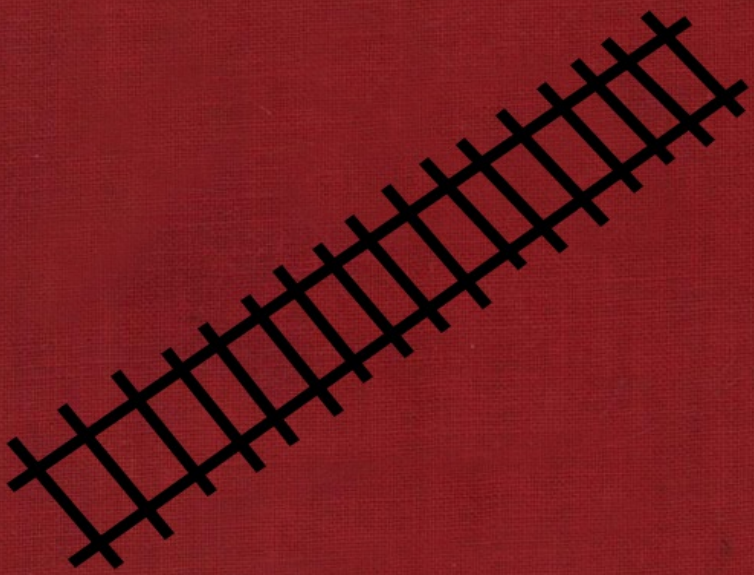
Two in a Train



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TWO IN A TRAIN
AND OTHER STORIES

by

WARWICK DEEPING

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TWO IN A TRAIN

MARSLAND picked up the Paris train at Montreux Station. He had reserved a corner seat, and he followed his fat porter who was all slung about with hand-luggage in an operation that always suggested to him an assault upon a walled city. There was much congestion in the corridor, but Marsland's porter ploughed through, only to be held up outside the door of the compartment that contained Marsland's seat.

"*Numero treize*."

Was it an omen? He had not noticed that the number of his seat was thirteen.

Meanwhile, the creator of the obstruction displayed himself as a very large man in brown tweeds and a cloth cap, French, with a face as hard and as flat as a board with two holes bored in it for eyes. The Frenchman was lugging through the window an interminable collection of suit-cases, bags, dressing cases and parcels which were being passed to him by a porter below. They blocked the entrance to the particular compartment, but that anybody should be kept waiting seemed to be a matter of indifference to the Frenchman.

Marsland stood and watched, while his porter fumed, but the man in tweeds was not to be dispossessed of the doorway. He blocked it until all his impedimenta were inside, and then with that delightful courtesy of a Frenchman when his own convenience had been served, he said "Pardon" to Marsland and let him in.

There were two women and a small boy in the compartment. Marsland's reserved seat was in the window corner facing the engine, and one of the women was sitting in it, a confection of a woman with a face like a peach that has hung in the sun all the season and remained miraculously sour. The porter explained the situation. This was the gentleman's seat. The woman glared at him, and moved into a corner on the corridor side.

Marsland’s porter was proceeding to load his luggage into the rack when the Frenchman tapped him on the shoulder. Marsland’s French was not facile, but the dumb show sufficed. The man in tweeds was insisting that Marsland’s luggage should occupy only that portion of the rack to which his seat entitled him. The French family owned all the rest of the first-class compartment and its rack accommodation, and they needed it.

Marsland sat down.

“Pleasant people,” he thought; “there may be something in thirteen.”

Now, Geoffrey Marsland was a man whose urge in life was to settle down, even in a railway carriage. He was forty-five, and looked thirty-five, one of those out-of-door creatures who remain profoundly simple and sentimental. He had sold out in Burma to come home and be English, with the help of someone else, but the comfortable adventure eluded him. He had endured three months of hotels and trains and restlessness. He had been winter-sporting with a crowd of elderly gentlemen and of hectic, hungry women to whom an occasional schoolmaster or Varsity lad were totally inadequate. They had tried to fasten on Marsland and had found him inarticulate, difficult and shy.

Marsland had a novel to read, but life was not going to allow him to read as he pleased. It was Oscar Wilde who said that a certain novelist wrote at the top of his voice; madame behaved at the top of hers. Never had Marsland heard a woman talk as she talked, like a machine-gun and a loud-speaker and a cantatrice all in action together. She had a peculiarly harsh-speaking voice. She was one of those women who are always in public and never private when the male is near, and as a matter of fact she was a very public person, but of that Marsland was ignorant at the moment.

He had the lady in the corner on his left, Monsieur Flatface confronting her, and the girl in the window corner opposite him. The child, a little blond boy of six, fidgeted about the carriage after the fashion of children, kicked people’s feet, and stared at Marsland. Marsland liked children, and he liked the face of the child.

But being English he had left a portion of his window down, and madame became impatient in a luxurious fur coat. She spoke sharply to the girl who obviously was the child’s governess.

“Close that window, m’amselle.”

The girl looked bothered. It had been her lot to have all sorts of unpleasant functions thrust upon her. She glanced anxiously, and deprecatingly at Marsland. She spoke in English.

“Would you mind having the window up?”

So, she was English. He smiled at her a little whimsically.

“It is my window.”

“Yes—I know, but madame has to be very careful of her throat.”

She looked frightened and apologetic, a dark, slight creature who took life rather seriously, and the appeal in her brown eyes was sufficient for Geoffrey Marsland.

“Certainly.”

He shut the window, and the girl thanked him, but neither madame nor her husband expressed approval. They exchanged satisfied glances as though the barbarian in the corner had been put in his place.

The child, who had been observing Marsland, planted himself on the girl’s knees. He, too, spoke English.

“When do we get to Paris?”

“About ten o’clock, dear.”

“And what is it now?”

“About two o’clock.”

“Six hours.”

“Is two from ten—six?”

The boy and Marsland twinkled at each other. Madame was talking hard to a partner who looked as though he was still digesting a large and hurried lunch. But the interplay at the other end of the carriage did not include madame, and as a celebrity she had to be included in everything. She took off her hat and displayed a wealth of brassy hair that made her face look even more like a confection. She had curious, floating, sensual blue eyes, a sharp nose, and two hard lines sloping to meet her mouth. She put up her feet on the seat, and arranged a cushion behind her.

“Come—my son—my son.”

The girl pushed the boy towards her. He was clutched, enveloped, and drawn to the lady’s breast. She kissed him voluminously and for effect, as though the osculatory act must always have some effect upon male observers. The barbarian in the corner was not glancing in her direction, and motherly tenderness was the pose of the moment.

She chattered to the child, but even when uttering endearments her voice was staged. She kissed the top of the child's head, and mauled him with hands whose nails were tinted red. To Marsland it was a disgusting exhibition. She held the child prone upon her body and pawed him as though he were a lover. And the boy, the strangely sensitive product of two such parents, was self-conscious and unhappy. His father had removed his cap and displayed a head the top of which had been cut off flat. Monsieur was reading the financial news in his Paris paper.

Madame kept looking at Marsland. Could not the barbarian realize that a most attractive and sexually disturbing woman was embracing her child. Were not such embraces intriguing? But Marsland was watching the governess, but with the carefulness of a man who was not a larded bull.

He was thinking—"She's the first girl with gentle eyes I've seen—since when?"

But it struck him that she looked rather white. She had closed her eyes. Possibly she had a headache.

Meanwhile, the boy had escaped into the corridor, and madame, finding both males irresponsive, commenced to sing. She began with a sort of crooning murmur, but the murmur grew into a monotonous, operatic declaiming. Never before had Marsland heard a woman singing in a first-class carriage. It wasn't done; it did not happen. Confound the woman! How long was this sort of thing going on? He would get hold of an official and try to change his compartment.

He happened to glance at the governess's face. The girl was very white. What was it—train-sickness?

The singing ceased abruptly. Madame was taking off her shoes. Well, really! Two plump feet in beige coloured stockings sat close to him.

"Mees Romney——"

The girl's eyes opened.

"Yes, madame?"

"Rub my legs and feet."

She got up meekly and began to massage madame's members. Madame sang something from Wagner. Avis Romney was feeling more and more sick. But one could not be sick in a train with any degree of comfort or decency, and her hold on her job was none too secure.

Marsland watched operations out of a corner of his eye. The girl's pale profile contrasted with the tinted glare of that insolently handsome countenance. Madame's feet stuck up close to the Englishman, like fleshy, succulent, heavily perfumed growths. Avis Romney's hands were patting and stroking the fine legs.

"Well I'm damned!" thought Marsland; "the woman's a——"

But he could only utter the word in secret, but it did occur to him that inadvertently one might drop hot cigarette ash on one of those feet.

He would change his compartment if that woman was going to sing and exhibit herself all the way to Paris!

But just as quickly instead of changing his compartment, he changed his mind. The governess was once more in her corner—looking ghastly. She glanced at the window.

Marsland understood. Without a by your leave he lowered the window six inches, stood up, spoke.

"Please try my seat. It is pleasanter facing the engine."

She gave him a look of gratitude.

"Oh—I couldn't——"

"Why not? I don't mind which way I sit."

They changed places. The singing had ceased. Madame was incensed. She put on her shoes. She shuddered. She drew the corridor door to with a slam. She began to speak volubly to her husband.

"I am to be frozen. It is abominable. People think of nothing but themselves. Egotists. We have paid for five seats. Shut the window, Albert."

Albert looked sullen. He glanced at Marsland, and then got up and shut the window.

Madame preened herself.

Marsland, after a strategic pause, relowered his window.

"Excuse me—my window."

Madame looked outraged. What manners! These English! She glared at her husband, but Albert had gone to earth behind his newspaper. After all, that fellow in the other corner was not the only egotist. Monsieur had been married to madame for eleven years, and she was a celebrity. Celebrities can be devastating people.

Madame glared at Marsland, flounced up, slammed back the door and joined her small son in the corridor.

The governess looked less white. She opened her eyes, and saw that there was peace. She smiled faintly at Marsland. He smiled back at her. Madame and the child had edged along the corridor and were invisible, but the lady was singing as though indulging in throat-massage.

