrier may be their motto.

We went round the stables, the two cottages, and outhouses. All had been cleaned up. I saw Peter making notes. He said: "If we used those loose-boxes and put in sliding doors we could garage eight cars. That's important." The lad had foresight. As to the cottages they could be used as staff-quarters, if other accommodations could be found for the gardeners.

Our next job was to inspect the Army huts. There were four of the damned things, two on the lower lawn, one near the stables, and another perched up behind the house. They were "Nissens," curved corrugated iron, and to make matters more difficult the two ends were not boarded up but built of bricks and breeze-blocks. The one near the stable had a concrete floor. The two on the lawn would have to go, for this was our tennis-court, but the two others might be useful for fuel storage and additional garage space. But how were we to get the labour to remove those eyesores on the lawn? And should we be expected to purchase them?

Peter sucked the end of his pencil.

"We might use the bricks and the breeze-blocks. And even the iron might come in. We shall have to get 'em down somehow. Damn it, I wish I had two legs."

"Well, perhaps we can pick up some labour. If we sold the things the purchaser might remove them."

"M-yes."

He was still sucking his pencil.

"I say, sir, why not try for a derequisition?"

“Now?”

“Why not? There’s a chance. Do you happen to know anybody who might help?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do. I’ve just remembered. Tony Parsons is something of a noise at the War Office. He used to come and shoot with me.”

“Oh, fine! Try it, Uncle.”

XI

I WROTE to Colonel Anthony Parsons, emphasizing the point that our proposed country hotel would not be merely a profit-making concern, but would give service to those of our own class who needed rest amid peaceful surroundings, and who could not afford super-luxury prices. I must admit that I was not very hopeful, for, judging by gossip, the War Office was autocratic and non-consenting in most matters, but I received a reply from Parsons by return. He said that he would see what could be done, and that it seemed to him that my request was reasonable and valid.

Peter, meanwhile, had appropriated my small study, and was covering the desk with plans and estimates, and he asked me to confer with him.

“Don’t think I’m being bossy, Uncle.”

“Go ahead, my lad.”

“We shall have to get a licence, you know.”

“For repairs?”

“Yes, I wasn’t meaning that. An hotel licence, and if possible a victualler’s licence.”

I confessed to gross ignorance.

“Why a victualler’s licence?”

“Because it will help with rations, and enable us to take people for a few days without using their ration books. Otherwise——”

As he explained it all I began to realize the lad’s thoroughness and efficiency. He had made a plan of the house’s accommodation, and he asked me to sit down and censor it.

“You see, Uncle, you come first. The big bedroom you used to use, and the library—if you choose it.”

I had not considered the question. Should I desire to share the house with a crowd of strangers, or stay on in Rose Cottage? For the moment I was undecided.

He looked at me questioningly.

“You are the C.O., and what you say goes.”

“I’ll think it over, Peter.”

“If you left Rose Cottage we could use it for staff.”

“Isn’t it too far off?”

“Not for the young, if the young are keen.”

He was a little apologetic over the next point.

“Then—Sybil and I. We could manage on the top floor. A bedroom, and a sitting-room.”

“Of course,” said I. “I suppose you——”

“Yes, we shall. I’d like to have Sybil down, if she can manage it. She’s got ideas—on the female side.”

“Most necessary,” said I.

“May I send her a line?”

“By all means.”

He drew two sheets of paper towards him.

“I have some plans out. Accommodation. I’d like you to vet them.”

“Go ahead.”

“About bedrooms. Reserving one for you and one for us, and two—temporarily—for staff, keeping the cottages in view—we can count on sixteen bedrooms. Eight double, eight single. Twenty-four guests—on an average.”

“Would that pay us?”

“I think so. But wait a bit; I’ve got some figures out. Let’s finish the accommodation.”

With the library reserved for me we should have a large hall, dining-room, drawing-room, smoking-room, and an additional lounge, and the billiard-room for games and dancing.

Dancing!

“Well,” said he, “we don’t want to be too humble. Newlands Corner under Roper Spyres used to have a jolly Saturday night show. So might we, some day, but that will be for you to decide.”

The next items he produced dealt with the staff and their wages. He budgeted for:

3 in Kitchen.

2 Chambermaids.

2 Waitresses.

2 Gardeners.

1 Chauffeur-gardener and handyman.

Their post-war wages might amount to £1,350.

The figure staggered me, but Peter was careful to emphasize the fact that his estimates were hypothetical. So were his other figures with respect to expenditure.

Rates, £150.

Fuel and Light, £150.

Living at £1 per head: with the use of home-grown food:

24 guests, 11 staff, roughly £1,800.

He emphasized the approximate nature of this figure, and he was a little embarrassed over the next item.

“I have put us down at three hundred and fifty pounds, sir. If you think——”

“That sounds very modest, Peter.”

“But we shall be getting our keep. You see, in the early days—one is ready to sing small. Sybil’s not greedy.”

I nodded.

“I pass that. What next?”

“Hotel car. We ought to have one. Say one hundred pounds—tax, insurance, and running expenses. We might make a profit on hiring.”

“Yes.”

“Garden, seeds, tools, etc. I have left that to you.”

“Put it at fifty pounds.”

“Then—there will be staff insurances and fire, etc. With Beveridge and all that—it may be a considerable item, but we don’t know where we are yet.”

“And what is the gross figure?”

“Round about four thousand pounds.”

I scratched my head.

“My post-war income, my lad, looks like being about twelve hundred a year.”

“But, Uncle, your income will be your own.”

“Do you mean that when we get going we could cover the four thousand?”

“Of course. Here is a rough estimate.”

He put it before me.

24 Guests:

5 at £10 0 0 a week.

10 " 7 0 0 "

9 " 5 0 0 "

Total £165 0 0 a week.

Per year: £5,800 0 0.

That startled me.

“That’s if we are full up all the year.”

“Do you know the hotel position as it is at present?”

“Well——”

“Waiting list for most. People booking months ahead. Then there could be other sources of profit, sale of wine, spirits and beer. Hire of car. Garden and farm produce for which the hotel would pay you. Another item against us would be laundry, breakages, repairs, etc. I put our takings roughly at six thousand pounds.”

“A gross profit of two thousand pounds.”

“Yes. Knock off ten shillings in the pound—and you make a profit of a clear thousand.”

“Well—I’m damned,” said I.

“If you like, Uncle! But we shall all have jobs, and the old house might chuckle.”

I have always been rather bored by figures, and at my school I was most unpopular with the maths, expert, but I began to feel the fascination of figures as they manifested in reality. There was a pattern here, like the human prospect which these figures symbolized. Value for value, profit and loss, an adventure in mild finance, I—the proprietor of a country hotel. And, as Peter had suggested, I was to be the provider of ducks, geese, poultry, eggs, fruit, vegetables, and so ease the food problem.

Problem indeed! The prospect was as wild with problems as the garden was with weeds.

The whole house needed redecorating.

Lavatories were to be installed in every bathroom to double the sanitary comfort of the place. Queuing for W.C.’s is poor play.

Only half the bedrooms had running water. And if we could buy basins, which we found we could, where was the plumber?

We should need more cutlery, kitchen equipment, and what-not.

Towels! Dish-cloths! I had a stock of these, but with thirty or more people in the house——

Sugar, tea—butter, jam! Could we start from scratch?

Glass for some of the windows, glass for the greenhouses, glass for the orangery.

Labour to remove those damned huts.

The whole thing seemed rather impossible.

Moreover, were we not just playing with possibilities? It seemed to me most unlikely that the house would be derequisitioned.

Peter had wired to Sybil, and Sybil had replied that she could obtain leave for the following

weekend.

Well, I had two very pleasant partners in this wildcat adventure, for I will admit that I was scared. Almost, I found myself hoping that the House would not be granted its freedom. But this was pure poltroonery, and the sight of Peter hobbling about on his crutches moved me to feel ashamed. Was I going to funk the issue and foil the young in their adventure?

I suppose a cynical world would have grinned at me and listed me as an old fool who was being exploited by two young gold-diggers. Of one thing I was convinced, and that was of Peter's integrity. I had grown fond of the lad, and I think he was fond of me.

In fact his approach to the whole subject was humane and enlightened. When he quoted me the prices that some hotels were charging I remarked upon the reasonableness of the figures in his estimate, an average of a guinea a day.

"I know how you feel about it, Uncle."

"How?"

"That we are not out for plunder. After all, people have had a pretty tough time, and I know you would like to feel——"

"That we shall be doing a good job."

"Yes, just that."

This was hardly the attitude for an opportunist and an exploiter.

I received the official communication on the very morning that Sybil was joining us.

The House was to be derequisitioned, and a valuer would be sent down to discuss dilapidations, etc.

I pushed the letter across the table to Peter.

"Read that. We are for it."

I saw his face light up. Sometimes it was a face old beyond his years, because of what he had suffered, and still suffered, but at this moment it was almost the face of a young lover. The young do not call on God, and all Peter said was: "So that is that."

I do not think one could tolerate the old, facile and oleaginous emotions, we who have gone through so much, and I rather like the brittle brevity of the young. Peter drank his coffee, with his bright eyes still glued to that letter.

"Still meaning to go through with it, Uncle?"

"I am."

His eyes lifted to my face.

"Ulterior motives, what! It means a lot to us. Sybil and I——"

He became hesitant and self-conscious, and he smiled into his cup.

"Gratitude is supposed to be—bunk—by the moderns, but if we are in this with you we'll be in it—like——"

He could not find the word.

"A happy family."

He nodded.

"I bet Sybil will have something to say."

She had.

I remember her coming up to me like a sturdy, solemn child. She put her hands round my neck and kissed me. Her blue eyes were set and steady.

"You are a perfect lamb."

Was I? I smiled into her solid, clear and solemn face, and kissed her forehead.

“I rather like being a lamb.”

“You don’t know what it means to Peter, yes, and to me.”

XII

WHEN I read some of the modern literature I often wonder whether we are as complex and life as complicated as these clever young people would persuade us. Or is it that we older folk do not register so freely and so subtly as the younger generation? We are fresh to the glandular theory, and the new psychology, Freud and all that, and maybe our mental pattern is simpler and broader, which leads me to remember that a clever cartoonist will sketch in a few lines a study far more mordant and vivid than tangled shreds of complicated fuss.

Our situation seemed quite simple to me. Peter and Sybil were in love; Peter and Sybil wanted marriage and a job. I wanted to preserve the old house and save it from being vulgarized or bought up and pulled down. I was being useful to Peter and Sybil, but when I thought of Sybil’s sturdy young arms round my neck I felt that I might be more than utility. Moreover, as one grows old the purpose and significance of life are apt to wane, and the House and these young things were re-stoking my furnace with a feeling of purpose and adventure. Should one end as a wet-nosed, grumbling old codger, or function to the last like gallant veterans such as G.B.S. and Churchill?

Scared I may have been of all the vicissitudes that loomed upon us, but I was not alone, and these two young things—bless them—did not allow me to feel alone. It was Uncle-this—and Uncle-that, and they chattered to me like friendly children.

I made a point of letting them enjoy the Sunday morning together, for Sybil wanted to go over the house, and perhaps censor some of our masculine ideas. If she were to play the parts of manageress and housekeeper, her views would be of value, and as an officer in the Wrens she had had plenty of experience in dealing with young women. Also, I gather that Sybil had taken a course in Domestic Science. Peter, in the part of hotelier, could not have made a wiser choice.

I was bothered about the good Ellen having all this extra work to do; but I need not have worried. Sybil was down bright and early, helping with chores. She had made her own bed, and later made Peter’s, and I heard cheerful voices in the kitchen. We had buttered eggs for breakfast, shell-eggs—strange term, and they were of Sybil’s making, and jolly good they were.

“Ellen’s a pet, Uncle. It’s so jolly to deal with comfortable people.”

Comfortable people! Excellent phrase—that!

I did my morning jobs at the farm, and had a gossip with old Potter. I told him the house was coming back to us, and I broached the subject of an hotel. I rather feared that old Potter might prove awkward, but when I told him that the garden would be his, and that he and I and Tom would be food and fruit producers, he waggled his backside rather like a duck, a strange trick of his.

“There beant nothing wrong with that,” said he.

“I am glad you see it in that way.”

“I reckon most old ’ouses ’ll have to change their ’abits.”

“And old men,” said I.

“Sure. What them young ones says is—‘Get on or get out.’”

When I had finished my palaver and my jobs I went and sat on the wall by the pool, and watched the moorhens, and the reflections in the water. Happening to glance at the house, I saw the lower sash of a bedroom window thrown up, and Peter and Sybil leaning out together. So, she had got him up the stairs.

She waved to me.

“Uncle—ahoi, we want you.”

I accepted the invitation, feeling that it was pleasant to be wanted and hailed in that naval and friendly fashion.

I met them coming down the stairs, Peter using only one crutch, and Sybil serving as a second crutch, with her arm round him. She watched every step he took and I watched them both while I pressed tobacco into a pipe.

“Well, how does the great idea shape to you?”

Sybil watched the last step before she looked at me with those very blue eyes of hers. I have never seen a face that could so express extreme innocence and extreme shrewdness at one and the same moment.

“Pretty shipshape.”

“No snags?”

She found Peter’s other crutch while he held on to the handrail.

“Just a bit more bath.”

I could not help smiling at her cleanliness and her brevity.

“And basins?”

“Oh—rather. Harrods have baths and basins. Gosh, why didn’t I learn plumbing.”

Peter grinned at me.

“You’d think, Uncle, she was all baths and basins, and without a thrill for——”

“Shut up, Pete. I think it’s perfect, all of it. I wish I’d seen it as it was.”

I was surprised. I was under the impression that all young things liked tubular chairs and Epstein art.

“Well, you can and will. All the old furniture can come back, the china and the pictures.”

“Oh, splendid, Uncle. You have the great idea.”

“Have I?”

“One doesn’t want a besotted boarding-house atmosphere, fumed oak and bronze statuettes and Pampas-grass, and Marcus Stone stuff. Why couldn’t an hotel look like home?”

I lit my pipe.

“Peter, a wise woman speaks. I rather thought that Sybil might want——”

She took me up.

“American Bar stuff, and all that! Shame on you, Uncle.”

“Apologies,” said I, “and I think you are God’s own prize lamb. I used to think the old house looked rather lovely.”

Her face went dreamy.

“I’m simply itching to see it look like that again.”

After tea we held a council of war in the Rose Cottage garden. I had been given to understand that we could not enter the house until the figure for dilapidations had been assessed and agreed upon, but there were a whole host of problems to be confronted. I had a feeling that Peter and Sybil had been talking over some urgent, personal problem, and I caught them looking at each other questioningly.