Monsieur put down his paper. His queer, flat face with its depressed nose suggested that his father had begotten him in Cochin-China, but his bulk was French, and so were his small sensual brown eyes. He was looking at the governess. Marsland, pretending to read, saw a hand in a wash-leather glove persuasively patting the seat.

“Damn the fellow!” thought he.

He glanced at the girl. She was looking scared. The yellow hand still patted the seat.

“Come and give me a little lesson, m’amselle.”

Making love to the governess, what! Marsland felt like giving the lesson.

The girl came and sat on the seat between them, but nearer to monsieur than to Marsland. She sat erect and stiff. She was both afraid of monsieur, and afraid of offending him.

“Shall we try some pronunciation?”

He ogled her.

“Yes, such funny words—you have. I ought to improve my vocabulary. Now, what is that—in English.”

He laid a hand on her knee, and out of the corner of an eye Marsland saw her hand dart out and remove his paw as though brushing dirt from her dress.

The Frenchman’s little brown eyes were like the eyes of some nasty tempered animal.

“You do not understand my little joke?”

She was frightened, embarrassed.

“What little joke, monsieur?”

Again the yellow hand appeared, and Marsland thought—“If you put that paw of yours on the child’s knee again—I’ll——” but his intervention was delayed. Madame appeared suddenly, holding Pierre by the hand. She swung the door to, sat down, and began to say things to monsieur. The boy, perched

on the edge of the seat—looked perplexed and unhappy.

Monsieur waved yellow and expostulating hands. He growled—*Quelle femme!* The girl had slipped across into Marsland's seat, and sat squeezed in the corner, her eyes looking out of the window. Marsland pretended to be absorbed in his book.

Then, monsieur staged a diversion. Something must stop that voluble red mouth. He jumped up and hauled a tea-basket from the rack. He sat down again with it on his knees, and opened the lid.

He became jocular. He wagged a yellow finger at his son.

"*Allons.* Let us attack."

The basket contained white cardboard cartons full of paté sandwiches and patisserie. Monsieur, very politely, held out one of the boxes to madame. Her eyes grew greedy. She dipped a hand in the box, extracted a white ice cake, bit off part of it, and gave the rest to the boy.

"Mother has made it sweet—darling."

Marsland fumed inwardly. He wanted to say to her—"Yes, you've got a face like one of those damned cakes and a soul like a squashed jam-tart. What you want is a dog whip once a day. And isn't the girl to have anything?"

Obviously, she was not. The family consumed sandwiches and cakes in bulk, and with sugary satisfaction. No box was proffered to the girl in the corner. Certainly, the child did turn towards her with an éclair in his hand, but his mother tweaked his hair.

"Do not fidget, my son. Mees Romney does not wish to be disturbed."

For, in spite of that slip of open window, which madame appeared to have forgotten, Miss Romney was feeling sick. She had been packing for those people half the morning; her lunch had been a scrappy affair. In fact—she was empty, and her inner woman, denied reasonable occupation, became spiteful and squeamish. Why didn't it get its share of those cakes? Denied, it protested that the cakes were messy and emetic. But, if Miss Romney wasn't careful, it would show her something.

She rose suddenly with an air of desperate and pathetic haste.

Said madame—"You can pack up the basket."

But Miss Romney was packing no baskets. She did not even speak. She escaped into the corridor.

Madame looked shocked. "That girl's moods are beyond me."

Marsland hesitated for a moment. Then he stood up, took a dressing-case from the rack, opened it on the seat so that the family should not see its contents, and extracted a whisky flask and a packet of chocolate, and slipped them into a pocket.

“Excuse me.”

His politeness was ironical. He stepped over monsieur’s legs into the corridor, and saw the girl standing outside the next compartment but one. She was holding to the metal rail, and had the window open, and her hair was blowing about her ears. She looked so wan and alone that Marsland’s involvement in the affair became serious.

He went and stood beside her and his eyes were kind.

“Beastly thing—train-sickness. Drink a little of this.”

He brought out the flask, and she glanced at it and then at him.

“I—I hadn’t much lunch.”

“And no tea. I’ll pour you out a dose.”

She did not protest. She was as much in need of kindness as she was of food.

“It’s awfully good of you.”

He poured whisky into the metal cup of the flask.

“Drink it slowly. When it has warmed you up, try a little chocolate. I expect the idea is rather nauseating at the moment.”

She sipped the whisky, and her dark eyes avoided his.

He said—“You need not be afraid of me, child. I’m not like the fellow in there.”

She gave him a sudden quick glance.

“Oh, no. One feels that sort of thing.”

“Why don’t you take off your hat? I’ll hold it.”

Was it that he wanted to see her without a hat? She slipped off her black chapeau. Her hair was dark and wavy, and her forehead as gentle as her eyes. He took the hat.

“That’s it. Take the wind in your hair.”

Her colour was coming back.

“I don’t know why you should be so—kind.”

Marsland smiled. He was finding it more and more pleasant being kind.

“Made that way—I suppose. Nice people you are travelling with. I like the boy.”

She said—“He’s a dear.”

They could hear madame singing in the distance.

“Does she always do that in trains?”

For the first time the girl smiled.

“She’s a very famous person. Madame Bonheur—the operatic star.”

“Never heard of her,” said Marsland, “but that’s my ignorance, I suppose. After all—I know enough French to think there’s something significant in a name.”

“Bonheur?”

And then she coloured slightly, looked confused, and finished the whisky.

“I’m the—governess.”

“Yes—I presumed so. And I suppose you packed all that confounded luggage?”

“Yes.”

“Monsieur’s too?”

“Yes. And three trunks.”

“And in Paris you will unpack it all again?”

“Yes.”

He thought—“I’m damned if you shall.”

He produced the chocolate.

“Feel up to this?”

She nodded, and her eyes were different.

“Yes, just a little.”

“Splendid stuff plain chocolate. The first dinner is at half-past six.”

He took the empty cup from her and slipped the flask back into it.

“You are looking quite different.”

She gazed out of the window.

“I—feel—different.”

They were beginning to talk of more personal things when madame appeared in the corridor. Madame was angry; madame was always angry unless she was receiving applause in some form or other. Why was mademoiselle neglecting her duty? Pierre was feeling sick, and it was Miss Romney’s business to attend to Pierre.

Marsland, unseen by madame, had passed Avis her hat. She put it on and went back to the compartment. She saw that the window had been shut. Pierre was lying on the seat in Marsland’s corner, for madame had said that if there happened to be an accident the Englishman might just as well suffer the inconvenience.

Avis gathered up Pierre and sat down in her own corner with the child in her lap. Marsland had followed her, and she glanced from his face to the window. He nodded and drew it down.

Madame protested. Her precious throat and her comfort were the most important things in the carriage. Besides, the child would catch a dreadful cold.

But the child piped up—“I like the air, *maman*. It makes me feel good.”

Madame shrugged. Change seats with monsieur? No, she could not travel with her back to the engine. She would shiver; she would be a martyr. She covered herself with a rug, and went to sleep.

So did Pierre, and so did Miss Romney. Monsieur sulked in his corner behind a paper. Marsland, with the novel on his knees, sat and watched the girl’s face. He observed the long lashes, the gentle, poignant mouth, the delicate chin. The poor child was tired out. How delightful it had been looking after her. He would like to go on looking after her. She was sitting in seat No. 13, but perhaps No. 13 had a mysterious and happy meaning on this particular occasion.

Twilight came. The landscape was growing dim. The lights were turned on. A restaurant-car attendant appeared in the corridor with a little book of tickets. He opened the door. Places for dinner. Marsland asked for one. Monsieur asked for four, but madame was awake. Four? Most certainly not. Three. The girl could finish the sandwiches and cakes in the basket. Monsieur took three tickets. Avis and the child slept.

Presently a bell rang. Monsieur and madame got up with alacrity. Madame woke the child.

“Dinner—my son.”

She smiled icily at Avis.

“You may finish the cakes, Mees Romney.”

They went out.

Marsland looked at the girl. He was smiling, but he was angry. He said—“The pigs have gone to dine. Don’t they expect anybody else to require food?”

She looked whimsical.

“There is the tea basket.”

“I am going to empty their damned tea basket out of the window. Here, take this.”

He held out the ticket, and she blushed.

“Oh, but I couldn’t—really. You——”

“I can take my luck presently.”

She looked embarrassed.

“No—I’d rather not.”

He guessed that she had not enough money to pay for a dinner.

“I say—forgive me, is it a question of—cash?”

She nodded, and he took a sudden decision.

“Wait a moment. I’ll go along and see if there happens to be a spare place. Now—I forbid you to touch those cakes.”

She smiled up at him.

“But I haven’t any money.”

“Don’t you worry your head about that,” and he disappeared upon the adventure.

Marsland found that the restaurant car was not full, and he tipped the chief attendant and secured seats at one of the little tables for two in the second compartment. Monsieur, madame and Pierre were in the first, and deeply embedded in their soup. Marsland hurried back through three swaying coaches to find Miss Romney waiting in the corridor. He had a triumphant air.

“Quite all right. There is plenty of room.”

He was aware of something in her eyes. What was it? Humiliation? His compassion saluted her pride.

“Will you do me the honour of being my guest?”

She hesitated.

“I should like to—send you——”

He looked hurt.

“Oh, come. It’s such a little thing after all. We are going to get to know each other—at least, I hope so. My name’s Marsland—Geoffrey Marsland. I have come home to settle down in England—I mean, if I can find—— Let me give you dinner, my dear.”

She looked into his brown face, and smiled, and accepted both the “dear” and the dinner.

It was to be a miraculous meal. The French family were so absorbed in their food that they did not see Marsland and the girl pass their table. Marsland made her take the seat facing the engine.

“I say—I’m hungry.”

“So am I.”

“Feeling quite all right now? You look it.”

“Do I?”

His “Rather” made her blush. He was looking at the wine list and he ordered champagne.

“You’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

“What?”

“The champagne. It’s not a habit with me.”

She laughed.

“Ordering champagne—for—any casual—young person——”

With his elbows on the table he looked her straight in the eyes.