And then Sybil looked at me.

“Do you mind if we talk shop, Uncle? Our—shop. You see——”

I saw further than she imagined.

“You and Peter want to be—married.”

She nodded, and I smiled at her determined little chin.

“I am telling Peter that he should apply to be demobbed. You might help with that, Uncle.”

“Yes, I think I could. But wait a moment. It is only fair to you that we should have a definite agreement. Perhaps you would like it all in writing, that I promise to take on the adventure, and agree to engage Peter as manager and you as——”

Again they looked at each other, and Peter shook his head.

“We’ll take your word for it, Uncle.”

I pulled hard at my pipe.

“Thank you, my dears, but to satisfy myself, I’ll have something down on paper. I’m an old fellow——”

“You’re not,” said Sybil, “and never will be.”

So it was decided that Peter should apply for his freedom, and that Sybil—when married—should do the same. It seemed to me the war would not last much longer, and that we should not suffer another winter’s black-out, and I was wrong. Meanwhile we attacked our principal problems, and one or two of them seemed to me insoluble.

How to get the house put in order? I understood that unless we obtained a certificate, we should be limited to an outlay of £10.

“Yes,” said Peter, “unless we do the work ourselves.”

“We?”

“Yes, it does sound a bit difficult. You might apply for a certificate.”

Then those damned huts. How were we to be rid of them?

“Wouldn’t some farmer buy the things?”

That was an idea, and I thought of my friend Wicks. He was a progressive person, always ready for adventure, and able to produce labour.

“Yes, I’ll try Wicks.”

But labour? How were we to staff the place? I bit hard on my pipe.

Then Sybil spoke.

“I—want to do some of the cooking. And I’ve had a pow-wow with Ellen. She would come to us.”

“And cook for thirty people?”

“Yes, with help. Ellen’s rather a dear.”

I indulged in topical slang.

“You’re telling me! We’ll pay her well.”

“She’s not greedy. My feeling about it is, Uncle, that we ought to be a team.”

“A little community.”

“That’s it, communal but not communist. All working together, ten per cent on the bills, and no tips. We don’t want the luxury pigs getting their hoofs in the trough.”

“I am with you, my lass, absolutely. But——”

“Well, Uncle?”

“Peter has listed two waitresses and two chambermaids, and two helps in the kitchen.”

Sybil nodded solemnly.

“I have an idea about part of that. I have two girls in my crowd who would like to come with

me. Jolly good girls. They have done some waiting.”

“You seem to have an answer to everything.”

“Not quite. Ask Peter.”

I looked at Peter and he grinned.

“I have a lad who was my batman. He’d come. Turn his hand to anything.”

I scratched my head.

“That leaves only two chambermaids, and someone in the kitchen.”

“What about your Emily. Ellen thinks——”

“I’ll write to her.”

“I think we could manage the rest—somehow. Besides—at a pinch—Peter and I can wire in. We shall all be in the show.”

XIII

I HAD a feeling that things were going too well, and that frustration might be waiting for us round the corner. It was proving a bad and a difficult summer, spiteful and hostile even to our men in France, and we were having trouble with weeds and the harvest. As for fruit it was one of the worst years I remember. The Rose Cottage orchard exhibited about six scabby apples, and there was not a plum on the place.

We three old men—John and Jim and Tom, were tired, and so a little out of temper. Wicks had cut our oats and wheat for us, but getting it in was another business. I was opening up the stooks to dry one morning when the sun deigned to shine, and old Potter and Tom had the Auto-Culto and truck out when I heard a voice hailing me.

“Hi, you there.”

I was in blue overalls and wearing a battered old hat, and facing about I saw a figure at the gate. Now, I was not in a temper to be shouted at or to waste my time walking to the gate. I went on with my job. If the fellow wanted anything he could come to me.

“Hallo, my man, are you deaf?”

He had climbed the gate and trudged across the stubble. I gave him a leery look. He was a youngish, cocky looking amateur-gent with yet another of those fish-faces favoured by officials.

“No,” said I, “I am not deaf.”

“Sir John Mortimer anywhere about?”

“You are speaking to him.”

After that he called me sir, and became polite in a casual sort of way, and his very casualness struck me as being an attempt to get even with me and cover up his *faux pas*. He told me that he was the official valuer and had come to inspect and assess dilapidations. He looked quite fit to be in the army, but I imagine he was one of the spry and agile souls who jump into safe corners.

I left my work and took him to the house. I saw a small car waiting. He collected a notebook and some official papers, and then stood and looked at the house. He was one of those fellows who made a kind of nasal noise whenever you ventured a remark.

“Thinking of turning the place into an hotel?”

“Yes,” said I.

He made one of his nasal noises, and it gave me to feel that he put me down as an old fool.

“Shall I leave you to it?”

“Got some problems here—what?”

“I have,” said I, “just a matter of initiative, you know.”

He bleated: “Quite.”

I unlocked the house and left him to it, for I was convinced that we should not be sympathetic to each other, and that if I did any prompting it would make him less sympathetic to the House. I guessed that he would be that any way, and that he was one of the bright spirits who uttered the magic word—“Planning,” and expected the world to become angelic over night. And probably he believed in planning all owners of property out of existence.

We went on with our work, for the sheaves were drying well in the wind and sun, and we wanted to rush as much under cover as we could, using a kind of improvised Dutch barn. In fact I almost forgot the fellow, and when we knocked off I found that his car had gone. Courtesy had not persuaded him to come and report to me, and it seemed that his inspection had been as casual as his manners. Not only did the incident irritate me, for I was tired, but it left me depressed and bothered, and obsessed by the feeling that the new world was to be a mass of negation.

My pessimism was justified.

Peter came down for a weekend, and he was depressed—poor lad. He had been fitted with an artificial limb, and it hurt him. Moreover, he was being messed about by authority, boarded, reported upon, told that he would have to report at his depot, which was in Yorkshire. It appeared that he might be given administrative work, and be vetted from time to time. What he lusted for was his freedom, freedom to get on with constructive work.

He said: “This chit-pushing business will get me down.”

I tried to cheer him up, but I was not feeling too cheerful myself. I think we both of us needed a dose of Sybil.

It was Sybil who acted.

She claimed special leave, made Peter do the same, and she married him in London.

They spent a short honeymoon with me, only to be told that all progress seemed stuck.

I remember what Sybil said.

“All the world’s a wangle, Uncle.”

Shakespeare—with adaptations!

There were other frustrations.

My friend Wicks came to look at the two huts on what had been lawns, and decided that the job of moving them would be too big for him. He asked me if the War Office had quoted me a price. They had not as yet, nor did I want to buy the damned things.

Did he know anything about it? He shrugged his big shoulders.

“No, afraid not, sir. Get enough bump of my own.”

Nor could I find any firm in the neighbourhood who would or could take on the reconditioning of the house. They all pleaded shortage of labour and materials.

And had I applied for a certificate entitling me to spend much money on the house?

I had not as yet.

Nothing could be done without it.

Next, my old car began to give trouble. The solitary expert at my local garage diagnosed a

senile back axle and an engine that needed reboring.

A new back axle? It might take months.

Second-hand cars were scarce and incredibly costly.

I could not buy a new car without a licence.

I remembered—sardonically—that one could not be buried without a certificate.

Well, I determined to try for a reconstruction permit. I approached the necessary authority and my application was turned down. I could spend ten pounds on having the damaged piece of roof re-slatted. If the house was weatherproof I had no grouse. Nor had I when I thought of the mess in London, and the poor wretches who would have been glad of my army huts.

I received an official notice of the sum in compensation I was to receive.

Two hundred and fifty pounds.

Well—well—well!

Lastly the war seemed to have gone stale on us. After all that brilliant sweep across France and Belgium, we had got stuck. Supplies—I suppose.

I began to foresee another war winter and black-out.

Oh, my God!

In fact everything seemed so hopeless that I seriously considered abandoning the whole project. I was tired, and all these difficulties had got me down. The more I thought about it, the more mad and reckless the adventure appeared to me. I—an old fellow, and a lad with one leg, and a girl to put the place in order and run it as an hotel!

But what should I do? Sell the house, and stay on at Rose Cottage? Yet, I could not get myself to hoist the white flag and abandon the House to its fate. Moreover, I should be letting those two young things down, and I had grown fond of them.

I had yet another fear, that if I left the house empty it might be requisitioned again, especially so with the war dragging on.

Should I move in, occupy a part of it, and picnic there?

I could not make up my mind.

The one person who adopted a positive attitude was old Potter. He snatched every hour that he could spare in clearing weeds and digging and cutting rough grass. I found him working overtime and looking cheerful and rosy about it. In fact old Potter was gloating over being back in—his—garden, and I could divine pride and an innocent vanity in him. If the house was to become an hotel the garden would be very much his show, and much more a show than it had been. His flowers and his fruit and his vegetables would be inspected and admired by an interested and ever-changing crowd. Old Potter would be painting a picture that would always be on show.

I said to him: “Jim, don’t you overdo it.”

He chuckled and waggled his backside.

“I be enjoying myself, I be. Getting the old place to rights. I ’ad a letter from Bill yesterday. He’s mad to come back.”

Bill was young Potter.

“Glad to hear it,” said I, and I had not the heart to take the shine off old Potter’s face.

I decided to write to Sybil and put the case to her, for poor Peter was still very depressed, and I discovered that I had a good deal of faith in that sturdy little person. I was quite frank with Sybil, and I confessed that I had met with nothing but frustration, and that I had begun to doubt the sanity of our scheme.

Sybil wrote by return.

She was trying for a release from the service, her case being that she had a crippled husband to look after, but the authorities were not being sympathetic. "Yes, damn them," wrote she, and I could hear her saying it. Peter was still stuck at a desk, and the two young things were separated. But Sybil was full of fight. She asked me to postpone any immediate decision, and said that she would try and get leave, though she had had a lot of leave of late.

"Would you write me a letter, Uncle, saying that you want me for a business consultation, and I can stuff it into them. Peter is so keen on the adventure. Thinking of it helps to keep him going. I believe he will be a new man when he has something constructive to do. As it is, you seem to be having all the trouble, poor lamb. I'm tough, and I might help."

I felt rather cheered by her fighting spirit. Nelson in petticoats! Sybil might be wise as to the potentialities of a blind eye. I wrote her a letter, and she wired me.

All serene. Got a week. Expect me to-morrow.

She turned up in uniform, looking very natty, her hair curled, her little hat cocked, and her complexion perfect. I sensed something roguish in her eyes. Sybil was out for piracy. It happened to be fine, and we had tea in the garden.

She said: "Who is the blighter who turned down your application to put the house in order?"

"Oh, the local authority."

"I'll go and see it."

"You?"

"Yes, me. I'll tell him I'm a working partner and that we want to get on with the job. Will you give me authority?"

I looked at her, especially at her pretty head with its curls, and those solemn eyes with traces of a naughty gleam in them, and I chuckled.

"Good idea. Even officials are human."

"Just how, Uncle?"

"Oh, you know, all right. Well, try it, and cock your hat."

"You are a very naughty old man."

She went, was seen, she talked and she triumphed. She came back with a little swagger of the hips, threw her hat on the sofa, and came across and kissed me.

"Got it. Or, I think so. He's coming to inspect."

"You have?"

"Really quite a nice bloke. I rubbed it in that we were out for social service. He said he might give us a certificate to spend five hundred pounds."

"Well, I'm——"

"No you're not. We could do quite a lot of decorating for five hundred pounds. Painting and distemper."

"I should say so. But what about basins and all that?"

"Buy them, Uncle, and say nothing. Who's to know? Besides—if anybody made trouble we could play innocence and say we thought we had the right to buy a bath or two."

"You minx," said I.

"Sez you!"

“But, damn it, now we may have to find someone to take on the job.”

Authority came to inspect us, and authority was more sympathetic than we had dared to hope. Sybil had begun the good deed, and the House completed it. Mr. Surveyor stood and surveyed the scene.

“It is an extraordinary thing, sir, but I often used to pass this house in the old days, and I used to think——”

He paused and rubbed his nose. It was a rosy and a human nose, and I gather that he and it were more sensitive than most municipal autocrats. I was conscious of his hesitation.

“What did you think?”

“Well, sir, that—er—your house would make a most charming country—club—or——”

“Hotel.”

“Yes.”

“A case of pure pre-vision. That is why we want to get the place in order. My partner and I have our plans on paper, but paper isn’t paint——”

He nodded.

“I will be quite frank, sir. Had you been asking for mere personal expenditure I could not have passed it. That’s why I had to turn down your previous application. You did not state quite clearly——”

“Silly of me. But if I give you my word that the place is for service, and not for an old gentleman’s private pleasure?”

“That will satisfy us. Have you any idea whether you can find a firm who will do the work?”

“No. We waited. May I say I’m grateful for your understanding attitude.”

Hitherto I had approached the more pretentious people, and then I remembered old Tom Brown of Framley, a working builder and decorator in a small way. I had never employed him, and he had the reputation of being an awkward old devil, and rather fond of the pub. It occurred to me to try Mr. Brown. He might even be glad of a job.

I spoke of it to Sybil.

“Got any whisky left, Uncle?”

“Whisky?”

“Yes, just plain whisky.”

“Quite a lot.”

“Try a couple of bottles.”

“What—on——?”

“Of course. All the world’s a wangle.”

“Naughty, naughty!”

Somehow, Sybil had put me in a laughing mood, and I drove my decrepit car to Framley with a couple of bottles of whisky on the back seat. I’ll admit they were camouflaged. I found Mr. Thomas Brown painting a chest of drawers in his workshop. He was an austere looking rustic with a goatee beard and a very shrewd grey eye, laconic, aloof, vaguely spiteful.

“Good morning, Mr. Brown.”

“Mornin’.”

He went on painting.

“Any chance of you taking a job?”

“What sort o’ job?”

“Painting and distempering Beech Hill.”

That seemed to astonish him.

“What, the ’old ’ouse?”

“Yes.”

He sniffed and laid his brush across the paint-pot.

“Got yer authority to spend more than ten pounds?”

“I have.”

This time he grunted, and his grunt might have been yes or no, but I had my plan.

“Supposing you come and look round. I can drive you up and back.”

“No ’arm in looking.”

I had taken out our front seat to give me room for shopping baskets, etc., and Mr. Brown sat down in the back seat almost on the whisky bottles. I glanced round and saw a hand. The rug revealed the bait.

I said: “Are those things in your way?”

He grunted.

“I forgot to take them out. I happen to have plenty. It’s damned difficult to get the stuff.”

He became topical.

“You’re tellin’ me.”

I drove off, and then I said quite casually: “When one’s tired a tot at night does one a world of good.”

He grunted, but there seemed to be a most consenting sound in the grunt.

“We’re not so young as we were. I like mine with a little hot water.”

Almost, he smacked his lips.

“I get that tired, sir, that I could go to bed with m’ clothes on.”

“Do you? That’s rather hard. Now I come to think of it, I can spare two bottles. You can have them—to help you sleep.”

XIV

WE WERE to be more fortunate than I could have believed possible. Sybil was waiting for us, and she gave Mr. Brown her hand and her best smile. I am afraid I winked at her behind his back and held up two fingers. We took Mr. Brown all over the house, and explained that it was to be an hotel, and that redecoration was urgent. We were prepared to pay handsomely for any work done.

He caressed his beard, and was so grumpily mute for a while that I wondered whether the whisky had done its work as a persuader. We returned to the hall where Sybil had collected three empty cases, three bottles of beer and three glasses.

“Have some beer, Mr. Brown.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Miss.”

We all had beer, and to my surprise and relief Mr. Brown gave us a toast.

“Here’s to it, sir.”

“You’ll do the work?”

“How much have they allowed you?”

“Five hundred pounds.”

He grunted.

“Cost nearer a thousand—I reckon.”

“Well, could you do as much as you can for five hundred?”

He emptied his glass, and Sybil refilled it. He gave a sudden grin in my direction.

“Call it five hundred, sir, for the time being. I ain’t in a hurry. Pound notes are useful things.”

“Splendid. Have you the labour?”

“Myself and my chap, and my boy. He’s been invalided out, but he’s pretty good.”

“Splendid,” said I again, “as a matter of fact I have some paint in store, if you are short. Could you make a start soon?”

“Next week.”

I felt like bouncing up and down on my box.

I drove Mr. Brown and the whisky home. He offered to pay for it, but I told him it was a present. Then I drove back and picked up Sybil.

“Well—that’s a bit of luck, my dear.”

“Gorgeous.”

“By the way, what did he mean about pound notes?”

She gave me a mother look.

“Oh—you sweet lamb. He’ll send you a bill for five hundred, and then you’ll stroll down one day with a wad of pound notes, and settle the difference.”

“But—that’s——”

“Quite so,” said she, “just a harmless wink and a tiny wangle.”

I believe that the first thing Sybil did was to write a letter to Peter, and to run off to post it in the letter-box near Framley church. I was chuckling and reviewing my morals. Were we committing a social sin? I could not see it in that way, for there was no war damage waiting to be repaired in our neighbourhood, and old Brown had jumped at the job. Moreover, it was to be a good job, and not merely to satisfy an old gentleman’s luxury appetite.

Nor was this the end of our luck. Wicks turned up that afternoon and said that he had changed his mind. He would take the two huts we did not want, if the price was not too high. Yes, he had a little more labour and could remove the beastly things.

I said: “Take them with my blessing. I’ll charge you half the price the official people want for them.”

I gave him a stiff whisky, and the thing was done.

When I told old Potter he almost jumped with glee.

“We’ll get the Auto on them lawns, sir, and plough ’em and scuffle ’em, and I can sow ’em ready for next year.”

Sybil and I went shopping. She had the list, and it was somewhat lengthy.

Eight basins for running water.

Three lavatory pans and seats.

Two baths.

Ten electric fires.

An electric water-heater.

Sundry kitchen utensils and gadgets.

Electric light bulbs.

We had no gas at High Beeches, but an electric cable had been laid years ago. I cannot say that I was optimistic, and I was a little worried about the price of things. She catechized me in

the train.

“Have you a Hoover, Uncle?”

“Yes, bought just before the war.”

“Fine. And a refrigerator?”

“A medium-sized one.”

“Oh—great! Can old Brown plumb?”

“I believe so.”

We were luckier than I had expected. An electric water-heater was not to be had at present, but we got five basins, one bath, coloured a delicate green, and the lavatory pans. They allowed us five electric stoves—of sorts, and Sybil did not do too badly with her kitchen stuff.

Had I a mangle, and a copper for washing?

I believed so.

And soap? Soap was the very devil.

I told her that I had a reserve of soap, dish cloths, glass cloths and towels.

“You lamb,” said she, under the very eyes of the salesman, and I wondered whether he thought that Sybil was to be an old man’s darling.

“Let’s try and celebrate, Uncle.”

We made the attempt, but not very successfully so. Every restaurant seemed chock-a-block, and my silly old club did not admit petticoats. We had to be satisfied with a Lyons, sausage and mash, and something they called trifle, but as a meal and for the price it was not too bad, and I take off my hat to Messrs. Lyons.

Another letter to Peter. I caught Sybil at it, and I made her add a postscript.

Britannia has begun to rule the waves. Try again for your release. If you think it will help I will put in a letter:

I expect Sybil has given you all the news.

Old Potter came to me next morning.

“I be wanting ten gallons of weed-killer, sir. We’ll have to make do with that there smelly stuff.”

Figuratively I struck my forehead.

“By Jove, just remembered. I had ten gallons of arsenic in store somewhere.”

“That’s the stuff, sir. Where be it?”

“I remember now. Two drums in the cottage shed.”

Old Potter looked as pleased as though he was about to administer arsenic to the whole Hitler gang.

“Them darned weeds. Nothin’ like ars-nic for frizzlin’ them up. And they stay frizzled.”

I carted the drums up to the house, and for two days—the weather being propitious—Potter—with budge and can, gave himself to the slaughter with an air of beatific satisfaction. The weedy drive, the paths, the stable yard were given their dressing, and in a few days that which had been a green and weedy mess, became a shaggy brown pelt. The gravel reappeared, and later old Potter and Tom, busy with stubby besoms, swept up the dead and gave them a fine funeral pyre.

On Sybil's very last morning the letter reached me. I read it at the breakfast table and smirked at my egg on toast.

"H'm, not bad news."

"Who's it from, Uncle?"

"Do you mean to tell me you haven't done any snooping."

"I don't snoop other people's letters."

"Well, give a guess."

"Not good at guessing."

"It's from Peter."

"Peter!"

"He says that the weather is quite nice, and that potatoes look promising."

And suddenly she tumbled to it.

"Oh—Uncle——Let me——"

"Now, now!"

"Don't be a herb——"

She jumped up, but I forestalled her.

"Fact is—Peter is getting his discharge."

"Oh, my dear!" and she came round the table and kissed me.

Sybil and I had discussed painting and decorating. The distemper and paint I happened to have in store were both cream coloured, and Mr. Brown had a certain amount of material on hand. Purchases would be patchy. I gathered that some brown wall paint was on the market. Now, in many of the rooms the paper was still in passable condition and could be sized and distempered. The old Jacobean tapestry pattern in the lower rooms had received most damage, but not more than shoulder high, and Sybil had suggested that we should wash it over with a thin coat of whitish distemper and let the old flowery blues and reds and greens show dimly through. The lower four feet of the walls could be cleaned up and painted brown. All ceilings—of course—would have to be whitewashed. I liked the idea, and talked it over with old Brown. The whisky appeared to have put him into a most consenting humour, and we decided to try the scheme of decoration out on one of the smaller rooms, but he pointed out to me that it would be wiser to get the out-door painting done while the good weather held, for many of the window frames were almost minus paint and showing the grain of the wood. Also, the piece of damaged roof needed re-slatting. His advice was sound, and I agreed with him, and soon ladders were up, and paint-burners, putty-knives and brushes busy. Old Brown had a trick for stabilizing ladders other than planting a man to stand on the bottom rung all day, and pick his nose and gaze vacantly at the landscape. He drove an iron pike into the ground and lashed the ladder to it.

I remember that morning early in October—a serene morning—when I felt the house smiling at me. Young Brown had been at work on the portico pillars and the great front door, and there they were as of old, brilliant and white in the sunlight. The house was beginning to laugh, and something within me laughed with it.

I wondered what Peter would think, a Peter who would soon be with me.

Wicks turned up with two lorries and a gang of men and girls and set about the two huts. It astonished me the way these lusty young women got to work with wrenches and hammers. Wicks, too, had his coat off; he was large and swarthy with hairy forearms, and he tossed corrugated iron about like cardboard. In an astonishingly short time they had the huts down

and loaded. Wicks came across to me. Did I want to keep the wire netting and iron grips and chestnut paling that had been spread to prevent the lorries bogging? I did not. If he wanted the stuff he could have it with my blessing.

I took him into the house for a whisky.

“Going to re-sow with grass seed, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Time’s getting a bit short.”

“I know. Potter is keen on an autumn sowing.”

He held up his glass to me.

“Here’s hell to Hitler. I’ll send a tractor up and plough that ground, if it will help.”

“That’s very good of you.”

“Well, you’ve been easy with me, sir.”

They stripped the ground of the netting and chestnut fencing, and next day Wicks’ tractor driver turned up and made a nice job of ploughing. Old Potter rubbed his backside as though he had the itch, which he had, to get on with his sowing. The weather kept good, and when the ground dried a bit Potter put our Auto-Culto to work and scuffled the soil into a tith. Next day he and Tom were sowing grass seed and scuffling it in to finish with a good rolling.

XV

BIKING down for tea that afternoon I ran into the unexpected, nothing less than Peter in mufti, swinging along rather stiffly on a new leg. I nearly fell off my bike into a hedge, and Peter helped to right me.

“Well, of all the——! How did you?”

“Got a taxi. Can you put up with me?”

“Ask Ellen.”

“I have.”

“I think I know what Ellen said.”

He looked colourful and bright of eye, and I felt that the gloom had gone from him. He had a green hat, a pale blue shirt, a green jacket and grey trousers, and a pearl grey tie and pull-over. I looked him over and found him good.

“Regular peacock, my lad.”

He laughed.

“I never want to see brown again, Uncle. I am registering a human protest.”

We had tea together, and nothing would satisfy him but a visit to the house. I got the old car out, for I saw that he was very new to his leg. We were lucky in the evening, for the sombreness of summer had gone, and the beeches were flecked with colour. The slanting sunlight shot over the house and threw a kind of glamorous veil over it. A little smoky mist was rising from the pool, and the sky was clear and cold.

Peter got himself and his new leg out of the car, and stood—head up. He had come without a hat. That which was becoming familiar to me was new to him, the fresh white window frames, the white door with its clean brass fittings—I had cleaned them myself—the great strong white pillars. The house seemed to stand like some Henry the Eighth, but without the arrogance of that corpulent cad.

“Here I am. Here I stand. I am I, and I am strong and free.”

Peter turned to me suddenly.

“Uncle, it’s laughing.”

“Maybe it is.”

“There’s not enough laughter in the world. We all want to laugh. Not politics—but ‘Punch.’”

And then he saw that the two huts had gone, and the neat brown carpet of rolled soil.

“Gosh, I hadn’t noticed that! Two bloody hippopotami vanished into air. Is that grass?”

“It will be.”

“English lawns. Say, I feel good. Let’s go in.”

I warned him that we had not yet tackled the interior, but—somehow—the evening light was soft and gentle to the house. The old place did not laugh, but seemed to sigh and draw happy tranquil breaths. And it was clean. We stood at a window, and looked at the pool, and the steep green valley and the soaring woods above. They had the sunlight on them.

Peter slipped an arm into mine.

“Oh, gracious land, oh—stately trees. I feel that it is going to be good, Uncle, good for human eyes. I have seen the mess man makes. We can do something better here.”

I took him into the kitchen, for I had a surprise for him. All our new gear had arrived and was stored in the kitchen.

“Even gadgets can be good.”

“Gosh, Uncle, how did you get all this?”

“It was largely—Sybil.”

He laughed.

“It would be. The Navy always does it. Christ, do you know what’s what?”

“And what is what?”

“Since I have been inside here I haven’t felt my fake leg.”

Over our evening meal we had an argument. I had said that Peter could stay with me, and he had countered with: “Yes, Uncle, if I pay.”

“Fudge,” said I.

“I won’t be a parasite. I have been putting money by. Uncle, I’d much rather.”

“Very well, my lad, then I shall have to begin paying you a salary.”

Then, we looked at each other and laughed, because—I think—that it occurred to both of us that we were arguing, magnanimously, about an entity which to us was not of prime importance. The job was the thing. The world had got bogged in economics, and I think I was absorbing the spirit of the more generous and enlightened youngsters. Man had to live, but not by bread or cash alone; his urge might be to live more graciously, more cleanly, less loutishly.

“Well, we shall have to compromise. What about postponing the argument?”

He gave me a whimsical grin.

“We have to make the place pay its way, Uncle, but I rather believe that neither of us care a damn about the filthy lucre.”

“Not always so filthy.”

“Of course not. I’m not one of the fools who won’t see that a man must have a cake to cut at, and that the better he is at his job, the bigger his slice should be.”

“Applied intelligence.”

“Yes,” said he, “backed by character.”

I gave him a benignant look.

“Glad you know that. But you would. I’m not too old to learn things. I think we are going to have tremendous fun with our show.”

He nodded.

“Yes, gorgeous fun.”

Peter and I held a consultation with Mr. Brown on the subject of baths and basins. He tickled his goatee beard and looked at us slyly.

“That isn’t in the contract, sir.”

“I know, nor is our permission to spend——”

“Nout said—who’s the wiser?”

He pointed out to us that before any decorating was done on the top floor basins and baths and lavatories should be installed, which was obvious. Piping, etc., would have to be laid, and walls broken through. It was Peter who made the wise suggestion.

“Supposing we opened with one floor, and took in the other rooms—later?”

“What about—noise?” said I.

“Well, the rough work and the hammering might be got through earlier. Mr. Brown understands all that.”

Mr. Brown swallowed the flattery.

“That be a good idea, sir. We could do the plumbing on the quiet. No need for Nosey Parkers.”

“We can settle the extras in hard cash.”

“That’ll suit me, sir.”

The weather had broken, October gales, but nearly all the outside work had been finished, and Brown & Co. were experimenting with our scheme of decoration. We tried it first on the study, and the result was charming. The flowery blues, reds and greens of the old pattern showed softly through the distemper. Peter—in particular—was delighted with it.

The stained surround of the floor boards had been worn away, and one morning I found Peter busy with a pot of stain and a brush. He was whistling.

“Found a job, Uncle.”

“So I see.”

“Makes one feel good.”

He was to find himself all sorts of jobs, putting up curtain rods, cleaning up finger-plates, polishing stoves, cleaning up baths and bath-taps, polishing lavatory seats. He was getting used to his leg, and the stump was ceasing to hurt him; he seemed to be in a perennial and sweet temper.