“If you think that—I’ll go back to the carriage.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Then, you admit that you are not a casual young person from—my point of view?”

Again she blushed.

“I’m a girl who has to earn her living. You see—I——”

“Do you like earning your living? But that’s rude of me. Most modern women are supposed to love it.”

She looked at the soup that had been placed in front of her.

“As a matter of fact—I loathe it.”

“I should say so—with people like that.”

They were half-way through dinner and becoming happy and easy with each other when Marsland met a pair of eyes. Madame had discovered them; she had recognized Miss Romney’s back, and she was announcing the discovery to her husband. Monsieur turned his flat head and stared. Madame looked outraged, and Marsland smiled at her distant indignation. Avis was unaware of the sensation they had caused, and he did not disillusion her. If there was going to be a row presently, he would be very much in it.

The scene was inevitable. Madame was waiting in the corridor, with Pierre and monsieur safely shut inside. She ignored Marsland and spoke insolently to the girl.

“A few words with you, mees.”

Marsland saw Avis turn and look at him, and he entered the compartment and shut the door. His participation came later.

Madame raged.

“Scandalous. Getting fresh with a strange man. A nice example for the child. You are dismissed. You need not come with us to the flat.”

Avis went white.

“I was hungry, madame, and——”

“Hungry! For sex—I suppose. You will leave us at the Gare de Lyon.”

“But, madame—I have hardly any money.”

“That’s not my affair, after this behaviour. Yes, go and see the English consul. I shall know what to say if he complains. Or perhaps this new monsieur will take you to an hotel—and pay.”

Miss Romney did not let that pass.

“I suppose that is your idea of—life, madame—but I am still young, and you—middle-aged——”

Madame's indignation was operatic. She—middle-aged? Insolence. But those words had penetrated her powdered, perfumed and massaged skin. She flounced into the carriage, flopped down in her seat, and burst into tears, and when a Frenchwoman weeps the dead may be expected to rise.

"I have been insulted—disgracefully insulted."

Monsieur looked alarmed. Pierre, staring at his mother, made one of those ruthless and innocent remarks that can come from the lips of a child.

"Don't cry, *maman*; it makes your face look funny and old."

Marsland went out into the corridor and closed the door. He said: "She's got it in the neck. I suppose——"

Miss Romney gripped the rail.

"Yes—I'm dismissed. I'm to leave them at the Gare de Lyon."

Marsland looked both concerned and fierce.

"Well—I'm——. And you——?"

She stared out of the window.

"Yes."

"And it's all my fault."

But she would not allow that.

"Oh, no—you've been——"

He put one of his hands close to hers on the rail.

"You had better come straight back to England."

"But—I haven't a ticket, and——"

His hand touched hers.

"Look here, my dear—it's up to me. I'm crossing by the night boat. Let me find you a ticket. No, please don't think—— This train has been—what you might call destiny—from my point of view."

She stood and looked out of the window at the night.

"I don't know. I——"

"Have you anyone you can go to in England?"

"Yes."

"Well—it's really quite simple, Avis. I mean—it might be—if you——

What I mean is—when you have seen a bit more of me—you might be willing to let me ask you something. Would you?”

She seemed to smile mysteriously into the darkness.

“Yes—dear—I might.”

THE RAINBOW

He was blind.

He could be seen almost any day of the year sitting in a wooden arm-chair in the middle of a lunette-shaped excavation beside the London-Brighton road. On his left stood a red petrol pump, on his right a wooden table, and upon it a very large book, and one of those hand-bells that associate themselves with Victorian dinners. Around him spread a squalor of cinders. Opposite him, on the other side of the tarred road, a beech wood stood embattled in its beauty. Behind him a cheap new bungalow painted white, with a roof like a raw wound, squatted at the top of a clay bank. A shed thrust into a recess in this same yellow ramp bore over its double doors the mystic word "Garage."

There were notice-boards:

"Pull In Here." "Teas." "Free Parking."

The whole poor, shoddy improvisation was known as The Rainbow Garage and Tea Rooms, though what the rainbow had to do with it God knows, for the place had a hopelessness.

He was one of Mr. Lloyd George's heroes, a brown and bearded man in a dastardly hat. He had the appearance of an apostle wearing—in chilly weather—an old army great-coat. Often he had that big book on his knees, the Bible in Braille, and some wag had called him The Blind Prophet.

The world on wheels flowed at his feet, and sometimes a lorry driver and his mate who knew the road would nudge each other and grin.

"Look at Holy Moses."

"Yus, 'is 'at looks a bit greener than last year."

But if John Tredgold's eyes were sightless, his hearing had become extraordinarily acute. He knew when a car was slackening to pull in for petrol

or oil, or for a shilling tea. His right hand would reach for the bell.

Clang—clang—clang.

“Mary—Bessie—garage.”

He had a voice with an edge to it. It was urgent, imperative, tyrannical. And if there happened to be delay he would go on ringing that bell until someone would appear at the top of the steps leading down from the bungalow.

“All right, father.”

It was as though he pulled a string and a little door opened, and obedient and flurried figures appeared. He was a man broken in the war, and his little world tried to humour him and to remember—that he was blind—and no tyrant.

It was not easy.

Up above on that tortured little plateau that was supposed to be a garden other activities displayed themselves, the rather unkempt products of two women who never managed to get Father Time by the forelock. There were weedy paths, and an attempt at floweriness, and six rickety tables and a dozen chairs, and a little drying-ground where the Rainbow’s linen saluted Sussex. Its stance was as precarious as its livelihood.

“O, damn that ruddy wind! It’s broken the clothes-line again.”

Mrs. Mary might have much sympathy for her daughter’s language, and clothes-lines—like most other things in the hero’s home—were cheap and rotten, but Mrs. Mary was afraid of her hero.

“Your father will hear you.”

“Let him. Do him good. Didn’t ruddy old Jehovah curse? Besides, we’ve got to wash those damned table-cloths again.”

Bessie was a darkly turbulent young thing aged nineteen, with an eye for a man and very modern ideas as to parenthood. She might be afraid of her father, and if she had remained under the edge of the Rainbow it was because of some queer primitive feeling for her mother.

“I don’t call this life. It’s cinders.”

Mrs. Mary said, “Don’t. Oh, do be quiet. Some things can’t be helped. I’ll do the table-cloths.”

“Oh, no, you won’t. You’re tired.”

Mrs. Mary was always tired, and her weariness was more of the soul than the body. She had been a pretty creature, cream and jet, with a face rather like a pansy, and a capacity for affection that was ready to fetch and carry. She was one of those women who, given one caress a day, will flutter about happily like a bird.

“I do hope it won’t be wet this week-end.”

Bessie knew that a wet week-end meant no teas, and butter and milk wasted, and the Rainbow’s profits a minus quantity.

“Must be fine—this next one.”

Also she knew that her father would sit out obstinately in the rain as though his soaking figure could persuade the world on wheels to pull in and pay. He was like some grim relic of the war, a chunk of battered English oak saved from the trenches, and the world had forgotten the war.

He sat there at the receipt of custom, for it was part of the Rainbow ritual that all takings were handed to him. When his womenfolk sold petrol they passed him the money, and his sense of touch was as delicate as his hearing.

As Bessie said to her particular young man, “If it wasn’t for mother I couldn’t stick it. He seems to think we’re just a pair of slaves.”

The lad did say that being blind might make a man funny.

“Funny! There’s nothing funny about father.”

There wasn’t. And that was John Tredgold’s tragedy. He could not laugh, and even if he listened to the wind laughing in the beech trees, he did not hear it as laughter. Almost he was Cromwellian, an old Ironside. Such voices as he heard in the darkness were the various voices of a grim and saturnine God.

He had not seen the face of his wife for ten years, and the face of his daughter had remained for him the face of a child, a child to be chastened and kept in order. He had never seen the Rainbow bungalow, with all its pathetic makeshifts and improvisations. Like Jehovah, he sat and brooded.

He had said, “Let there be a livelihood. Let there be tea-shop and a garage by the roadside,” and all this had happened. He had had no active share in it. The burden had rested on the shoulders of his wife.

The Blind Hero.

Possibly he believed that his sacrifice sufficed. He had given his eyes to the future. He was a kind of landmark to be respected, and ringed round with posts and chains like one of those derelict tanks posed on a piece of greensward and

presented to the nation.

He rang his bell.

“Bessie—Mary, garage.”

Possibly he was afraid of softness. He had known one patch of dreadful emotion when the truth had been told him about his eyes; he had floundered in it, wept in it, and then dragged himself out. Terror. There can be terror in such emotion, a hint of madness, and deliberately he had chosen to be hard. He would not pity himself, but in refusing to pity himself he had become blind to the frailties of others.

But in him were other gropings, fears, doubts, and he suppressed them, and the very repression made him more tyrannical. He forbade that which he feared, all jocund things, laughter and fooling, for these things menaced him. They might grimace at him and he could not see. He was playing a game of blind-man’s-buff with life, but it was a game without laughter.

For he had one dreadful and secret fear, the dread of being left utterly alone, and it made him as jealous as Jehovah. There were other men who could see, men who could filch from him the little that he had, for that was his illusion. He thought of the little instead of the much. He did not realize how much was given him. It might be so much less or so much more.

He sat and brooded and listened, and it was this deadness that provoked his daughter.

“He might try and do things. It would be better for him if he did things. Look at St. Dunstan’s. But he won’t try.”

Bessie could have found him jobs. He could have cut fire-wood; he could have taught himself to wash cups and saucers. Yes, women’s jobs perhaps. And, in secret, she accused him of being the graven image of a hero. He would not or could not bend to the little trivial things.

Her mother was more compassionate.

“A man’s hands aren’t a woman’s hands, my dear. Men are made different, or some of them. He always was for the big things. He liked to show his strength.”

Bessie shrugged her shoulders.

“He can’t forget his old God and his Bible. He ought to have been Moses or Elijah. I sometimes wish——”

But she checked herself. She had been about to say that she felt moved on

occasions to burn her father's Bible, yes—"shove it in the furnace under the copper and let it assist in the Monday washing."