Old Potter and Tom were sweating in the garden. They tackled the greenhouses, and the broken fruit-garden wall, and did a creditable piece of amateur brick-laying. Spades and scythes and sickles were busy in fine weather, and weeds were disappearing. The lawns were growing a crop of green hair.

I found Peter at the breakfast table looking very solemn over a letter. I could guess its origin.

“How’s Sybil?”

“Swearing.”

“Dear, dear!”

“She says: ‘Damn this war. Why don’t they get on with it. The blighters won’t let me out. But I’ve got an idea!’”

“Sybil is full of ideas.”

Peter looked bothered.

“I wonder what this one is.”

Rain, rain, rain, and the war news damnable. The Germans have broken the American line—just when we thought the beasts were finished.

Damn everything! What a nice Christmas present!

The house was very damp, and we were afraid of the walls sweating and spoiling the new distemper, and it was an occasion for trying out the furnace and radiators. Thank Heaven we found no sign of leaks. One drenching day Potter and Tom cleaned out the furnace and saw that the cistern in the roof was full, and stoked up the furnace with dry wood and some coke which the army had left behind. We toured the house watching the radiators, but thank God the installation was in order, and the old house began to warm up and to dry. For days the windows had been blurred with moisture.

Peter came to me on this particular day.

“Great snakes, Uncle, we have forgotten something!”

“What?”

“Dining-room tables.”

So we had! The big mahogany table I possessed would be useless, so we went touring antique shops for pedestal, or three-legged tables, and even gate-legged specimens, and they cost me much. Our idea was to have polished tables which would save cloths and laundry.

I was preparing to expand our food production, and add geese, ducks and rabbits to our poultry, but I needed more help with Potter and Tom so busy and young Potter not yet with us. Through Wicks I managed to win a Land-Girl, one Polly, a large, buxom, sunny creature with a *retroussé* nose and curly hair. She was a trained poultry-woman, and as strong as a man, and with a temper that was as sweet as milk. It was Polly who persuaded me to keep two cows, Jerseys, and to make herself responsible for them. Incidentally, Polly was to be most valuable in a crisis and in saving a situation. The cry would go out: “Ask Polly to give a hand,” and she never failed us.

All the members of our staff came to be known by their Christian names, Ellen and Emily, Sybil, Marie and Jean, Jane and Margaret, Peter—and I—as Sir John.

Cold weather. We managed to keep the furnace alight during the day on odd logs, regular tree trunks, and oddments of coke. The painting and decorating was going well, and we were delighted with our scheme. The whole of the ground floor had been papered in Sibilla's day with that rich and expensive Jacobean pattern, and the effect with the thin coat of distemper and the brown dado was admirable. I was lusting to see the carpets and furniture back, and all the familiar and lovely things. Somehow I was not afraid of damage being done, for I had a feeling that the people who would come to us would not be of the cigarette-end, spoil everything order. We did not want that kind of casual savage, but folk who needed peace and beauty and quiet spacious days, people to whom the old house would be a friend. In fact we had decided when possible to censor our list of clients, and to refuse to welcome any who had behaved as barbarians on some previous visit. Houses have souls, souls which can be good and evil, and we wanted people who could feel and respond to that which the house could give

them.

Peter had painted a little coloured text which he proposed to hang up in the hall:

“We wish to keep the House lovely. Help us.”

I was a little doubtful about this admonition, but Peter was keen on it.

“Not priggery, Uncle. Just a word to the wise.”

XVI

PETER has had a shock.

Sybil has written to say that she is going to have a baby.

I think that Peter was more appalled by the news than proud of it, just when all our other responsibilities and problems lay heavy on us. Sybil would be out of action, and more than that; she would have a child to care for in our most busy house.

The lad apologized to me.

“I’m sorry, sir. My fault—I suppose.”

I was too worried to see the humour of it. We had been relying so much on Sybil.

“Babies will come, my lad. That’s both a platitude and a cliché.”

“I shall have to get her into a nursing-home.”

“All in good time. She can come here.”

He gave me a most grateful grin.

“But we can’t park all our troubles on you.”

“The trouble is months ahead. Sybil should be able to help us for a while. We shall be in the house by the time the child arrives.”

“You are a sport, Uncle.”

But he was depressed and bothered, worried about Sybil and the problem of a baby tossed into our very new hotel, so much so that I tried to make a joke of it. I told him of my friend Barry Neame who had been obliged to run his show partly with mothers who had babies parked in prams all over the place, and that the babies had been an hotel asset. Benign and philoprogenic souls had found pleasure in bending over prams, and making paternal and maternal noises. It had made Barry’s place seem very much alive.

Peter wrote to Sybil every day, and Sybil wrote to me.

I always knew you were a lamb, Uncle, but now you are a lamb with a halo. I shan’t forget.

She had applied for a release, and of course her release would be inevitable.

I’ll be with you any day. Peter talks about buying a pram. They are hard to get, and horribly expensive. Stop him.

I was rather puzzled by that blunt order. Surely a healthy young woman need not prognosticate miscarriage or a stillborn child?

We were at lunch when I heard a car pull up outside Rose Cottage. I had a better view of it than Peter had, and I saw that it was a taxi.

“Someone calling?”

“By Jove,” I said, “it’s Sybil!”

Peter was up and out of the room before I could move, and that in spite of his artificial leg. I sat down again. Let the young things meet; I should be *de trop*. I heard their voices, a mild argument, and laughter from Sybil. The taxi man had been paid and was driving off.

“You mustn’t carry that. Hand it over.”

“Mustn’t isn’t used by husbands.”

“Come along, darling, hand it over.”

The gentle conflict appeared to concern her kit-bag, and I gather that she surrendered it to Peter. We were having mince for lunch, and if there is anything I loathe it is mince, and I left my plate to ring the bell for Ellen. Sybil would need lunch—even if it was nothing but mince.

They were in the passage, and I heard Peter say: “Go and see Uncle. I’ll carry this up.”

I opened the door and was confronted by Sybil in mufti, a very presentable and jocund young woman. I told myself that pregnancy in its early phases sometimes gives a girl a natural bloom, and then I was kissing Sybil. She felt warm, in spite of the cold weather, and she smelt sweet.

“Well, well, well. Come in and sit down.”

I was paternal and considerate. I admit that I glanced at her figure, but I could see no evidence. In fact she looked more slim and sleek in that silver grey suit.

“I’ve had a sandwich lunch, Uncle.”

“That won’t do. Oh, Ellen——”

Ellen was with us, maternal and smiling. It appeared that mince was in short supply, but Ellen could produce Spam.

“And there’s a gooseberry tart, Mrs. Nash.”

Sybil giggled. Mrs. Nash—indeed!

“Oh, scrumptious. Some of your bottled ones, Ellen?”

“Yes, and cream.”

“Cream! I’ll be a pig. By the way, I’ve got a pound of butter, two pounds of sugar and a quarter of tea in my bag.”

Ellen beamed upon her. Almost her maternal face radiated cookliness and the assertion that prospective mothers must be well fed.

Peter came clumbering down the stairs. He put his arm round his wife, and drew her towards the fire.

“Do sit down, darling. Get warm. You must be tired.”

She suffered his carefulness, but she smiled at me, an oblique and Mona Lisa smile, and I was puzzled by it. The carrying of a child might seem humorous to Sybil; most certainly it was not depressing to her.

Sybil ate Spam, and she had two helpings of gooseberry tart, and half a pint of beer. Obviously her appetite was excellent, and not yet subject to the puckishness of pregnancy. I saw Peter watching her with loving and responsible eyes. Ellen brought us coffee, and the young things lit cigarettes.

“Come and put your feet up, darling.”

He wanted her to rest on the sofa by the fire, but—in the vulgar parlance—Sybil wasn’t having any. She shook her curls and perched on a tuffet, and blew smoke at her husband.

“I want to see the house. How are things going, Uncle?”

Peter looked at me. Did he expect me to assist in exerting husbandly pressure?

“Fine,” said I, “I can drive you up, if my wretched old car will function.”

She laughed.

“Drive? What’s wrong with flat feet? I haven’t got the vapours.”

Peter looked bothered.

“Do you think you ought to, darling?”

“Dear boy, I’m not a hospital case yet.”

So, walk we did, and Sybil was as light as ever on those pretty legs of hers. Peter had been for taking her arm, but she shrugged him off gently, and he looked hurt. Her spruce apartness seemed to say—“Don’t fuss, darling. You need not worry about me.”

When she saw the house in all its recovered whiteness, with the huts gone, and the weeds effaced, and the young grass sprouting she stood still and held my arm. Her face was soft and her eyes liquid. Even the weather was being kind to us with its cold sparkle, for, in this dear old country’s foul moods it can drive a man to drink.

“Oh, Uncle, it’s—perfect.”

I glanced at Peter. Poor Peter was looking bothered, for she had held my arm, not his.

Thomas Brown & Co. were at work on the first floor. The furnace was going and the old house felt warm. As for the scheme of decoration—it delighted Sybil, as it had delighted us.

I pulled Peter into the picture.

“You see all the staining, and the curtain rods, that has been one of Peter’s jobs.”

“I can do curtains. Have you a step-ladder?”

Peter frowned at me.

“No step-ladders for you, darling. I won’t have it.”

She smiled at him with sudden tenderness, and went and put an arm round him.

“I’ll be very careful. Haven’t I got a considerate husband, Uncle?”

I said: “One in a thousand, my dear, and I mean that. Some men wear well. Give me kindness.”

She turned her face up to Peter’s.

“Darling, don’t worry. You’re such a dear.”

And she kissed him.

I confess that we were proposing to wrap Sybil in cotton-wool and surround her with a protective idleness, but Sybil would not stay idle, and I became more and more puzzled. She appeared to be more active than ever, and full of energy and enthusiasm. Peter had suggested a medical attendant and she had laughed it off.

He came to me.

“I wish you would try and persuade her to see a doctor.”

“She doesn’t seem to need one at present.”

“No, that’s what’s worrying me. She ought not to take risks and tire herself. I caught her hanging curtains, and I’m afraid we had a row.”

I said: “I don’t think Sybil is reckless. She is a wise little person, you know.”

He was frowning.

“Yes, but there is something I don’t understand, something I can’t get at. She’s not moody or fussy, but she won’t be——”

“Coerced?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. She won’t let me persuade her—to——”

“Shall I——?”

“I wish you would.”

I did, and the result was devastating. Sybil began to laugh, and to laugh most immoderately.

“Oh you two sweet lambs!”

Were we two sweet lambs, and why? I began to feel a trifle peeved, for an old fellow does like to be listened to.

“I think I might suggest, my dear, that Peter’s interest in your—er—condition—is somewhat rational.”

“Oh, quite,” said she, “you are both utter dears, but so—innocent.”

I—innocent! No man quite likes to be considered that. Maybe I became a little throaty and high coloured, and she saw that she had offended me, for she came across and sat down on my knee.

“Uncle, you’re such a lamb. I’m a—minx. You and Peter are both dears. Didn’t you suspect that I’d done a wangle?”

“A wangle?”

“Yes, I did so want to get busy—and be with Peter.”

“Do you mean to tell me you’re not——”

“No, I don’t think I am.”

I stared at her wholesome, naughty little face, and felt as though I had burst my braces.

“Good God, do you mean you have been—fooling?”

“Not quite fooling, Uncle.”

“But—how the devil——”

“Well, I spun a yarn, and there was a dear idiot of a doctor—who swallowed——”

“You are a very disgraceful young woman.”

“Oh, Uncle!”

“Yes you are. I’ve a good mind to turn you over and spank you.”

“Spank away if you like.”

“Don’t you realize—that you’ve made yourself liable to——”

“Have I? But, can’t a young wife make mistakes?”

“Like your nice idiot of a doctor?”

“Yes, just like that.”

I turned her over and gave one good, hearty smack.

“That’s from me, for being a bold-faced, lying jig. You may get another from Peter.”

She scrambled away, sat on a tuffet and smiled at me.

“Assault and battery, Uncle? But aren’t you really a bit relieved? I’m working fit. I’m sure Peter will be relieved, poor darling.”

I shook my head at her.

“You have shocked my faith in human nature. You are a thoroughly bad girl.”

She made a move at me.

“Much better laugh, Uncle.”

As a matter of fact I believe that Peter took it far more seriously than I did. He did not laugh. He was more than a little shocked, and I gather that he talked gravely to Sybil about reporting to her old unit and confessing that both she and the doctor had made a mistake. It was not priggery in Peter, but a kind of fierce integrity, and I think it both frightened Sybil and made her respect him far more profoundly. There were wangles and wangles, some of them not to be suffered.

Maybe Sybil felt a little penitent after this dose of ethics and her clash with her young husband. She was unusually silent and subdued for some days, and almost her manner might have been described as demure, a word that is utterly out of favour. She watched Peter almost anxiously, but I gathered that she loved him all the better for being what he was. There are some lies that cannot be laughed at.

Meanwhile, Sybil worked like a Trojan up at the House. We had had some of the carpets brought in from storage, and Sybil was vetting them for moths. There was one particular fine Chinese carpet which was heavy to lift, and one morning I found them together unrolling the thing.

I slipped away. So peace was in the air, and they were learning that marriage means working together. And when I looked in again they were crawling about the carpet searching for moth damage, and I smiled over the symbolic act.

“Found any trouble?”

Sybil sat up.

“No, Uncle. No moths in our show.”

XVII

I THINK I ought to mention the fact that the surveyor who had granted us a certificate came again to inspect the house and the work, and I too felt conscious of having indulged in a little wangling. Our basins and baths had been carried out of the way to the top floor, and Mr. Surveyor found us all at work on carpets, curtains, and what-not. For an official he struck me as being a very human person who, when the job seemed justified, would not look too critically at details. I explained that we were not using the top floor to begin with, and I showed him over the rest of the house, and explained how much we had had to do.

I saw that he was both interested and appreciative, especially so when I emphasized the fact that we were out for a form of social service. We wanted the right people, and we were not going to bleed them.

“Good business, sir. One hates to be niggardly.”

I told him that he had treated us kindly, and he rubbed his chin, and said that if we found ourselves hampered by expenses he might be able to help us further. I felt rather guilty as I thanked him.

He did not seem in a hurry to go, but looked out of windows, and at our carpets, and the softly-blurred colours on the walls.

“Going to put back the original furniture, sir?”

“Yes. The idea is—a country house—not merely an hotel.”

He nodded.

“Making people feel at home. I should not mind a fortnight here when you get going. My poor wife is pretty well tired out.”

“You will be very welcome. No washing-up for your wife!”

“I mean it seriously, sir. Would you let me know when you open?”

“I will. We have to obtain a licence. My manager, Mr. Nash, is seeing to that.”

“I don’t think you will have any difficulty. I might be able to help you with that.”

I strolled with him to his car, and he stood a moment looking about him. He, too, was a very

tired man, with a bleached skin and lustreless hair.

“Getting the garden going again, I see.”

“Yes, bit by bit. Tennis and croquet—perhaps. Our idea is to produce much of our own food.”

He opened the car door.

“I could sit for a week in a chair, and look at that wood.”

I smiled at him.

“Well, why not? We will have a deck chair ready for you next summer.”

I went back and had a word with Peter. I told him that he could put down “Mr. Surveyor” as one of our first visitors, and that we owed the gentleman conscience-consideration. I also mentioned the point that we might be helped with our licences, and Peter grinned.

“I’m seeing to all that. We want to be licenced for liquor. And I am trying for a victualler’s licence.”

I am afraid I was very ignorant on these matters, but Peter had had experience. The only thing he asked me was whether I knew any members of the Bench. I did, and he suggested that I should sound them on the subject.

“No more wangling, my lad. I have done enough wangling.”

He grinned.

“So has Sybil.”

Messrs. Thomas Brown & Co. had functioned magnificently. Tom had had two more bottles of whisky for Christmas, and I had offered him a private bonus if he could get the work finished by the spring. He had promised to do it and he was doing it; he had even contrived to rope in another elderly painter from somewhere. The stables and cottages were still looking shabby, and I knew that I could not get permission to deal with them, but it was Peter who suggested that he and Sybil might make some sort of amateur show there, and I wrote and asked Mr. Surveyor if there would be any objection to our doing this work ourselves. He wrote and told me that it would be in order if we supplied our own materials and labour.

I had some rather crude blue paint in stock, and we mixed brown with it and created a quite lovely greenish-blue. Not only did Sybil and Peter set to work, but I joined them, and so did old Potter, and Tom for three days. We produced a quite creditable daubing of the cottage and coach-house doors, though our windows were a little smudgy, but at the end of a fortnight the stable quarters were looking fresh and gay. Peter wanted to get up to the cupola clock and wind-vane, and paint the clock face and re-gild the arrow, but we vetoed it on account of his leg. Old Potter volunteered for the job, and we got a ladder up, and Potter did some impressionist work on the clock and vane, and from below they looked quite jocund.

I could not find anyone who would come and repair the clock.

Our day of days was marked for March.

And what a month was March, windless and sunny, iced wine at eight a.m., hot enough to sun-bathe in at noon. Wonderful weather, and I am old enough to mistrust freak weather in this island, for you can expect other and unpleasant freakishnesses to average things out. But sufficient unto the day was the joy thereof, for we were all joyful and excited. The vans were coming from Melford, and the House was to be dressed and garnished.

On that morning the three of us climbed to Beechhanger, as to some high and sacred grove where the God of the Valley could be invoked, and we stood and looked at the House. It was in

the full sunlight, almost its old self, its sturdy white legs defying all misfortune. The lawns were faintly green, the drive and paths as of old, the wind-vane glittering, the pool tranquil agate. I could contemplate the newly painted orangery and glass-houses, and the brilliant blue-green of some of the stable doors and windows. I had my glasses with me and I turned them on the place, and I could see the gleaming buds on the rhododendrons, and the moorhens paddling, and the first daffodils out in wild places.

Peter had his arm round Sybil, and their serious young faces seemed to reflect all this loveliness.

“Halcyon weather,” said I. “May our luck be like it.”

“It won’t be luck,” said Peter gently.

“No, my lad, hard work and imagination, pride—the pride that can take infinite trouble. Luck is the fool’s gambit.”

I heard Sybil say: “You can’t do anything good without a conscience,” and Peter laughed.

“Listen to God’s own angel. What about——”

“Shut up, darling,” said she, “if I hadn’t been married to you——”

“So—man is always responsible!”

Then we saw the first van nosing its way past a bosky mass of old yews, and all three of us did a bunk down the valley meadow. Peter’s leg was ceasing to be his master, and I could do quite good going down hill, but Sybil led the race on those neat black legs of hers, and she looked cheekily round at us.

“What about it? Women can be good.”

“Damned good,” said I, “at——”

“Now, now, Uncle! Keep off it.”

We reached the house just as the men were lowering the tail-board. I had a look inside, and saw that the first van contained bedroom furniture. Good staff work this. That which had to be carried upstairs should arrive first. Since I knew the house and its gear I played the part of supervisor, but we all gave a hand, including Potter and Tom.

What a day we had! We were to have three days of it. We sweated and laughed and joked, and I felt the old house laughing with us. We had a picnic lunch, plus beer, in the library. Some puckish incidents stick in my mind, such as a solemn old fellow with a beard carrying something under his apron, and meeting Sybil on the stairs.

“What’s that?”

“Er—a convenience, Miss.”

He was concealing a jerry!

Potter and old Tom got stuck with a chest of drawers and had to be rescued.

Peter tried erecting beds, and was beaten by a spring mattress.

I conducted myself rather like a French clown, buzzing about and giving directions, and showing great activity while doing damn-all.

But our pride and pleasure were to be in garnishing the lower rooms. The great Chinese carpet was spread in the drawing-room, with dust-sheets laid to save foot-marks, and when all its old familiar furniture, including Sibilla’s piano, were in place, I sat down on the Jacobean settee with its French tapestry and felt suddenly sad. I wanted Sibilla here. And yet—how would she have felt about it? The young things left me alone here. Maybe they understood that I wanted to be alone with my memories.

For nearly five years I had been out of the house, and here I was back again, and seeing it as of old. Should I grudge its peace and beauty to other people? And when I had answered that

question I knew how greatly I had changed, and the house with me. I had been young, and I had been old, and I was young again—with a difference. It was not virtue, but a kind of tissue-change, and somehow I had shed a self-centred shell, and become almost what the psychologists used to call an extravert.

The young things and Ellen had a surprise for me. I found Sybil laying one of the new dining-room tables, complete with wine glasses and old silver and my painted porcelain handled French cutlery.

“Hullo, what’s this?”

“A celebration, Uncle. And we are trying out the kitchen.”

I was touched.

“Does Ellen know?”

“She’s in the kitchen, cooking the week’s joint all at one go. And she has found a Christmas pudding.”

I looked at the wine glasses.

“Something lacking.”

I got the cottage key from Ellen, and biked down and collected a bottle and a half of champagne. The black-out had gone, and instead of it we had a dim-out, but not so far as the dinner was concerned.

Peter gave us a toast.

“To you, Uncle, and High Beeches Hotel.”

We clinked glasses, and then I went and fetched Ellen, and made her drink champagne.

“I’m sure it will go to my head, sir.”

“Let it,” said I, “we’ll all see you home.”

I confess that we went home singing, after locking up the house. We were to move in next day. And just above Rose Cottage we met the local policeman, and it was dark.

“Hullo, what’s all this?”

“Good old England, Saunders,” said I.

He recognized my voice.

“Good old England it is, sir, I—hope.”

I had assigned to myself the library and the big bedroom which had been Sibilla’s, and into the library I moved my more intimate things, Sibilla’s portrait and pieces of furniture that were associated with her. The bedroom too was as much sitting-room as sleeping place, and being at the end of a short corridor it was apart and quiet. Experiences in other hotels had taught me much about bedrooms. Never be near the lift, never over the bar or the bridge-room. It is extraordinary how much gabble can rise from bridge-tables, and continue till past midnight. I had cursed people who played cards.

Peter had taken over the small study as a temporary office, and from somewhere he produced a roller-top desk and ledgers and files. He printed a notice for himself—“Office,” and for me a defensive—“Private.” Ellen was vastly busy in the kitchen; we had screened off a part of it as a temporary sitting-room; one of the large pantries was to be the staff dining-room and parlour, and it was to possess arm-chairs. Sybil was busy sorting out the linen and checking it. Peter had asked her to take a census of the blankets, sheets, pillow-cases, towels, dishcloths and glass-cloths. As he had told me, he had a supply of his own stored in London.

I was very busy with home food production, raising young chicks. I bought in ducklings, goslings, and rabbits, but I was shy of turkeys. Geese and ducks can do much foraging on their own. Potter and Tom were hard at it getting in early crops, beans, potatoes, peas, parsnips;

carrots, beet, onions and early lettuce and radishes in frames. The fruit had had a winter wash, and was waiting for lime sulphur and lead arsenate. Wild old gooseberry bushes had been pruned, and so had the apples and pears in the winter, and there had been much cutting back and tying in of straggling plums. Wicks had ploughed and harrowed for us, and sown our field crops, and rolled them in.

There was one point we had to decide, the problem of gates, and in the end we chose to leave the drive open for the time being.

Mr. Brown was painting us a sign in black and white:

“High Beeches Hotel.”

XVIII

THE modern problem of problems confronted us—Labour. Emily had come back to us, but we had no adequate staff, and we could not put up our board and begin to advertise until we had waitresses and maids.

I advertised and visited the Labour Exchange.

One or two condescending ladies called on us and said they were willing to oblige at three pounds or so a week for keep and limited hours.

Why—oblige? What we needed was enthusiasm and hard work. And when I had looked the ladies over and gauged their complacent and condescending sterility, I dismissed them, or turned them over to Sybil.

Sybil had a tart tongue. I believe she said: “Why oblige? Shouldn’t we be obliging you by over-paying you for diddling around for a few hours each day?”

To me she said: “This damned country needs shocking. Some of them have had bombs, but they want their dashed conceit exploding. I object to paying scarcity value for scrub-service.”

I always had a feeling that Sybil had something up her sleeve. She had. She announced to us one morning after V-Day, when we had lit up the whole house, that Jean and Marie would be with us in a month, Jean and Marie? Yes, Sybil’s devoted henchwomen who were escaping from the Wrens.

Then it was my turn.

I received a letter from an unexpected source with an equally unexpected request. It came from my friend the surveyor. He said that his wife had a widowed sister who had had a pretty rough passage during the war, and who had been acting as under-housekeeper in a London hotel. She loathed London and wanted work in a home in the country, and she did not mind what she did, provided that it was not mere brainless drudgery. She could cook, and had something of a passion for cooking. Her age was forty-seven; she had one daughter who was in the A.T.S., and a minute income of her own. Could I consider employing her? If so she would come and see me.

Now, I had begun to realize that our show was going to be a very new-world affair run by enthusiastic amateurs who would—in all probability—put the professionals to shame. We were a composite crowd, and I wanted people of some culture and character who had shed snobbery, and developed a sense of humour and of finding fun in the job, and who had some feeling of service, and would not hold us up to ransom.

Sybil was pretty wise as to the “Bits” who might have exploited us, and who would go hoity-toity if dirty silver was shown to them, and leave you in the lurch without the slightest compunction.

My idea was the team-spirit, and to render for good and kindly service a home that was human and friendly. We should all be friends together. Every worker should have a day off once a week, and do with it what he or she pleased. There should be no tipping, but ten per cent on the bill, and I proposed to found a staff-fund out of profits, if and when my team earned profits. We were not mere commercialists, even though the profit motive is legitimate and necessary. Our hotel should be much more than an hotel.

Peter was in complete agreement with me. He was much more than Monte Carlo.

So I wrote to Mrs. Hobson and asked her to come and see me. She was staying for a few days with her sister and brother-in-law.

A tall, pale and rather tragic looking woman arrived, who suggested both the Russian Ballet and a Whistler portrait. Her black hair was drawn back austere from her forehead. I should have said she had been starved both in body and spirit, and she sat before me with hands clasped, her eyes on my dead wife’s portrait. I had just come in from work, tieless and in blue overalls.

I apologized. I said: “We all work here. It is everybody’s show.”

Her eyes met mine.

“Then it should be a happy house.”

She rose, went to the window, and looked out, and when she turned again I thought her eyes were blurred.

She said: “It is very lovely here. I have had some experience of hotels. I don’t mind what I do.”

“Would you help in the kitchen, and perhaps in the bedrooms? We are going to be short of staff for a while.”

She nodded.

“And—in the garden—if I might? I used to have a garden.”

I spoke of terms and conditions and she listened with interest. Our ideas seemed to appeal to her, especially the notion of our waiting upon everybody and upon each other. She said that she would be glad to come to us.

Peter has been up to town to call on a friend who is also a wine merchant, and this friend has agreed to allocate to us a monthly ration, champagne, Burgundy, claret, sherry, whisky and gin. I was astonished. I did not know there was any wine left in the country.

“Oh yes,” said Peter, “they have been holding on to it. Why should they chuck their vintage stuff on the market when E.P.T. and income and surtax make trading a farce?”

“Yes,” said I, “I see the point, and perhaps waste old wine on vulgar fools who would not know the difference between Chambertin and Algerian vinegar.”

“Quite. One need not be patriotic by wasting a vintage wine on proletarian politics.”

I thought this rather good.

I was leaving all the technical details to Peter, such as rations and hotel supplies, and insurance. I was spending capital, but that did not worry me, for parsimony seemed without flavour. Now we faced the question of when we should open. As to staff we should have two in the kitchen, two waitresses, and one chambermaid, enough—we thought—to begin with, for we were agreed upon mutual assistance. Sybil was quite ready to help with the rooms, and

Peter saw himself as an assistant waiter in emergencies. Jean and Marie were coming in a few days, and Peter suggested that we should open on May Day. Well, why not? A propitious occasion. He proposed advertising in the *Times* and elsewhere, and I agreed. He produced a sample.

Beech Hill Hotel will open on May 1st. Lovely country, peaceful and informal atmosphere. Home produced food. Large garden and farm. Book now. Framley Green, Surrey. Taxis arranged. Garage accommodation available.

I thought Peter a bit of an optimist in advertising garage accommodation, but he winked at me, and I suppose he must have been given the tip about the return of basic petrol. And why all this secrecy? Why must officialdom treat us like a lot of nitwits or silly children, and not tell us the why and the when and the wherefore? One might almost suspect that Bumble was interested in the second-hand car market, and was unloading or even hanging on for a rise.

I had applied for a licence to purchase a new car, for an hotel car was necessary. It had been refused me. I applied again, and put in a strong letter, only to be fobbed off with the usual inhuman chit. I looked around for a reliable second-hand car, and could not find one at a price that was not monstrous. Once again I dared to write to Bumble, stating that I had a case and that I intended to make a case of it, and did not mean to be fobbed off by the office-boy or a junior clerk.

Would you believe it, they sent a representative to inspect both me, and the hotel! The gentleman was polite and I was caustic.