Every day a particular van pulled up outside the Rainbow. It was the baker's van from Four Oaks delivering the bread that was needed for the Rainbow teas, and it was driven by a cheerful, florid, jocund man named Smith. He was a widower aged three and forty, with two small children and a sister who kept house for him, and Mr. Smith had the reputation of being something of a Juan, for he had a good skin, a fair moustache, and very neatly gaitered legs.

"Morning, Mr. Tredgold."

Invariably he was cheerful, and somehow his cheerfulness was an offence to the blind man. He would hear Mr. Smith go whistling up the steps to the bungalow, and make bright conversation for the ladies. He was full of persiflage. He called Bessie by her Christian name.

"Hallo, Bess. How are the boys?"

He was more polite to Mrs. Mary.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tredgold. Same as usual, is it? Yes, we've got Maurice on the pictures. Coming to see him? Yes, you should. He's a lad."

It seemed to the blind man down below that the fellow's voice had an insinuating slyness. He was too familiar, too confoundedly pleased with himself. He swaggered.

"Morning, Mr. Tredgold. Feeling the sun nice and warm, aren't you?"

Patronizing brute! And during the war he had been somewhere at the base driving a lorry. To Tredgold the fellow's daily call became something more than an unpleasant incident, and about it the blind man's mistrust of the other world began to crystallize. He hated this fellow who careered cheerfully about the country and who behaved as though the sun and the green trees and the sky were his.

Tredgold's blindness had made him suspicious. Was it necessary for that van to call every day? Had the fellow cast eyes upon Bessie?

He spoke to his daughter. It was a June evening, and she had come down the steps and was waiting for a red bus to take her up to Four Oaks.

"Bessie."

"Hallo."

"Where are you going?"

“Pictures.”

“Who with?”

She bridled. What was it to do with him? She had been working hard all day and she had her life to live.

“Guess.”

“That fellow Smith.”

She broke into laughter.

“Try again. An old fellow like that! Why, he’s got two kids. No, if you must know—it’s Peter.”

“Peter. Peter who?”

The red bus was coming up the hill, and she stood forward to signal to the driver.

“I suppose you expect me to get married some day, dad. You and mother did it.”

He was angry. She was not treating him with proper respect.

“Yes, but I expect to see the lad.”

“Well, you couldn’t see him, could you, if I——?”

The words had slipped out, and she regretted them.

“Sorry, dad. I didn’t mean that. I’ll tell Peter to drop in some evening.”

The bus carried her away, and Tredgold sat and gloomed. It was as though youth had mocked him, and then fobbed him off with a casual apology. Yes, he was of no account, a kind of Samson fooled by the Philistines. His right hand went out and touched the handle of the bell; he rang it.

His wife appeared at the top of the steps.

“Yes, John?”

“Come down here.”

“What is it? There’s no car.”

“The girl’s gone to Four Oaks.”

“Yes.”

“To meet a man.”

She had come down the steps and was standing beside him.

“Yes. Young Holland of Holland’s Garage.”

“No one told me.”

“I thought Bessie had told you. He’s quite a nice lad.”

His fingers rapped on the arms of the chair.

“No one tells me anything. The girl goes gadding about——”

Mrs. Mary’s tired face winced.

“Don’t, Jack. What do you expect? She’s young; it’s only natural.”

“Natural!”

His voice was harsh.

“I may be blind, but I’m not a fool. I don’t hold with a girl gadding about alone.”

“But they all do it, Jack, these days. Life’s freer than it was when we were kids.”

“Free and easy, what? No morals. You ought to be ashamed——”

Her pale face flushed, but she restrained herself.

“I don’t believe in playing the tyrant.”

“I’m the tyrant, am I?”

She put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t, John. My dear, I know it’s hard for you, and sometimes—it’s a little hard for us. You can’t keep the girl shut up.”

He moved his body away from her hand.

“Oh, yes, you’re a couple of martyrs, aren’t you? Why don’t you go up to the pictures? Damned sobstuff—and sex. The whole world is going to the devil.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but he could not see her tears. She was beginning to be afraid of his God, for sometimes his God was a devil.

“No, John, it isn’t as bad as that. Don’t let your blindness get you down.”

His head gave a kind of jerk.

“Well, don’t blame me if anything happens.”

During those summer days John Tredgold's mistrust of life seemed to increase. He sat and listened. He grew morose and silent. He began to be attacked by monstrous and preposterous suspicions, as though voices whispered to him that the invisible world deceived him. For, shut up in the dark world of his own imaginings, he became a creature of self-created fears and fallacies, like a man in a cave watching vague shadows on the wall.

He began to suspect his wife.

For, one wet and windy evening, when Bessie was out and Tredgold was sitting in the bungalow's porch, he thought he heard footsteps go down the path to the steps leading to the road. Someone had slipped out by the back door, and that someone could only be his wife. He listened. He was sure that he could hear voices, and one of the voices was a man's. Perhaps a car had pulled in, and he hadn't noticed it, but the man's voice was familiar, and suddenly he recognized it. His wife had gone out to speak with that fellow Smith.

The suspicion became like a horrible and sinister face. It grinned at him, and the evil spirit in him beheld the false face of his God.

He heard the footsteps return and go round to the back door. Did she think he had not heard? These two women, his daughter and his wife, one had gone out to meet her lover, and the other——! Treachery! Was he just a blind fool in a chair, a kind of idiot child to be spoken to soothingly and kept in ignorance of the secret happenings in that other world?

He sat there consuming the bitterness of his own thoughts. He was not quite sane, for insanity can be nothing but an exaggeration of man's natural reactions and the emotions that emerge. He was like a blind prophet beholding in the darkness of his inward world a fantastic and terrible travesty of life.

He heard his wife moving in the house. She came to the porch door and opened it.

"Supper's ready, Jack."

He said nothing. He raised himself from the chair and groped his way in, and when she laid a hand upon his arm he shrugged her off.

"Don't mess me about. I can manage."

He could not see the wounded look she gave him. She stood off and watched him go blundering towards a little table upon which she kept a few poor ornaments, photos and little silver things.

"Jack—stop!"

But he walked blindly into the table and overturned it, but managed to save himself. She rushed to him, and then held back.

“Damn you! Why do you want to leave things about like that?”

She stood voiceless, like a woman overtired and weary, whose patience was near breaking point. And then sudden pity sustained her. She loved him—in spite of everything, poor, blind, bitter soul.

She spoke softly.

“I’m sorry. No, nothing’s broken. Here’s your chair, dear. I’ll pick the things up.”

His face looked all twisted.

“Oh, yes, nothing’s broken. That’s all right, then.”

And in the darkness of his clouded consciousness he thought that she was just humouring him, fooling him, and his unhappy rage concealed itself behind a dreadful dumbness. He would keep his ears open and his mouth shut—until he was sure. Yes, until he was sure.

The weather changed its temper, and a succession of still, warm days brought more custom to the Rainbow Garage, and Tredgold would sit in the sun listening to the world of wheels upon the road, and ready to ring his bell, and every day the baker’s van from Four Oaks brought bread to the bungalow. To Tredgold it became more and more the bread of sinister bitterness.

“Morning, Mr. Tredgold. You want a nice yellow umbrella over that chair of yours.”

Facetious fool! Tredgold’s sightless eyes glared. His jealousy was becoming an obsession like some evil animal tethered to his chair, and up above Mr. Smith indulged in harmless badinage, and behaved like a gay lad. It is possible that he did loiter longer than was necessary, but he loitered outside other doors where the women had looks, for he was that sort of man.

Tredgold heard his wife and daughter laughing. They never laughed in his presence, and he supposed that the world would say that the fault was his.

He was like some human vessel simmering on the fire. The crisis was very near, and later, when it arrived, the air was close and oppressive and working up for a storm. Bessie was out, or rather Tredgold imagined that she was out, and that his wife was alone in the bungalow, for it was about seven in the evening and the tea hour had passed. Tredgold heard a car glide up quietly and stop. Footsteps crossed the cinders and went up the steps. There were voices

up above, his wife’s and a man’s, and they seemed to him secret and surreptitious. He recognized the man’s voice.

So the fellow had sneaked by him, had he?

Tredgold rang his bell, and its jangle was angry. He heard a man’s boots crunching across the cinders. The engine of the van was started up suddenly, and the vehicle sheered off.

Tredgold’s bell kept up its clangour.

“What is it, Jack?”

Did she think he was so innocent? He shouted:

“Come down here.”

She came. She was frightened. His blind face was flushed and furious.

“You’re carrying on with that fellow. Think I don’t know, do you? It’s got to stop.”

“John!”

“Yes, at your age, and with a girl——”

She looked white, horrified.

“It isn’t true. John, how can you——?”

“Not true, is it? You’ll swear by this book——”

He grabbed the big Bible from the table. He held it out to her.

“Put your hands on the book and swear. I’m not going to have secret and slimy sin in my home.”

But they were not alone. Bessie was on the steps, and her dark and turbulent young face was ablaze. She swept down on them; she snatched the book from his hands, and flung it in front of the wheels of a lorry that came thundering by.

“How dare you?”

She stood over him. She ignored her mother’s appeal.

“Your god’s a brute, a blind beast. You and your Bible! The sin’s in you, and not in us. Sitting there and thinking vile things while she—— Why, she’s a saint, and you don’t know it. She’s been a saint to you for years.”

He sat strangely dumb under the lash of her young anger, but Mrs. Mary was out in the road, recovering that battered book. She smoothed its pages out

as well as she could. She was weeping. She came and placed the book upon his knees.

“You’ll be sorry, John.”

She stood there helplessly, to be caught by the arm and dragged away by her daughter.

“I’ve had enough of this. I’m off. He’s not a man, he’s a——”

“Bessie!”

“Let him hear. I’m off, and you’re coming too. Oh, yes, you are. I’ve heard of a job at Tanbridge. You’ll come along with me.”

Now, whether Mrs. Mary was swept off her feet by her more impetuous and turbulent child, or whether Mother Eve entered into the heart of woman, Mary Tredgold allowed herself to be coerced by Bessie. She climbed the steps cut in the clay bank, and when she saw that little white hutch with its raw red lid she shivered.