“I suppose you doubted my word?”

“Oh, well, sir, we have to be rather sceptical.”

I got my licence to buy.

But enough of controversy. I was pretty sure that the world was going to be a very unpleasant place, howls, sneers, strikes, demagoguery, scrambles for more pay, much bilge talked about service. I was one of the few who believed that at the next election the New World would chuck Churchill. Benign cynicism and the urge to get on with one's particular job while the politicians screamed clap-trap. I would try and make it a gentleman's job in spite of Comrade Slop in a surplice.

For, Nature is always with one, and Nature was being very kind at the moment. We had all of us been working like blazes, and suddenly our stage was set and garnished, and we sat down to look at it.

But let me speak of my first night in the House. It was a most strange feeling to climb the familiar stairs that had known candle and slipper days, and to walk into that intimate room and shut the door upon the world. This room, with all its belongings, was Sibilla, and as I lay in bed with the sweet stillness of the valley about me, I could feel Sibilla with me, a Sibilla who was sharing in the old house's spiritual and human adventure, for that was what it was. It seemed to me that Sibilla would have smiled upon us and the House, a Sibilla who was more Other World than we were.

Dear old sentimentalist!

But I slept the sleep of the contented. Life was being somehow good, with the House cleaned and garnished, a house that was full of new inspiration, and waiting calmly for what was to be. I slept until someone knocked at my door. I heard Sybil's voice.

“Early tea, Uncle.”

Well, well, well!

“Come in,” said I, “this gracious act is appreciated.”

So, Peter and Sybil and I went all over the place together. We saw the polished tables and rich curtains and flowery walls of the dining-room, and the gracious calm of the chambers where our guests would sit at ease. We inspected the bedrooms and the bathrooms where Peter—thorough as to detail—had fixed two hooks upon each door. We looked into Sybil’s linen cupboard, and her blanket store. We paid a formal visit to Ellen and her kitchen, and Ellen’s face was as bright as her pots and pans.

Then we went outside and wandered. Floweriness everywhere. The Mollis Azaleas were out and the early Rhodos, and Pyrus Floribunda, and the apple blossom, and narcissi in wild corners. Down below there old Potter and Tom were scything the new lawns before the mower would deal with them. The Pool was a shimmer, blinking at us, and up above the great beeches were coming into leaf. I thought that the Surrey valley had never looked more green and lovely.

From below came the exultant quacking of ducks, and Sybil copied them.

“Quack, quack, quack! Aren’t they feeling good?”

“The duck is an optimist,” said I.

Peter smiled at me.

“Call it an omen, Uncle. If this place does not please people—well——”

“Hats aren’t eaten these days,” said his wife.

XIX

WERE we excited? Yes, sir, we were.

Jean and Marie had joined us, and I liked the look of these women. Jean was sandy and smiling, Marie—slim, dark and intense, a lovely mover and graceful—as a waitress should be. I guessed that she was the more temperamental of the two, but would respond to courteous handling.

But before we opened our show we gathered the whole staff together in the dining-room, Ellen and Emily, Mrs. Hobson, Jean and Marie, Polly, Potter and Tom, and I spoke to them of the spirit of our enterprise. It was to be a rest-house for the tired. We should be giving succour and service, working as a team, wholeheartedly and happily. We wanted every member of the staff to feel a part of the show, and responsible for it. We were not mere commercialists. I appealed to them to accept the ten per cent, and to refuse tips, which might be bribes, and unfair to those who could not afford to bribe. I spoke of the staff fund I hoped to found, a share in the profits. And if any member of the staff had a grievance, let her or him come straight to me. Moreover, we should welcome any suggestion which might make for efficiency and the easing of labour.

I watched their faces. They were interested and friendly, and I felt that I had them with me.

Then I said: “Does anyone wish to say anything?”

There was silence for a moment, and then Polly sat forward in her chair.

“Jolly good show, sir. I don’t mind turning in and giving a hand at anything.”

“Thank you, Polly. That’s the spirit.”

I looked at Mrs. Hobson, whose face was somehow eloquent, but she remained silent.

“Does anybody else——?”

I had a smile from Marie.

“When we have our day off, sir?”

“Yes, Marie, all of us will do—helps. That’s the whole idea. I’m ready to put on a white jacket and play waiter.”

There was friendly laughter, and I added: “Whenever one of us has a day off, that means breakfast in bed, for those who like it.”

Yes, we were excited, and I think I was more excited than any of them. I had become a regular kid; I lay abed thinking, and I got up early in the morning and potted around for my own pleasure. I am afraid I was proposing to leave all the interminable bump to poor Peter: ration-cards, official fuss and what-not, for he was young and knew much more about it than I did. I found that he had some knowledge of accounting, and he elected to keep the books, and make out bills. He could use a typewriter, and so could Sybil, and I had an old machine which still functioned.

I had had notepaper and bills printed.

THE BEECH HILL HOTEL, FRAMLEY GREEN, SURREY.	<i>Telephone Number</i> So-and-so.
<i>Proprietor</i> SIR JOHN MORTIMER.	<i>Manager</i> MR. PETER NASH.

I had rather wanted to cut out the Sir, but Peter had grinned at me, and said it would supply dignity and inspire confidence.

We possessed a telephone. I think I forgot to mention that. We had a little box rigged up in the hall.

I fussed around the garden, eyeing our crops, especially the earlies, for we should need them. There had been a most dastardly May frost, but our fruit was above the valley bottom, and it did not suffer severely. Potter had put the motor mower over the lawns, and I had rummaged out a croquet set and hoops, and a box of bowls. Tennis balls appeared to be out of the question for the moment, and we had no stop-netting and standards.

My moods fluctuated between elation and mild gloom. I had seen our advertisements, but as yet they had brought us no inquiries. I watched for the postman, but for days he delivered nothing but papers and letters for the staff. I had arranged for daily papers.

I became a little irritable and worried.

Damn it, was our show going to prove a frost?

Peter disappeared for one whole day, and came back looking mighty pleased with himself. He confessed that he had been touring some old haunts and making contact with friends and acquaintances who might prove helpful.

“Such as——?” I asked him.

He mentioned the names of two famous hotels, and a restaurant, and said that the managers had been kind to him, but he had also visited several of the quieter hotels whose clients might find Beech Hill more sympathetic to their pockets and their tastes. I understood that they had consented to the display of our card, which was magnanimous of them, but then Peter and his lame leg were particularly persuasive.

Our first letter.

It was addressed to the Manager, and Peter brought it to me in the vegetable garden where I

was helping to earth up early potatoes.

“Read it,” said I.

The letter came from London, and asked for information, terms, etc., and whether we had two single rooms vacant. It was a feminine letter. The writer explained that her husband had been ill, and needed rest and country air. It was signed “Mary Manners.”

I liked the name.

“Well, the answer is in the affirmative.”

We had three letters next day, inquiries for two double rooms, and one single. I began to feel tails up.

Then Mrs. Manners wrote and said they would come to us on the Friday, and could they be met at Melford station? I had not got my new car yet, but the local expert had tinkered up the old one.

“Yes, I’ll do it, Peter.”

“You, sir?”

“Why the devil not? I’ll play chauffeur.”

I did, and feeling pucky I did the thing thoroughly. I put on a cap and coat which had belonged to my chauffeur; they had been stored. Peter saw me drive off, and I shall never forget his grin.

“All tips pooled, sir.”

“You’re telling me!”

I met Mr. and Mrs. Manners. I saw him as a very frail man with a skin like vellum and queer dark eyes, leaning on the arm of a tall, grey-haired woman. A porter followed with some luggage. I touched the peak of my cap in the proper professional way.

“For Beech Hill, madam?”

She gave me an appraising look, but her grey eyes were kind.

“Yes.”

She had a pleasant and slightly husky voice. I held the door open, while she helped her husband in. He was very feeble. The porter stowed the luggage away in the dickey. I had brought a rug and a cushion, and I offered Mr. Manners the cushion. His white fragility touched me.

We drove off, and I remained silent, as though knowing my place. Then I heard her voice.

“Tell me, driver, who was it who thought of the cushion?”

“As a matter of fact, I—did, madam.”

“Thank you.”

There was more silence, until we were passing the delightful group of old white cottages in Melford.

“Good to be seen once more, dear.”

“Yes,” said he. “England and peace.”

She spoke to me again.

“Is the hotel very full?”

“As a matter of fact, madam, you are our first visitors. We are only just open. We are expecting more people soon.”

“It is an old country house?”

“Yes.”

“Quiet and a good garden?”

“Yes. I have always thought it one of the loveliest places in Surrey.”

I could see her questioning face in the mirror. I wondered if I had given myself away.

“May I ask if you are—masquerading?”

“Masquerading, madam?”

“Yes.”

I laughed.

“Well, we are all doing jobs. Luckily my old car can still do a job.”

“How—er—human, Sir John. You make an admirable chauffeur.”

“Thank you, madam,” said I, “how quick of you!”

“You are a great relief to me. I judge by the cushion.”

They were silent when we reached the valley, and saw the high woods, and the pool and the comely house, but I had a feeling that Mrs. Manners drew a deep breath. She laid a hand over her husband’s.

“Isn’t it lovely!”

What a gentlewoman was this!

I said: “Nearly all the valley is ours. You can wander or sit as you please.”

“It is like a soft green cushion.”

I helped Mr. Manners upstairs. Sybil handled the luggage.

She was as strong as a pony. I showed them their rooms.

“If there is anything you want——”

She was looking round the room.

“It’s a house, not an inn. Do you like it, Arthur?”

He said: “I feel I shall sleep here.”

They had tea in the lounge. I had put out deck chairs, and later I saw them sunning themselves on the lawn, for the day was kind. I had a basket, and was off to gather young spinach which had been cloched. I took a look at their two faces, and I had the feeling that they were all smoothed out. In fact, when I came back with my basket I met them wandering up by the azaleas to the high seat under an old lilac. Mrs. Manners looked as though she had shed much weariness and care, and the brave melancholy of a good comrade who had grown secretly afraid of life.

I stopped to speak to them. Yes, the azaleas were lovely. They were poignant both in perfume and colour. Manners was looking at my great basket of spinach; he struck me as a man who was starved both in the spirit and the flesh.

“Yes, this is for dinner. And new potatoes.”

“New potatoes!”

“Yes, a specialty of ours.”

For I had stuffed the orangery and the glass-houses with early potatoes in big pots and boxes.

“How wonderful,” said she. “This wretched war has starved us in all sorts of ways.”

I took the spinach in to Ellen and Mrs. Hobson, and then met Peter with a handful of ration books.

“How did you get on, Uncle?”

“I got found out.”

“Serve you right. They seem nice people.”

“The very people we want.”

I saw it all clearly at the moment. The Manners were a kind of happy omen for us, even in their surname, the very people whom the House would welcome, graciously and with a promise

of peace. And I had a sudden inspiration. I turned back into the kitchen.

“Oh, Ellen, give our guests boiled eggs for breakfast.”

For, I will confess that we had been guilty of a little wangle as to eggs. It had seemed to me absurd that we should not be allowed to feed our eggs to our guests, but had to sell them for strangers. I did only what scores of other people were doing. I had presented twenty birds to Potter, and twenty to Peter and Sybil, to be kept in separate pens, on the understanding that two-thirds of the eggs came into the house. The rest of our produce went to the world at large.

I remember seeing Mr. Manners' breakfast tray going up next morning. We were giving them breakfast in bed. I winked at Marie and followed her up to the bedroom door. I waited, and I heard a voice.

“What, a boiled egg!”

“Our special, sir.”

To such simplicities and poor austerities had the folly of mechanical man reduced us!

For it exasperates me when I read letters from pedants in the Press, claiming the high caloric value of our diet and declaring that the country is adequately fed. They prate of averages and average persons, and allow nothing for aesthetics and individual taste. They are as dull as the diet they advertise. I always visualize these learned gentlemen as what I would describe as Laboratory Dyspeptics, people who could exist on fish and pills and tabloids. They have tabloid minds.

I would like to condemn them to hours of queuing, searching for the fish which they claim is so prevalent. I would like to stuff them for a fortnight on nothing but the dreadful war buns and cake which suggest to me yellow, saccharined sawdust.

Our diet adequate! Damn the prosy pedants and their equally prosy palates!

XX

JOY in a boiled egg, and in a dish of early potatoes!

What shocks for those uncomfortable people with hydrocephalic heads!

I could feel the House laughing, not riotously, but with gentle humour. So many good things were with us, the passing of the black-out, and the deaths of Doodle and of Rocket, and of Germany herself. The House could open its eyes at night and look at the moon and the stars. And the world was flowery and the woods green, and plums and apples were setting, and even our old cherry—May Duke—promised a bumper crop, but that would go to the blackbirds. These handsome thieves sang to us at daybreak, orange bills tremulous, and so did the thrushes. Yes, we had set our stage and drawn up the curtain when the earth was young again and pulsing with sap, and jocund with colour and perfume. How different might it have been had we opened our doors in suicidal November when the grey gloom of fog brings melancholy to man. That which may not seem worth while in November, rises to dance and sing in May.

I remember hearing sudden music in the house. Someone was playing Chopin on the drawing-room piano. I looked in and found Mary Manners on the stool, and her husband lying on the sofa, eyes closed, pale face serene.

She paused for a moment.

“Do you mind?”

“Mind! Music in a house that has been sad.”

“But not sad now.”

“No, so give it music.”

We are alive, yes—very much alive.

Six guests, including Mr. Surveyor and his wife, came to us during the following week, mostly elderly people, and as yet—thank God—we have not received a bore. The hotel bore can be the most pernicious of creatures, stuffed with a garrulous egoism which empties rooms. Poor Mrs. Surveyor is a very tired woman, and when I looked at her bent back I knew why. Washing-up, and making fires, and cleaning house, and no help. We put her to bed for three days, and Mrs. Hobson took up all her meals.

I happened to meet Mrs. Hobson coming down with a tray; her eyes were wet. I hesitated. Should I—?

“I hope nothing is wrong?”

“Oh—no,” said she, “poor Bertha has been having a weep—because it’s so good here, and everybody is so kind.”

I did understand. Women who have been tied up for months and tired out, may enjoy the happy relaxation of tears.

“Well, we seem to be doing—not too badly. Are you—er—satisfied?”

She gave me a wet smile.

“I haven’t felt so good for years.”

But, believe me, our business was not being all jam, and the problems cascaded on poor Peter. He was having difficulty with fuel, food, and what not, but he was a persuasive and a persistent creature, and his quiet young dignity seemed to produce results. You could not be curt and rude and a curmudgeon to a lad with one leg. He borrowed my old car and me as driver, and we toured around and made personal contacts. The various controls became sympathetic, and gave us what they could.