“I have tried so hard all these years. I can’t stand any more of it.”

“I should think not,” said the daughter. “Let him sit and do a little thinking.”

Her mother looked very helpless.

“I can’t leave him like this, Bess.”

“Oh, yes, you can. You’ve got to. We can catch the eight o’clock bus to Tanbridge. We have twenty minutes to pack.”

At that critical moment she dominated her mother. She lugged out a couple of old suit-cases and stuffed a few necessaries into them. If you were leaving a few things behind, what did that matter? She got Mrs. Mary and the suit-cases down into the road and past that fatal figure in its chair. She held on firmly to her mother’s arm, and compelling her down the road to the bus halt at Lavender Lane, she confronted Fate. They stood there side by side with the suit-cases at their feet.

Mary Tredgold felt faint.

“I can’t go, Bess—I can’t—really.”

“You’ve got to. Let him sit and think.”

“There is going to be a storm.”

“Oh, he’ll find his way in. He’s done it before. That’s what he deserves, a

good old crash-up.”

“My dear, you’re hard.”

“Hard! Well, I like that! If a man accused me, I should jolly well think it good to be hard. You’ve been too soft with him, mother.”

The bus stopped for them, and Tredgold’s daughter pushed her mother into it, and passed up the suit-cases to the conductor.

“You look hot, miss.”

Hot, indeed! Well, why not, with thunder in the air and a mother who had made a doormat of herself and a father who was more jealous than ten Jewish Jehovahs! She sat down on the cushioned seat beside her mother and allowed herself to contemplate that blind figure left derelict beside the road. She had inherited some of her father’s fanaticism. Let him and his old god have it out together. Yes, and a storm would be just the right accompaniment.

Meanwhile, John Tredgold sat with the Bible on his knees and the useless bell beside him. He could not curse with book or bell, and perhaps the spirit of condemnation was passing from him. His fingers fribbled with the leaves of the book and found no comfort in it.

He rang the bell, but less loudly than usual, and no one answered it. He sat and listened and wondered, and suddenly he was afraid.

Had they left him? It couldn’t be true. It wasn’t possible.

Cars passed him occasionally, but they were mere sound and wind in the sultry twilight. He began to be more and more afraid, more conscious of the darkness about him, and of a dreadful loneliness.

He called to his wife.

“Mary, Mary.”

Still the same silence, an ominous, sultry hush. He heard in the distance the crumpling of thunder like the voice of an angry God. He shivered, and in the branches of the beech trees across the way an answering shudder made itself felt. A sudden gust of wind blew down the road, and the wood was full of rustling fear.

He put the Bible on the table beside him, and his hands trembled. What should he do? He became conscious of his sin, the sin of blasphemy against the spirit of love. It was as though his inward eyes had opened. He saw—— Good God! what had he said to her? How had the evil thing come to swell in him? Thunder, wind, shuddering trees!

The blackness about him became overwhelming. How helpless he was! Yes, and he deserved to be helpless. He had driven her away, the one creature who cared for him through all these years; he had blasphemed against her compassion and her patience. He began to see, to understand how he had tried her, vexed her with his eternal grumblings. He—a hero? Assuredly the heroism had been hers.

The thunder came nearer. There were flashes in the sky, but he could not see them. It was like the end of the world, his world. And then, suddenly, he felt the rain. It came at first in a few scattered heavy drops that struck his knees and his hands and his head. It gathered and thickened into a downpour that hissed on the tarred road. He sat there and let it soak him. He wept.

Presently the downpour ceased; the storm had passed over him and away along the hills. He was wet through, but he continued to sit there as though the mere flesh had ceased to matter. He could hear the moisture dripping from the beech trees across the road, but the road itself was silent and deserted. He put out a hand and touched the Book on the table beside him, and the thing was almost as sodden as he was.

Revelation!

What had he and the Book been saying to each other all through these years?

What could it say to him now?

What could he say to himself?

He sat and listened to the dripping leaves and in the darkness a new revelation of life came to him. He suffered, and he surrendered to his suffering, and in surrendering became like a man reborn.

Time seemed to have lost all significance for him. He did not know how long he had been sitting there in the darkness, and, strangely enough, he was not conscious of his wet clothes. The hour might be any hour of the night, and two solitary cars passing on their way south proved to him that the other world still survived. So utterly alone was he for the moment that he might have been the last man left alive on earth.

The storm had rumbled itself out, and the stillness was supreme, and in the far distance he heard a clock striking. It was the Four Oaks church clock striking midnight, and he was glad of the sound. The beginning of another day, but what could the new day bring him? What was he going to do? Find his way to the steps and up to the cottage? But he would be more helpless there than a small child, utterly and significantly helpless.

He began to feel chilled, and he was telling himself that he must make some effort when he heard the sound of footsteps coming up the road. The rhythm was both irregular and hurried, and they struck him as being the footsteps of someone who was very tired. A tramp? No, they were a woman's footsteps, and somehow familiar. He was conscious of feeling a strange pang at the heart. He sat rigid, not knowing that a moon was shining, and that he was sitting there in a patch of moonlight.

The footsteps were very close to him now, and suddenly they seemed to quicken. The darkness became breathless. He was acutely conscious of a familiar presence.

"O, John—my dear——"

She dropped her suit-case on the cinders. He felt her hands on his shoulders.

"O, my dear, you're all wet. You haven't been sitting out here all through that storm?"

His hands went up and clasped hers.

"Mary, you've come back?"

"Of course. Do you think——? I'm sorry, John. Forgive me."

And suddenly he had his face in her bosom.

"O, Mary, mother—I've found myself out. I've been a blind beast to you. It's you who must try to forgive."

She held his head in her arms.

"There, John, there. You've been so unhappy, I know. And I have always tried——"

Both of them were weeping, and he said, "Yes—I know. I'm not blind any longer, not in that way. I made everyone unhappy. But it is going to be different now. I'm going to read in another kind of book. Not that the book's wrong, Mary. I read my poor blind self into it—that's all."

She kissed him.

"That's all right, John, that's all right."

But his hand was groping for some object, that blatant bell. He grasped it by the handle.

"Just a moment, Mary."

She drew aside, and with a sweep of the air he flung the thing across the road into the ditch below the beech wood.

“Let it rot there.”

A sudden breeze stirred the beech leaves. They seemed to utter an approving and applauding murmur.

THE MADNESS OF PROFESSOR PYE

PROFESSOR PYE'S house was visible from one point on the Dorking-Guildford road as a cube of concrete rising above the dark foliage of a group of old yews. Standing upon the chalk ridge and reached only by a steep and flinty lane whose privacy was emphasized by a notice board, it suggested the isolation of an iceberg. Professor Pye's message to humanity carried no sense of uplift. His notice board did not challenge the casual crowd to climb the heights and speak of Plotinus and Einstein.

It was a rude and abrupt notice board. It said—or rather, it snarled—

Private.
Keep out!
Yes, you!

A serious hiker in shorts, shirt and spectacles, happening upon that notice board, remarked upon it to his mate.

"That's the sort of thing that puts my back up. Let's trespass, Maisie."

Maisie was less politically minded than her mate. It was a hot day, and the lane was steep and stony.

"I don't see any sense, Fred, in climbing a hill just to have a row."

"It's one's duty to have a row with a fellow who——"

The lady fanned herself with a piece of bracken.

"Too many flies, and I want my tea."

They passed on, but happening upon a roadman trimming a hedge the young man in spectacles paused to ask questions.

“Excuse me, who lives up there? The fellow who put up that notice board.”

The roadman ran a thumb along the edge of his swaphook.

“That there white house?”

“I suppose so. Sort of chap who owns the earth.”

The roadman grinned.

“Chap named Pye—Professor Pye. Very particular about his privacy.”

“I should say so.”

“Down there in the village they call him Old Crusty.”

The hiker’s spectacles glimmered approvingly.

“Bit of a misanthrope, what!”

The roadman was not familiar with the word, but he divined its meaning.

“All crust and no apple.”

The hikers applauded this piece of rustic humour and passed on in search of tea.

Now, Professor Pye was a very distinguished physicist, but to the public he was not even a name. As a scientist he had not received from his confrères the recognition that is acceptable to a philosopher, and when the simple things of life go wrong there can be no more unphilosophic person than your philosopher. Things had gone wrong for Professor Pye. Someone had once described him as “A man whom nobody liked, a piece of cold flat-fish,” which was both true and an exaggeration. There had been moments in his life when Alfred Pye had been furiously eager to be liked. As a man he had fallen in love with women and friendship and success and the swagger of it, and all of them had flouted him. He possessed a great brain and an unfortunate exterior, a certain resemblance to an undersized grey he-goat.

Women actually shrank from him as from something that was both cold and unpleasantly libidinous. As a young man he had been shocked and wounded and enraged by this shrinking. He could remember sitting on a seat in a moonlit garden, burning to utter the words that other men could utter, and suddenly the girl had risen to her feet. Actually, she had shuddered.

“I think it’s too cold out here.”

And poor Pye’s passion had flopped like a fallen angel into bitter and icy waters.

He was strangely repellent to anything with warm blood, women, children, dogs, his fellow-men, and at one period of his life he had—with bitter irony—made pets of a snake and a tortoise. These cold-blooded creatures had accepted him, and had fed out of his hands. He might have said that they recognized the brother reptile.

II

But one thing he did possess, and that was money. The Pyes *père* and *grandpère* had been Birmingham men, successful manufacturers of hardware, and Alfred had been an only son. Being interested in pure science, he had sold the business on his father's death, and retired into his laboratory with two hundred thousand pounds in gilt-edged securities. He was somewhat sensitive about his money. He knew that though the world had no affection for Alfred Pye it would smile upon Alfred's pile of cash.

The making of a misanthrope may be a complex business, and if at the age of sixty Professor Pye hated humanity he had his reasons for this hatred. A man who has lived alone with himself for fifteen years can turn sour in the process, and Pye's uncontestable brilliancy made scorn easy. As a younger man he had carried out experimental work as a subordinate, only to have his very suggestive discoveries exploited by his senior. Professor Gasson, in claiming the younger man's researches for the honour of a particular University, had seen to it that much of the honour had materialized as a personal halo. Professor Gasson had an international reputation. He was a facile writer, one of those men who can popularize the abstruse and the mysterious. He was now Sir Philip Gasson.