I remember the day when Sybil rushed out to me.

“Oh, Uncle, the butcher’s failed us.”

“Dear, dear!”

“It isn’t dear-dear, it’s damn! Nothing for dinner.”

“Nothing at all?”

“But macaroni. Can’t you kill something?”

“The butcher! But it would be rather tough! Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

I will confess that I purloined two dozen eggs from those that had to be marketed and took them in to Ellen, and suggested poached egg on macaroni, and I thought Ellen would kiss me. She took her job with a kind of glowing seriousness. As a matter of fact poached egg *à la macaroni* proved extremely popular, and no apologies were needed.

Two problems paraded for solution, and Peter, Sybil and I held a conference.

We had a wireless set, but we had not put it into action. Did our guests want the news, or were they sick of war news, so sick of it that they would prefer a sylvan silence?

We decided to take a Gallup poll, and I put the question to our guests during dinner.

Without exception they said that they would rather be without the damned thing, so the B.B.C. was relegated to the kitchen.

The second problem was far more complex. Should we take children? That very morning we had received an application from parents with two children. We talked it over this way and that,

upside down and round-about. My feeling was that the kind of tired people we were getting would prefer to be left in peace. Children can be such restless, noisy little beggars, and the modern cult of not saying no is not conducive to discipline. Sybil was rather for taking children, but Peter agreed with me.

He said: "If and when we have another wing built we could make it a family affair. I think the house as it is is too—intimate—for kids. Besides—there are kids and kids."

So Sybil was out-voted, and we decided—regretfully—not to accept children. I dare say many people will cry "Shame," but we were serving the old and the weary rather than the obstreperous young. This war has been unkind and unfair to the old. Youth has its youth, and its milk and its vitamins and its oranges. To the old life has become very much a sucked orange.

Peter's optimism was proving itself valid. This first post-war summer, miserable as it was as to weather and bothersome in its political prospects, was like an open garden gate to many tired old children. Hotel gossip came to Peter and he could tell me that there was frustration everywhere so far as holiday accommodation was concerned. Any dirty, casual, English third-rate place could fill itself. Well, we were full, and I knew that Peter was coveting the empty top floor. With only half our bedrooms in action we were losing money, but we were creating a clientele; with the top floor occupied he said that we should be making a profit, in spite of moderate charges, good wages, and the scarcity value of everything.

Now, many of the people who were coming to us were folk whose homes had been bombed, and who still were homeless, people who had voyaged from hotel to hotel and were sick of it, poor dears. Many of them came to us because our new clientele had recommended the place. Some of them, to begin with, were a little peevish and exacting, but I must confess that the House had a wonderful way of smoothing them out. You could watch the gradual transfiguration, and chuckle benignly over it, as I am sure the House did. It talked to them like some comely, gracious mother.

"Now, now, my dears, go and play croquet or bowls, or potter about or sit in the sun, if there is any. Go and look at the pigs and the poultry, and the fruit."

This simple life suited our people. It got them back to a sweet sense of reality. Its rhythm was as old as time. I used to find some of them looking at our fruit, for the May frost had not harmed us greatly. The old orchard up above had set pears, apples and plums. Williams and Commice, Blenheim and Bramleys, Victorias, Purple Pershore, and Giant Prune. We had a good crop of bush fruit, and we gave our folk fruit at nearly every meal, and they lapped up the juice like children.

Our staff was working very well. We all gave a hand, here, there and everywhere. There was no snobbery about it, no grudging—"That isn't my job." The only one I had doubts about was Marie, not because she wasn't a good creature, but because of her temperament, and the very way she moved. Graceful, vibrant restlessness, but I was to be wrong about Marie. She stuck at it.

I must mention June 1st and "Basic." A few people actually came to us in cars, but that was not the problem.

Passing motorists, especially at weekends, pulled in and asked for lunch or tea, so much so that we had to put up a notice:

We are sorry. Owing to the food shortage we cannot serve non-Residents. We regret having to make this decision, but you will agree that our Residents come first.

Mrs. Hobson's sister, "Mrs. Surveyor," was still with us, for the rest was doing her much good. Her husband came over to see her at weekends. I think he was grateful to us, and that he appreciated the job we were doing.

He asked me how we were progressing, and I told him about our top floor. Peter was thinking in terms of old-fashioned jugs and basins, but it would mean carrying up hot water, and the main problem was the lavatory, and the bath. There was only one bath.

"May I have a look?"

I took him up, and he inspected every room.

"Could you get the work done, sir?"

"I think so."

"I might pass it. I'd put it up to my council."

"That's very helpful of you."

He smiled at me.

"Well—if you don't mind my saying so, you are giving good social service, sir. It is not merely a luxury show. As I see it, one of the needs of the future will be places such as this."

"I am glad you see it in that way."

He was emphatic.

"I do. You are not commercialists. You are giving what many people are hungry for."

When I told Peter he nearly fell off his mock leg. We got hold of Mr. Brown and put it to him. Could he do the work if the costs were passed? He could. Whisky still seemed to be warm in him.

But there was the question of noise, punching holes through brickwork with cold chisels, and the taking up and re-laying of floorboards. The one thing we did not want was noise, and energetic operatives hammering hard and punctually at two o'clock, just when elderly souls were seeking an afternoon nap.

We put this up to Mr. Brown. If the work was sanctioned, could he do it in the mornings?

It surprised me to find that he saw our point. He was fond of his Sunday, post-dinner snooze, and I blessed the habit. Comprehension makes the whole world kin.

We were having to refuse applications, which was flattering, but bad business. Peter appealed to me. Why not let two or three of the upper bedrooms while the work was proceeding? Brown could hurry the second bathroom into action, and we could take the rooms in series.

I agreed, provided that our visitors were given to understand that there was no running water in these rooms as yet, and that alterations were in progress. He could say that no work was carried on in the afternoon.

I believed in frankness, and in telling people the truth. If they were wise as to a situation before they reserved accommodation they had no grievance. I had suffered much from the lack of candour in English hotels, and the activities of an insensitive and half-trained staff who clattered and gossiped in corridors. I had visited numbers of English hotels where work was in progress, and the noise insufferable, and always I had asked the question—"Why did you not warn me that you had workmen in?" and I had been met with blank and unhelpful faces.

Apparently it had been no business of mine.

I had considered it very much my business.

I had not come away to listen to hammering and tramping feet, and loud, brainless gossip.

I had always left such places.

So, one of the virtues we impressed upon our staff was the blessedness of silence. Nor

should they get into a huddle and chatter outside doors.

We were a somewhat civilized crowd, and our people understood me. It was everybody's show, and our ideal was to make it oiled and noiseless.

I am sorry to have to say it, but the most considerate and enlightened hotel I had known had been German. They had treated their calling as an art, and had been proud of it. The English have little art, and seem to take pride in being ashamed of their job.

Just—snobbery.

I decided to have cards printed which could be hung outside bedroom doors:

Please Do Not Disturb.

I first saw such a notice in Germany.

XXI

THERE was one curious and characteristic thing about the House, it took people in, not in the vulgar sense, and in accepting them persuaded them to accept each other. It surprised me how people settled down together, and chummed up, and were kind to each other. Almost our community might have been an old-fashioned country-house party. There was sufficient space for those who felt separative or who wanted to read, to get away in a quiet corner, and I put my library at the service of my guests. The garden appeared to be a great solace to many of them, and you would find deck chairs parked in solitary places; people were a little thoughtless about returning them to store. We were too busy to go about collecting lost deck chairs, and I put up a little notice:

Will guests please return deck chairs to the house.

Washing-up! What a business. And how boring until you became used to it. I think the washing bowl might be accepted as the symbol of the new world. Yet there is an art even in washing-up, oh—very much so, and conscience and pride. Unlimited hot water, plenty of Lux, an abundance of dry glass-cloths, and in my case a rubber scraper, for on three evenings a week I gave a hand. I had a feeling that the staff had been at it all day, and that I had no right to escape from what might be drudgery. We joked and chattered. I remember breaking a wine glass; the stem seemed to snap in my hand, and someone said: "It just broke in my hand." But there came to me a kind of satisfaction in this cleansing, and of seeing that which had been unclean become clean and polished. Often Peter was with me, for he was an expert washer, with quick and sensitive hands.

"You seem to like the job, sir."

They all called me "Sir," though I sometimes put on an apron.

"Yes, funny, but I do. Didn't at first. Call it transcending egg stains on a fork, or a smeary glass."

He gave me a sidelong grin.

"No wonder you have us all on toast. It's like the old tradition."

"Which one?"

"The Saxon thane going into the harvest fields with his men."

“And why not?”

“Yes, why not? Gentleman is as gentleman does.”

Peter came to me rattling the keys and cash in his trouser pockets. Even those pockets suggested extreme satisfaction.

“We are on the right side at last, Uncle.”

“Politically?”

“No, on the wrong side—with the jabberers. We are making a profit.”

“Splendid,” said I, “what scum we are!”

“And something more?”

“Are we socially septic as well?”

“Booked up to the end of October. And quite a number of people want to winter with us.”

“Good for you, Peter.”

“Good because of everybody. But a point arises.”

“Well?”

“I think we ought to limit visits to three weeks—in the spring and summer seasons. Only fair. Besides we don’t want to collect chronics.”

I agreed. Does not everybody know some of those “Chronics,” crusty nuisances, exacting, making personal property of the best chairs, boring the world with garrulous egoism.

“Quite right, my lad. We don’t want people who cough and creak.”

Hitherto we had been lucky. We had no old blowflies buzzing around, save on one occasion, a school marm lady who had persisted in giving lectures, and so driving people out of their chairs. We had dealt with her by telling her that her room was wanted, and had been reserved. Then, we had an old gentleman with a large nose and a persistent verbosity, who had cleared his throat loudly three times a minute, and smoked very foul pipes, and insisted on talking to people when it was obvious that they did not want to be talked to. He spread a dank frost wherever he chose to sit, and he would sit for hours and goggle. We got rid of him in the same way, and he was rude to us.

After all, one wishes to protect one’s show and one’s people from flatulent egoism, obfuscated asses—male or female, who bray a whole community into boredom.

We had managed to find another chambermaid, so our staff was complete, save that young Potter had not yet come back to us, though I kept applying for him. I suppose the Army and Whitehall will hold on to the men to the bitter end, in order to save their own jobs. Though Polly was as strong as a young pony and worked harder than most men, we needed a lusty fellow about the place, for Potter, Tom and I were not in our prime. We had to grow more vegetables for the House, and our miniature farm was in full production. Moreover, we had a bumper crop of fruit, which was fortunate, for one fruit-farming friend of mine had not a plum or an apple worth selling. Frost and apple blossom weevil had played havoc with his orchards.

Some of our guests volunteered to pick fruit, and I think they enjoyed it, especially filling baskets with rosy and purple plums. Ellen and Mrs. Hobson were busy bottling all the plums we could spare, but they had mostly to bottle in water, for sugar was scarce. I may say that we were honest about sugar and butter. Each guest’s weekly ration was placed in a glass jar and labelled, and put upon their tables. It was up to them to make it do. Nor were we doing too badly for food; we had our geese, poultry and ducks, and an occasional rabbit, unlimited fresh vegetables and fruit. Both Ellen and Mrs. Hobson had ideas and hands, and worked well

together, and they served up tasteful and spicy stuff. Our food was never flat and flatulent, and it piqued people. Above all we were punctual.

Our scheme of one day off a week worked well. The girls could catch a Framley bus into Melford, and train to London, if they wished. They did not always wish, but lazed about the place. At any rate the day's choice and the freedom were theirs.

In Edwardian days I had been an expert croquet player, and something of a bowlster, and after tea I would join in croquet matches, or trundle bowls. We were agreed not to take these games too seriously, for life and the future were sufficiently grim, and we joked and chipped each other. I found my old skill with a mallet coming back, and I was somewhat the star turn. The good ladies selected me as a partner.

"I'm going to play with Sir John."

I had routed out an old white flannel suit which the moths had not eaten to pieces, and in the afternoon I shed my working breeches and my blue overalls, and enjoyed myself. I was reminded of some of the old and more gracious days, and the House looked at us benignly.

Our top-floor was now in action, and we were full to the roof. Peter produced his account book and smiled over it.

"Like to see the week's profit, Uncle?"

"Not 'alf," said I.

I began to contemplate opening our staff-fund.

One morning I found Peter at his desk with what appeared to be a plan before him. He was busy with pencil and ruler.

"What's on?" I asked him.

He laughed up at me.

"Extensions."

I sat down beside him.

"When and where, my lad? Will hotels be permitted to grow fat?"

For the Socialists were crowing, and the country had ratted on the man who had saved it, just as I had expected it would do, but it seemed to me that in five years time the Socialist cock, while still crowing, might be a very ragged and moth-eaten bird. But Peter's plan was Peter's plan, and I saw that he had sketched out an extension at the back of the house of the same character and white simplicity. It fitted on very well, and would occupy a piece of ground that would not matter. He explained it to me; the ground floor would house a new dining-room capable of seating some fifty people, and on the upper floor there would be twelve more bedrooms, two bathrooms and two lavatories. The old dining-room could be used in emergencies, that is to say if we admitted non-residents or gave weekend dances.

"I like it," said I, "but isn't it very much in the future?"

"Well, they can't say no for ever, though it does so delight the little people to say no."

"Quite so. About their only way of feeling big. But if—as at present—no one is allowed to build a private house costing more than twelve hundred or so? Mind you, I think that is fair, considering the house shortage."

Peter grinned at me.

"True blue Tory and gentleman, Uncle. But, maybe, there will be such a goddam mess, that the whole show will blow up and settle back to dust and reality."

"I thought that the Socialists were the realists."

“Far too real to be real. Casual man may get fighting drunk, and bash in the faces of the pundits and the planners.”

We were to be presented with an extraordinary situation.

Peter brought a letter to me one morning, and when I had read the signature I nearly dropped my breeches. As a matter of fact they were minus two buttons, and I was about to appeal to Sybil.

“Caradoc Griffiths! It can’t be—the——”

“Why not, Uncle? He asks for a private bathroom.”

“That can’t be—the great man.”

“How simple of you, sir. The ‘Great’ deserve and demand private bathrooms.”

So, that Celtic Paragon and Protector of the Poor came to us, plus wife and car. He was a large, swarthy, unbuttoned sort of man with a woof of black hair and an incipient tummy, the kind of man whose tie flops out. His face was a genial crumple of good humour; he had a large laugh like himself, and a voice that boomed, for—at the moment—all the world was his platform. His wife was a bright little blonde, and very much the lady.