Pye had never forgotten or forgiven the ingenious fraud. It had taught him secretiveness, made him even more lone and separative. He had withdrawn from the world of men, academic and otherwise. He had purchased thirty acres of land on the North Downs and built himself a kind of little concrete fortress, a strong place that was as complete and self-supporting as money and brains could make it. It contained a laboratory; it possessed its own water supply, a powerful electric installation, an oil storage tank, a miniature observatory. Even Professor Pye's dietary was eccentric. He drank nothing but water or strong coffee, and lived on grape-fruit, oranges, apples, nuts, bread and cheese. Life in all its details was simplified and subordinated to his work. The laboratory was his holy of holies, and in it he functioned like a priest.

He possessed one temple-servant, a curious creature named Hands, an ex-service man who had lost his hearing and half a face in the war. Life's disfigurements and frustrations had made Hands as much a recluse as his master. He was a queer, sedulous slave who lived with a small mongrel dog in the kitchen, and who made beds, and stoked the furnace, and ran the oil engine and dynamo, and controlled the stores, and pottered about in a very small garden of his own. There was nothing of the spy about Hands. A large, gentle, tame creature who smoked a pipe, and liked to feel his hands licked by his

dog's tongue, he could resign himself to his environment. He attached himself like a neuter cat. So attached had he become to the solitary place on the downs that semi-suburban Surrey had become as wild to him as a jungle.

Between these two men there existed the kind of affection that had united Robinson Crusoe and good Man Friday. Isolation held them together. Hands had a disfigured face, the professor a warped soul. Hands hated nothing; to the professor hatred of the world of men had become a sinister inspiration. Pye was so malignantly sober in his scorn for all the follies and hypocrisies and conventions of the social scheme that he was too sober to be sane as carnal man understands sanity. Year by year Pye was becoming nothing but a brain, a concentration of pure and merciless intelligence, an intelligence that was hostile to his fellows.

If he had any affection for any creature it was for Hands. Hands could lip-read, and being deaf he never heard the rasp of Alfred Pye's voice, nor did he feel the abruptness with which his master spoke to him.

"Hands—turn off that radiator."

"Hands—more bread."

"Hands—the oil's too low in the storage tank. When are those damned fools coming to refill it?"

Hands would nod his head reassuringly.

"Yes, sir."

He had a flat and toneless voice, and eyes that were not unlike the eyes of his dog.

"Yes, sir—I'll see to it, sir."

According to Trade Union standards he was one of the most overworked men upon earth, a meek automaton with a curious capacity for devotion. He was sure that Professor Pye was a very wonderful person, a kind of superman. That, too, was Professor Pye's conviction. The outer world was full of damned fools, monkeys, mountebanks, people who would be better dead. The professor's egotism had grown like some monstrous fungus, or like a fantastic brain uncontrolled by any of the human reactions. In his younger days—like all normal men—he had wanted to be liked, and the world had not liked him. A bitter and solitary egotism cherished hate.

Sometimes on a summer day he would go up to the little white tower of his house and stand there looking down into that deep, green, beautiful valley. He could command a short strip of the road, and observe the procession of cars

passing along the tarmac surface. To the satanic Pye upon his height they looked like tin toys, absurd little mechanisms that crawled and tooted.

“Beetles, ants.”

So—that was civilization, a procession of little standardized robots running around in their little machines, people who had no more originality than flies. An insect world, grubs that daily consumed the pulp of a popular press. Professor Pye’s scorn was cosmic. If he felt himself to be a creature living in a world of other dimensions to those clerks and shopmongers he had some justification for his arrogance. He had a wonderful intelligence. He was living on the brink of catastrophic revelations. He had worked for years in that fascinating atmosphere where things physical melt into the seemingly miraculous. Like Professor Rutherford and his disciples he had been analysing the atom. His dream had been to dissociate the atom, and somewhere he had read that centuries would elapse before man could split and control atomic energy.

Professor Pye had smiled over that particular paragraph in a learned article.

“Damned fools!”

He knew what he knew. The lightning was in his hands. He had but to discover how to control and to project it. And then? No Jove upon Olympus would be so potent as this little grey man of sixty standing alone upon his concrete tower.

The world had misliked him, ignored him, cheated him.

“Damned fools!”

He would give the world thunder and lightning.

III

It happened on an afternoon in June. Hands had carried an ancient basket chair into his piece of garden, and was proposing to enjoy a pipe and a little relaxation. His dog lay at his feet and blinked up at him through the sunlight. It was a warm and gentle summer day, but for Hands it had been a day of toil and trial.

A lorry full of stores had arrived from Garrod's. The professor purchased everything in bulk in London, and Hands had had to deal with those stores and pack them away in the store-room.

The oil-tanker had laboured up the lane to recharge the storage tank. Also, it happened to be charging day, and the oil engine had behaved temperamentally. So, in fact, had the professor. When Hands had knocked at the door of the laboratory and attempted to inform his master that the stores had arrived and been checked and put away, the professor, forgetting Hand's deafness, had screamed at him:

"Get out. Don't interrupt me."

Not hearing the order, Hands had continued to knock at the locked door.

"I've had trouble with the engine, sir."

And suddenly the door had flown open, and Professor Pye, red lidded, wild as to the head, and in nothing but shirt and grey flannel trousers, had raged at him.

"Get out, you fool. Don't come worrying here. I'm busy."

The meek Hands, watching his master's mouth, had repeated his news about the engine.

"Accumulator's low, sir."

"What!"

"I dare say I'll get it going soon."

The professor had gibbered at him.

"You'd better. Most damnably important. Telephone to Guildford for a mechanic."

"Oh—I'll get it right, sir."

"You had better."

And Professor Pye had slammed the door and locked it.

Hands, sucking his pipe, felt pleasantly sleepy. After all, some gentlemen were funny, just as colonels and sergeant-majors had been funny in the army, but this life suited Hands. Professor Pye might be a little grey bit of wire and wisdom, with a tufted chin and red-lidded eyes, an irritable gentleman, but after all he was a great man. He paid Hands generously. There were days when the professor was as smooth as silk. The dog was asleep with his head resting against his master's right foot, and Hands himself was on the brink of dozing.

Then, something startled both man and dog. Hands straightened in his chair; the dog, up and quivering, emitted three sharp barks, and stood whimpering. There had been no sound, but both dog and man had felt a curious vibration like an earth tremor. Hands could have sworn that his chair had moved under him.

He stood up, holding in his right hand a pipe that had gone out. He looked at the quivering dog.

"What was it, Jumbo?"

Jumbo, tail down, whimpered and looked up obliquely at his master.

"I don't know," he was saying; "but whatever it was—I didn't like it."

Neither did Hands. He put his pipe away in his pocket. He stared at the white wall behind him. He was a man whose mind worked slowly.

"Anything wrong in there?"

He remembered reading somewhere that strange things sometimes happened to learned gentlemen who experimented in laboratories. Had anything happened to Professor Pye? The suggestion was a sufficient stimulus, and Hands became the man of action. He rushed into the house and found himself staring at a glazed door at the end of the corridor. The glass in the door had been smashed, blown out upon the floor.

Hands pushed it back, and crunching broken glass, made for the laboratory. He sniffed the air. No, there was no strange smell. The door of the laboratory was painted white, and down the two upper panels ran dark scars. They were cracks where the panels had been split.

Hands rushed at the door, seized the handle, and shook it.

"What's happened, sir? Are you all right?"

Silence, an inevitable silence so far as Hands was concerned. The door was locked. He put his face close to one of the cracks and tried to see into the

laboratory. He could distinguish a table, and he realized that the table, a stout, deal bench, was lying on its side. There was a foot visible beside it, or rather—a black boot, toe upturned and everted.

Hands put a shoulder to the door and heaved. It defied him. He drew back a yard and charged it. He was a heavy man, and the lock plate gave, and Hands and the door went in together. Recovering himself, he stood and stared. The laboratory looked as though a bull had been active in a glass and china shop. The windows were smashed; everything seemed on the floor.

Professor Pye was on the floor, surrounded by what appeared to be the glass and metal fragments of some complicated apparatus.

Hands bent over his master. Professor Pye's face was the colour of old vellum; his eyes were closed, and from his nostrils blood oozed. Hands had seen dead men in the war; Professor Pye looked like death, and Hands was frightened.

He knelt down, and put his head close to the professor's chest. No, his master was breathing. And Hands lumbered up and off into the dining-room. The professor did indulge occasionally in old French brandy. Hands extracted the bottle from the sideboard and hurried back.

But he paused in the laboratory doorway, and stood staring. The professor was sitting up, looking bemused, ghastly and bewildered. The fingers of his right hand were stroking his forehead. He gazed at Hands, and his eyes were vacant.

"My God—you gave me a shock, sir!"

The professor's lips moved, mumbling something. He looked round the shattered room.

"What happened, sir? Something exploded? Have some brandy, sir."

The professor looked at the brandy bottle, nodded, and allowed Hands to trickle some of the spirit between his lips. He gurgled, he spluttered, and suddenly, clutching Hands's arm and shoulder, he struggled up. He still looked ghastly, but his very ghastliness was exultant.

"Eureka!"

Hands blinked at him.

"Where shall I find it, sir? In your shaving cupboard?"

And suddenly Professor Pye laughed, a strange, creaking and discordant laugh.

“No, I’ve got it, Hands, I’ve got it. Eureka, Eureka!”

IV

When the Masters of Science speak of protons, electrons and neutrons, and describe strange bombardments, and streams of particles shooting at high speed through a substance that has every appearance of being solid, the plain man must listen and accept the strange things that these adepts tell him. At home in the suburbs the plain man may fiddle with his wireless, and repeat some of the jargon of the technical press, but in the matter of knowledge he is but a child. His may be the right to say, “Well—I’m damned! What will these scientific fellows do next?” The marvels of research may leave him gaping, and feeling perhaps vaguely uncomfortable, and certainly had any John Citizen been allowed to peep into the mental workshop of Professor Pye he would have felt supremely uneasy.