The Caradoc Griffiths’ had our best bedroom, and the key of a bathroom. It so happened that I was playing butler-waiter that evening, for Marie was out, and Jean had a headache. Mr. Griffiths plus wife walked into the room as though making a state entry, and he walked in in front of his wife. We had reserved them a table by a window, and I bowed them into it. I was wearing a white linen jacket.

They sat down, and Mr. Caradoc Griffiths gave me a broad and half quizzical smile.

“Have you such a thing as a wine list?”

“We have, sir. I am afraid wine is rather——”

“Oh, quite so,” said he, “old wine in an old house, Sir John. Very gallant of you.”

So, he had spotted me, and was amused, and for a moment I wondered whether his grin was an “Up with—us, and Down with the Rich”—gloating. As a matter of fact it wasn’t, as I realized later. I found him the wine list, a very simple brochure, and he studied it.

Now, we had a little Chambertin left, and some Nuits St. George, which—I confess—I had put in the list to create atmosphere. We had not sold a bottle in six months, for the price was beyond the purses of our people. Sybil and I were carrying round plates of soup, and when I placed the plates on the Caradoc table he addressed me.

“I see you’ve got Chambertin.”

“Yes, a little.”

“I’ll have a bottle.”

“Very good, sir. Would you like it warmed?”

“Just take the chill off.”

So, this Pea Green Incorruptible had chosen Chambertin at three pounds a bottle! The House chuckled.

I will admit that I had been prejudiced against Mr. Caradoc Griffiths both as a politician and a person who had posed in public, but his choice of Chambertin gave me a shock, as did the obvious appreciation he displayed in his savouring and sipping of this lovely wine. If the fellow could appreciate prime Burgundy he could claim some comradeship with the Côte-d’or. In fact, I got to like the man, in spite of his politics. He was a large and human creature, with a jocund sense of humour and he was helpful. He actually turned to once or twice to give a hand with the washing-up, and was nimble with his big fingers, and he laughed and let off quips. What is more he came down and volunteered to help with the potato crop, and he was lusty

and capable.

“A fork instead of a pick, Sir John.”

“You used to be——”

“Yes, a miner. Sweat and coal-dust and reality.”

Yes, I got to like the man, and we became quite pally, and I had Peter in the background, licking his lips, and fidgeting.

“You know—what—he is, Uncle?”

Of course I knew. With one gesture, if he cared to make it, Mr. Caradoc Griffiths could give us the earth.

But I was feeling that the man had integrity, and that though he sometimes talked popular and passionate tosh, or what might seem tosh to us, he had a human light in his lantern. He really did believe in a braver new world. Moreover, he had colour, something big and almost Shakespearian about him, and more surprising still he could play the piano and play it well in a rather Wagnerian fashion. He borrowed books from my library, and they were books after my own heart.

I was picking apples one afternoon, Worcester Pearmains, and he joined me, and his reach was useful. Also, I saw that he had some knowledge of the job and a conscience, for he placed the apples gently in the bushel basket.

“May I ask you a question, sir?”

“Go ahead.”

“I suppose you call yourself a Tory?”

We grinned at each other.

“Well—a somewhat—developed Tory.”

“In fact, a bottle of Chambertin.”

I put two apples in the basket.

“From that I might infer——”

“Mutual appreciation. Yes. I suppose you thought me a ghastly fellow?”

“I don’t. Prejudice is a base quality. Chambertin makes for mellowness.”

He put a very red apple to his large and human nose, and looked at the valley.

“Men discover things about each other, Sir John. I rather believe that a man’s education should include a month in a coal mine, in a spinning mill, a foundry, on the land in the mucky season, behind a counter, and perhaps in a hospital.”

“I’m afraid my education has been badly neglected.”

“I don’t think so. This is a good human job you are doing. And—you—are doing it. After all—we Labour people are not blind to beauty.”

“Beauty in nature?”

“Yes, and in behaviour.”

I did not tell him of our needs, or of our plans for the future, for that would have been unseemly and an insult to his working conscience, but Sybil, who had become very matey with Mrs. Caradoc, prepared the ground for Peter. I was told all this afterwards. Sybil, having prepared the indirect approach, was followed by her husband, who, with an air of humility, asked for Mr. Griffiths’ advice. Would the enlargement of such a Rest House as ours be regarded with sympathy by the planning authority? Peter had his answer. Most certainly it would, provided that—I—Sir John Mortimer remained in control.

They told me all this afterwards, the young beggars, not with sly laughter, but seriously and appreciatively so.

“We knew you couldn’t and wouldn’t do it, sir, so—we sounded the great man.”

“Oh, you did, did you?”

“He really is—big—rather like a large and benignant St. Bernard dog. And no fool. What do you think he asked me?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Whether—you—had suggested. Well, of course—I could tell him—you hadn’t.”

“Thank you, my lad.”

“You’ll be amused by what he said.”

“Shall I?”

“He said: ‘Sir John, without realizing it, is one of the most enlightened democrats I have met. We want all men to be gentlemen.’”

I did not blush.

“Well, that is rather a new point of view. You are a damned young scoundrel, my lad.”

“Oh, no, Uncle, I had a good case.”

I wagged a finger at his wife.

“I jolly well know who started it. *Cherchez la femme.*”

Sybil came and kissed me.

“You are a lamb.”

XXII

L AUGHING HOUSE!

Yes, it was so. The house had learned to laugh, at life, at me and with me, and at itself.

I could hear it say: “I was a potterer’s house, I was a sad and dirty house, but now I am a working and a laughing house. Yes, sir, and I am going to grow. I am going to be celebrated in a pleasant sort of way. I am going to be full of fun, and voices and laughter.”

Fun and adaptations! Even our two remaining army huts were put to work. One became an additional garage, the other was taught to be a potato and vegetable store and a fruit-grading establishment, and a home for garden oddments. Somewhat to my surprise, and greatly to my relief, our staff continued to be a happy crowd at a time when all the world was in a snarling temper. Our Staff Fund was mounting up. We intended producing complete accounts for the benefit of our workers, with a share-out at Christmas.

And we were booked up for the winter.

I said to Peter: “Are you and Sybil satisfied. I mean—is this show going to give you sufficient scope?”

He grinned at me.

“Uncle, we are going to be big. We are going to be the most popular Rest House in Surrey, and a Country Club as well. No, don’t worry; I don’t want a noisy, pinch-my-backside drink centre. Fact is, I’m damned happy here.”

“Well, so am I, my lad. We seem to be slipping into the new world without shedding our pants.”

Yes, the House laughed, and in other ways. We got some funny people, a few, and I must catalogue one specimen. He and his name were incredible but true. Sir George Bounce! Would you believe it! And the name fitted him like a body-belt to support fat.

He bounced. He had a large voice, and swollen manners. He was civic in the worst sense. He looked rather like a wart-hog, and the staff loathed him. He appeared to have little consideration for those who served. The war and the peace had taught him nothing.

Almost he was musical comedy, and "Punch," while loving him, might have found him a little too obvious. He sported a dinner-jacket, when we had the moth in ours, and his long lean wife, who was hauteur personified, behaved as though she was crowned with a tiara. I have heard it said that exacting people obtain better service than those who are softer and more sensitive, and Sir George and his wife were exacting enough, but our staff was not accustomed to being hectored, and Sir George's bounce fell rather flat.

I disliked the fellow. He was rude to me, but that did not matter, but when I happened to hear him being rude to Peter, my dander rose.

"Look here, young man—I—expect——"

I cut in. I said to him with emphasis:

"Look here, old man, we don't cater for cads."

And the curious thing was he went flat as a football whose bladder had burst. I saw Peter's grin, and—I heard the House chuckle.

Sir George and her Ladyship left us next day, and I am sure the House dismissed them with laughter.

It was on one of those November mornings when there has been a night frost, and the air is like iced wine, that I strolled up alone to the high wood. The grass was dew-drenched and still silvered with frost where the sun had not reached it. I sat down on a grey root, with my back to the great beech bole, and looked at the valley and the wooded hills. The oaks were still tawny, and a few beeches thinly brilliant, but most of the trees had gone into winter lace, and glistened in the sunlight. The grass looked as green as in spring. The pool was black and glassy, emphasizing the whiteness of the house, with its two sturdy pillars. Near by a big old pear tree still wore a few crimson leaves. Smoke went straight up from the chimneys. Windows blinked at me.

Or were they winking?

I was wearing my blue overalls, and an old leather jerkin. My hands rested on my knees, and happening to glance at them I realized that they were different hands, work worn along the inside of the thumbs and first fingers. I smiled at them. They were old hands, and yet young hands. My hair was white but thick. I felt smooth in my tummy, and clear of head.

Calmness should come with age, and a happy tranquility, but my calmness was not the coldness of death.

Yes, the House—was—winking at me.

Laughing House.

I sat there and reflected upon the years that had gone by, and upon the almost fantastic changes which had exploded upon us like an atomic bomb. They had blown me head over heels, and yet here I was, sitting on a tree root, and feeling good and not superfluous. Thanks to the young and my helpers I was doing a job and doing it not too badly.

What would Sibilla have thought?

My feeling was that she was somewhere near and smiling.

Then I heard Peter's voice behind me.

"Hullo, Uncle, having a look-see?"

"Hullo, what are you doing up here?"

He stood beside me.

“Not just coincidence. Saw you mooching up and felt like coming too.”

We were silent for some seconds.

Then he said: “Our show. Jolly good show. Isn’t the old house looking—jocund?”

“It is. Laughing house, my lad.”

“Feeling good, Uncle?”

“Very good,” said I.

XXIII

CHRISTMAS.

The house was warm, and full of lights and colour, glancing in its many mirrors, and with wood fires burning everywhere. We had decided on a good old-fashioned Christmas and all of us had been hard at it with holly and laurels and laurestinus. It was a wonderful berry year, blood on the chaplets of peace. Peter had managed to scrounge some boxes of crackers, and candles and coloured paper. Ellen had made puddings. I had arranged to kill three geese, poor dears, and Polly was so upset about it that we had to get Tom to do the job for her.

But I had a new idea for Christmas. The house was full, and of comfortable people; no human snags. I had some champagne left, and it seemed to me that now was the time to drink it in celebrating our first Christmas though I could not call it a season of peace. The whole world seemed to be squabbling like a huddle of old hags.

My idea was this; it should be a communal Christmas. Tables should be laid in the hall as well as in the dining-room, and staff and guests should dine in company and serve themselves and each other. We would sing carols, and have games in the billiard-room, the old games of my childhood: Blind Man’s Buff and Nuts in May, and Oranges and Lemons, and we would dance Sir Roger de Coverley. Peter could preside at the piano.

I put it to him and to Sybil, and they fell for the idea.

“Oh, great idea, Uncle.”

Sybil was more practical.

“What about the washing-up?”

“Oh, damn the washing-up,” said I, “let’s leave it to the morning, and tell everybody to be late out of bed.”

The House tumbled to the notion. I explained it to our guests, and they co-operated like Christians. Everybody would give a hand, volunteer to serve and wait. It might be a bit of a scramble, but great fun, and when we were all nicely laced with free champagne I rather thought there would be no grit in our gambols.

For I had been reflecting upon the cheerfulness and contentment of our staff. All women have bad days, when they must let off fireworks, but our fireworks were very small squibs, and I think our house was a happy house because each worker in and outside felt herself or himself to be a person. Modern man’s life is so damned impersonal, and this impersonality may be at the back of strikes, and envies and savageries. The common man, docket, miner, weaver knows in his heart that he will be no more than what he is, a twig in a bundle, and there is anger and bitterness in him. He may not be conscious that balked self-conceit is at the bottom of it all. And what does he do? Gathers himself and thousands of others like him into a bundle, a birch rod for the beating of the community. Only by making himself a bloody mass-nuisance to his

fellows can he become conscious of a feeling of individual importance and power.

But of our dinner.

Lights, and dancing fires, and colour, polish on the old furniture, firelight on the pictures. I thought the House had never looked more rich, and jocund and happy. We gathered in the drawing-room for mild cocktails, all save Ellen and Mrs. Hobson who would not leave the kitchen. Our two senior guests carried round the glasses, which was a nice gesture, and I took two little drinks to Ellen and her helper. Ellen had a rosy and perspiring face, and she refused her drink. Mrs. Hobson accepted hers.

It was a laughing, jolly show. Sybil led the volunteer waiters and waitresses. We did not segregate ourselves, but mixed staff and guests, and Marie, in a vivacious, glistening mood, was ready to give glad eyes to any man. Polly looked damned pretty in a light blue frock. I had put on a white jacket, and played wine-waiter.

I had kept the champagne a secret, except from Peter, and he helped me with the bottles. There was a merry popping and applause when I said that the sparkling stuff was a gift from the House. Everybody chattered, everybody laughed. We brought in a half-protesting Ellen and sat her down at the head of a table. I filled her glass and held up mine.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the most important person of the evening: Our—cook.”

We drank Ellen’s health, standing.

“Speech, Ellen,” said Peter.

She bounced off at that, and fled to attend to her geese.

I was kept busy, filling glasses, and popping bottles, until there was a protest from two or three of our ladies.

“It isn’t fair. Sir John is getting no dinner.”

“I’m quite happy,” said I.

But two charming creatures came and sat me down in my chair, and Peter took charge of the champagne.

I must say it was a great meal, though half of us were up and down, changing plates and serving. An eminent surgeon who was with us for a week, operated on the birds. The pudding was brought in in the old-fashioned way, alight and redolent of brandy. Jean and Marie insisted on playing pudding-maids. Then we pulled crackers, everybody with everybody. We put on caps and crowns, and swapped sentimental or provocative mottoes. Someone came and crowned me with gold paper; I think it was Sybil. Peter was on his feet, with his glass raised.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a toast. Here’s to the father of the show, our host—Sir John Christmas.”

They called on me for a speech, and I stood and chuckled at them.

“Thank you, all of you, very very much. But I loathe speeches, especially my own. Let’s go and play Oranges and Lemons.”

“Uncle,” said Peter, “you’re a lemon.”

I found myself the first victim in Nuts and May, and Polly was sent to pull me over. She did so.

“So much for mere man,” said I.

And would you believe it, Polly kissed me, to the accompaniment of loud applause.

And before the evening was over I believe nearly all the women had kissed me.

What a Christmas, but after Sir Roger de Coverley, which I danced with Sybil, I sneaked away into the library, and lit a pipe and sat down and looked at my wife’s picture.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected.
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.
Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *Laughing House* by Warwick (George) Deeping]