For Professor Pye had taken a leap beyond his contemporaries. He had discovered and isolated a little creature that he called the “On.” It would not be possible for an untechnical scribbler to describe the manifestations and mysteries of this child of the atom. Professor Pye had brought a little stranger into the world of man’s awareness, and with a complex of glass tubes, electrical force and certain chemicals had caused the On to manifest. That the On or congeries of Ons had nearly killed him was neither here nor there. Professor Pye, working upon certain hypotheses, had taken risks. His idea was not only to isolate the On, but to control and use it.

A minute manifestation of On-force had blown a screen of argonil to atoms, but the protecting tube of palmyrium had stood the shock. Apparently palmyrium was impervious to the On. That—of course—had to be proved and tested with an increasing stress of On-force, but if a palmyrium box or tube could be produced that could contain and confine the streams of Ons when Professor Pye’s process produced them, then——! Professor Pye, standing on his concrete tower and looking out across this peaceful English valley, smiled a truculent little smile, and rubbed his beard. He, Alfred Pye, granted that his hypotheses were correct, would have under his hand a strange new force that could be controlled and projected into space. What its ultimate effects would be upon things organic and inorganic he could not yet say, but judging by his experience of a minute release of the On-force, a larger dose would be lethal to creatures of protoplasm. It would annihilate—silently and secretly. It might be potent over a thousand miles. The German gun that bombarded Paris would be a mere crude and barbaric toy compared with it.

For some time after the wrecking of the laboratory Jack Hands was worried and nervous. Apparently, Professor Pye had been immensely excited over the

result of some particular experiment, and it was probable that the experiment would be repeated. Hands, simple soul, was more worried about his dog than about himself. He spoke to the professor.

“Are there going to be any more—explosions, sir?”

For Professor Pye was working far into the nights. Hands, worried and restless, had seen the laboratory windows lit up at two in the morning, and fear is more fearful at night.

“You see—I could put Jumbo to sleep in the tool-house.”

Alfred Pye had no sense of humour, or any feeling for pathos. Moreover, he was becoming more and more the little megalomaniac swollen with a sense of imminent and catastrophic power. In fact, Professor Pye was not quite sane in that he represented pure and pitiless intelligence divorced from all emotion and the social urges. He spoke curtly to Hands.

“Don’t be a fool, man. Bring me my lunch in here.”

Professor Pye was in apron and shirt-sleeves, and standing by his electric furnace. Hands could see that some queer apparatus was in process of construction, for Pye had so great a contempt for his man’s intelligence that he let him stand and stare. The professor was not only an inspired physicist but an expert mechanic. He had small, strong, delicate fingers, hands of infinite dexterity and precision. He was capable of manufacturing a watch or turning out the most sensitive of instruments. Being a separatist and secretive he had trained himself to do these things.

Hands went for the professor’s lunch, an apple, six dry biscuits and two wedges of Swiss Gruyère cheese. He was placing the tray on a laboratory table when the professor—who had quick ears—heard the sound of a car in the little courtyard behind the house.

“Who’s that?”

Hands—of course—had heard nothing. Pye, who was beginning to nourish acute suspicion now that his researches were nearing fruition, went to one of the laboratory windows. It was a high window, and Pye had to stand on a stool to look out.

“A woman in a car. Go and see what she wants.”

The professor pulled down the blinds on the side next the courtyard, and Hands hurried out to interview the visitor. She was elderly, plump and pleasant. She looked compassionately at Hands’s disfigured face, and produced a little book.

“I am sure you will excuse me calling at this hour, but could I see Professor Pye?”

Hands, with his eyes watching her lips, explained somewhat apologetically that the professor was not easy of approach. The lady smiled upon Hands.

“But won’t you go and ask him to see—me?”

“What name, ma’am?”

“Mrs. Millard.”

Hands returned to the laboratory where Pye, sitting on a stool, was eating cheese and biscuit.

“A lady named Millard, sir. Her compliments and would you——?”

“What does she want?”

“I don’t know, sir. She’s got a little book.”

“A damned journalist! Go and tell her to go to——”

Hands did not deliver the message as he had received it from Professor Pye. He explained that the professor was busy in his laboratory and could not be disturbed.

Mrs. Millard smiled her social-service smile.

“I—quite—understand. I called to see if Professor Pye would subscribe to the S.P.C.C. I’m collecting subscriptions for our committee.”

Hands was puzzled but wishing to be helpful.

“The S.P.C.C., ma’am?”

“Yes, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children.”

Hands took the book, and ventured once more into the laboratory.

“The lady wants a subscription, sir.”

“A subscription?”

“Yes, sir, to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.”

The professor was eating his apple. His face registered a curious, twisted little smirk. He cackled, and the sound was sinister.

“Quite superfluous. Sadism is an interesting human trait. Well, I’ll give her something. Pass me my coat.”

Hands fetched it from the hook on the laboratory door.

“She’s quite a nice lady, sir.”

“That’s not unusual, Hands, when they are after favours.”

Professor Pye picked a pound note from his wallet and passed it to Hands.

“Give her that. No, I don’t want to put my name in her wretched little book. Get rid of her.”

Hands went out to announce the good news to the nice lady, and Professor Pye resumed the eating of his apple. His nostrils expressed scorn.

“Prevention of Cruelty to Children! Better that most of the little wretches shouldn’t be born. Cruelty! Is an earthquake cruel? Can my intelligence be cruel—to ants?”

V

During the whole of that summer Professor Pye was at work upon what may be described as his Atomic Gun. Externally it consisted of a tube of palmyrium mounted on a tripod stand, and in appearance not unlike a machine-gun. Its mouth could be closed by a diaphragm of palmyrium, and to the centre of the tube electric leads were attached. The apparatus's interior could have been described only by Professor Pye himself, and the description was set down in cypher in a note book which he kept locked in a safe.

Also, during the whole of August he kept the laboratory locked, and Hands, brooding over his exclusion, was both a little grieved and tempted. Moreover, Professor Pye's temper had become like the English weather, absolutely unpredictable in its moods and phases. He was extraordinarily taciturn. He emerged from the lab. to munch his biscuits and apples in the dining-room, and the lab. key was in his pocket.

Hands, who after all was human, did make one attempt to play Peeping Tom one day while the Professor was at lunch. Undoubtedly, the old boy was up to something, and Hands had not escaped the world's passion for sensationalism. Since the laboratory door was locked, and the key in the professor's pocket, he would have to attempt the windows, but when Hands sneaked round with an empty grocery box for a stool he found that the windows were shut and the blinds drawn. Obviously, Professor Pye had something to hide, and he was not taking any chances.

And Hands wondered. He was not without education in the matter of lurid literature. Like many simple souls and children he had a fantastic fancy. Now—just what would a very ingenious gentleman create in a lonely and a sexless spot like this? Sex and its bitter and baffled urges vexed Hands not a little. Supposing an old man like the professor had dreamed amorous dreams and was proposing to create a sort of mechanical Venus?

"Damn it," said Hands—"why not?"

The fantastic notion piqued him. He even chortled over it. Certainly, this would be a species of creation that a man like Professor Pye would keep draped and screened. And then Hands had a feeling that somehow his carnal fancy had overstepped the bounds of decency.

Eminent scientists should be allowed to transcend the erotic. Professor Pye might be planning to fly to the moon.

Hands felt bothered by a certain personal turgidity, and when the flesh

vexed him he dug hard in his garden or took Jumbo for a walk. On occasions he would ramble along the downs for miles, finding solace and solitude, while Jumbo discovered rabbits, imaginary and otherwise. To Hands his dog was a dumb but eloquent preceptor. The little beast had attached himself to a lone man to the exclusion of all canine calls.

“Marvellous!” Hands would exclaim, “Jumbo, you can teach me something.”

It was a Thursday in September when Hands asked Professor Pye to grant him leave of absence for the afternoon, and though he did not know it, the request toned with the professor’s plans. He was in a state of concealed excitement. He had been wanting to get rid of Hands for the afternoon.

“I’d like to take the dog for a walk, sir.”

Pye was affable.

“Certainly, Hands, certainly. You can have the whole afternoon. By the way, you haven’t had a holiday since you’ve been here.”

“No, sir.”

“You must take a holiday, Hands. Haven’t you any relations?”

“I’ve a brother in Brighton, sir.”

“Well, arrange to take a holiday. I may be going to stay at my London club for a week.”

“Holidays aren’t much in my line, sir. You see——”

The professor was emphatic.

“Everybody needs a holiday sometimes. Change of environment. You must go for a holiday, Hands.”

Hands took Jumbo out on the downs towards Dorking. Now, just what was the old fellow at? Was he really going to London, or did he desire Jack Hands’s absence for a period? Hands had taken a Thermos with him, and a parcel of bread and butter and cake. The professor allowed him grocer’s cake, the yellow stuff with cherries in it, but on that day Jumbo consumed most of the cake. Hands was feeling strangely depressed. Almost, he seemed to be suffering from some unpleasant premonition.

Not so Professor Pye. He carried that four-foot tube of alloy with its tripod to the top of the observation tower, and linked it to a power plug by long flexes that ran from one of the lab. windows and were raised by a cord to the top of the little concrete tower. It was a serene and perfect September day, windless

and golden, but Professor Pye had no eyes for the beauty of the landscape. His hands trembled as he attached the wires to the apparatus. He was face to face with his crisis, and he was facing more than a critical experiment. He was confronting death, personal annihilation. He could regulate his current, and release what he might estimate to be a small charge of On-force, but he could not swear that the new force would not shatter the apparatus and kill its creator.

But he needed a target, something protoplasmic and obvious upon which he could train the atomic gun. He stood looking down over the low parapet, and the target offered itself, some cows in a field in the hollow of the valley. These cows belonged to Mr. Honniset of Fox Farm, and they were pastured in two different fields separated by a strip of arable. One of the fields was less than three hundred yards away, the other more than a quarter of a mile. Professor Pye trained the gun on the farther field, and stood back behind it with his foot on the contact-maker.

For one moment he hesitated. There was a faint click as a flexible wire operated the diaphragm, a second click as his foot pressed the make and break. The palmyrium tube remained motionless; there was no sound, no suggestion of vibration. Professor Pye stood with his eyes fixed on the apparatus. He had been prepared for a possible catastrophe, blackness, oblivion.

Apparently, nothing that could be registered by the senses had happened. Professor Pye kept his foot on the contact maker for three seconds, released it, and closed the diaphragm. A curious little grin seemed to trickle into his beard. What had happened? Had anything happened? He was conscious of furious excitement and a feeling of personal reprieve. He had let the thing loose, and he was alive.

He walked to the parapet and looked down into the valley. The cows in the farther field had been grazing in a group, and every beast in that field was down. Dead? The animals were lying on their sides, legs and heads extended. The cows in the near field were still grazing. Professor Pye’s face expressed a kind of demonic exultation. His hair stood up like the crest of a cockatoo. But were those cows dead, or merely shocked and temporarily helpless? He dashed downstairs for a pair of field-glasses, returned, and crouching behind the parapet, focused his glasses on the field.

He realized that he was looking at carcasses. The flaccid, inert posture of the bodies was unmistakable. He watched them intently for five minutes, and not one of the animals gave any sign of life.

Professor Pye stood up. His face was the face of a man who was not quite

sane. It might have been the face of a Biblical Satan, or of a mischievous, malignant and amoral boy who had perpetrated some cunning outrage and who gloated over its success. What were a few cows compared with the discovery that he could kill, silently, swiftly, secretly? He possessed power, power such as no other man had ever commanded. He had evolved that power. It was his.

VI

But it was not merely a question of dead cows.

The beasts in the near field had not been touched, and Professor Pye, reflecting upon that fact, realized that for some unknown reason there was a non-lethal zone surrounding his gun. Queer, that! The area of the dispersion of the On-force would have to be studied and tabulated.

What was its range?

His gaze travelled beyond the farther field, and then it was that Professor Pye realized that something unusual was happening down there in the valley. The projected line of force had traversed the strip of high road that was visible from the tower, and in the roadway, or rather in the hedges, the professor could distinguish what appeared to be the wreckage of motor-cars. One of them was alight and burning brightly.

He raised his glasses and crouched.

Other cars were piling up in the road to left and right of the wreckage. Little figures were active. A man could be seen squirting the burning car with a fire extinguisher. Another man joined him.

And then Professor Pye understood, and drew swift and stark conclusions. The On-force had caught those two cars, killed the drivers, and the machines had run off the road and crashed! For a moment his face showed bleak and sharp, lips retracted, nostrils pinched. He crouched there. He had killed more than a few cows. And what—exactly—had he killed? How far had the force travelled? Had it sped for miles and left a death track behind it?

If ever a man was taken to a high place by the Satan that is self and tempted, Professor Pye was that man. He crouched between compassion and the consciousness of unrestrained and intoxicating power. He was tempted perhaps as few men of science have been tempted. He could bless or he could curse. But whereas most men of science are also social men, Professor Pye was not a social creature. He was one of the world’s paranoiacs, a man who had cherished a sense of his own infinite significance, and the conviction that the world had persecuted him and denied him greatness. His was a case in which a malignantly sane intelligence was socially insane. He was a little, venomous Jehovah looking down upon the world of men and finding it vile and hateful.

He stood up. He extended his arms like some prophet cursing his generation. Almost his face was maniacal. He slavered into his beard.

“You legion of swine. Mine—is the power. It shall not spare you.”

VII

He was like a man possessed.

The immensity of the thing intoxicated him. He seemed to shake with a cold rage; the urge to prove his power became a merciless and ordered frenzy. For a little while he stood observing through his glasses that minor catastrophe in the valley. He focused those agitated and active ants on that tarmac road. And then he observed in particular two figures—one that of a police constable, the other that of a chauffeur in a linen coat. They were standing together looking up at his white house. And one of them raised an arm and pointed. He was pointing out the white tower and the little figure poised there.

They were pointing at him! How dared they point at him? Did these slaves suspect?

Professor Pye stepped back behind the palmyrium tube. He rearranged the tripod and trained the gun on the road below. He released the diaphragm and switched on the current, and with an air of sardonic glee awaited the result.

There was sudden stillness down yonder. The man in the dust-coat was lying on his back in the middle of the road. The police constable had crumpled into an inert blue heap.

They had dared to point at him, had they, he—the great Professor Pye, god of the On-force, the greatest man alive!

His self-exaltation was in full flood. Inevitably he was challenged to prove the extent of his new power. Men were no more than ninepins to be bowled over. Was it not possible for him to efface humanity or as much of it as he pleased, or perhaps to permit a remnant to crawl to him and hail him as god and master? The passion to prove his power became a frenzy. He must choose some particular ant-heap and reduce it to nothingness so far as man was concerned. He stood brooding in the September sunlight, while at Newlands Corner and on Leith Hill hikers and motorists and children played and made love and picnicked in ignorance of the menace.

What ant-heap should he choose?

London?

No, London would be too immense, too large and luscious a fruit to begin with. He would prefer gradualness, a subtle crescendo.

Brighton—Hands’s Brighton—flashed into his mind.

Why not Brighton?

And then he remembered Hands.

Confound the fellow! He would have to get rid of Hands, and to that deaf and disfigured creature Professor Pye allowed his one moment of compassion. Hands had been a good creature. Should he keep the fellow here? But, no, that was impossible. He could permit no man to witness his humbling of humanity. Hands must go. He would give the fellow money and tell him to go—but where? Professor Pye's pity shrugged its shoulders. After all—this was fate.

And then he heard the voice of Hands, calling to his dog.

"Jumbo—Jumbo—come on, old lad."

The dog had loitered, and Professor Pye, crossing to the back of the tower and looking over the parapet, saw Hands standing in the courtyard. The decision was made and taken. He would have to play the autocrat with Hands.

He locked the door of the tower staircase and descended. Hands was just entering the house with the dog at his heels.

"Hands, you must go for your holiday."

Hands stared.

"When, sir?"

"Now."

"Now, sir?"

"Yes, at once."

"But, sir——"

"I'm going to London to-night in the car. I insist on your taking a holiday, Hands. I shall pay for your holiday."

The professor went into the laboratory and opened his safe. When he returned to the hall he had six five-pound notes in his hand. He thrust them at Hands.

"Here's the money. Pack a suit-case. Catch a bus to Guildford. No, better still—I'll drive you to Guildford."

Hands looked bothered. He took the money, and stood hesitant.

"I'll go to Brighton, sir."

The professor's face expressed exasperation. Damn the fellow! He couldn't

go to Brighton. By midnight there might be no Brighton in any human sense.

“Don’t be a fool, Hands. Go and see something. Go to Scotland. Get some mountain air. Good for the dog, too.”

“But where’ll I stay, sir?”

“Stay? Why—at hotels—of course. Enjoy yourself, eat, drink and be merry.”

It occurred to Hands that the professor would have to be humoured. He could allow the professor to drive him into Guildford and leave him at the station. He could take a train to London, and another train to Brighton. Scotland? No, he was not going to Scotland, and the professor need not know about it. Besides, he would be pretty welcome at Brighton, with thirty pounds in his pocket. He and Brother Jim could have a bit of a beano on thirty quid. He could buy the kids presents.

The professor himself opened the door of the garage and backed the two-seater into the yard. Hands hurried in to pack. Years of intimate experience had taught him that when some bee buzzed in Professor Pye’s bonnet, it was necessary to let that bee buzz itself to death. Besides, thought Hands, as he tossed his belongings into an old fibre case, the Brighton idea with thirty quid to blow was a bit of all right. He could take Jumbo down to the beach and introduce the dog to the sea. Jumbo had never seen the sea.

He hurried out to the waiting car. The professor, hatless, was sitting in the driving seat. It struck Hands that Professor Pye’s hair looked more turbulent and fierce than usual.

“Do you want your hat, sir?”

Professor Pye looked contemptuous. Need the world’s new god and master be reminded of the conventional hat?

“Get in, Hands. Better nurse your dog.”

Hands slung his suit-case into the dickey, and got in, holding Jumbo in his arms.

The private lane struck the main road about a quarter of a mile from where the On-force had acted, but even here cars were strung out and people were standing talking. Professor Pye threaded his way through the crowd. He took the Merrow road, and on the long hill to Newlands Corner they met a couple of ambulances.

Hands was interested.

“Must have been an accident, sir.”

“Probably, Hands, probably.”

“A pretty bad smash, I should say, sir. Road blocked, and two ambulances.”

“The roads are full of fools, Hands.”

“Must have been a motor-coach, sir.”

“Perhaps two motor-coaches, Hands.”

The professor drove into Guildford, and in his state of mental exaltation he drove rather carelessly. He ignored or did not observe the signal of a policeman on point duty, and the constable whistled to him and came and said rude and sarcastic things to the professor. He was a tall and superior young man with thin lips and a Roman nose.

“Careless driving—dangerous driving. Ignoring signals——”

The professor went red.

“I didn’t see you.”

“You were not looking, sir.”

“I’ve something more important to do,” said Pye, “than look for fools in uniform.”

That put the official back up. The professor had to produce his licence. The policeman took notes and told Mr. Alfred Pye that the case would be reported.

The professor smiled a little sneering smile.

“Think so, do you? Poor idiot!”

The policeman waved him on.

“You might watch your manners, sir.”

Manners—indeed! The professor drove on to the station and deposited Hands, dog, and suit-case. He was abrupt with Hands.

“Enjoy yourself. Go and see Loch Lomond.”

Hands saluted the professor as he drove off. Gosh, but the old lad had put it across the bobby! Would he—Hands—be hauled up as a witness? Probably, but not till after he had completed a classic week at Brighton. He watched the two-seater disappear, and with Jumbo on the lead, he walked into the booking-office, and took a third-class ticket and a dog ticket for London.

The professor left Guildford by the Shalford road. He had no desire to repass that insolent young officer, but so poor a thing was his philosophy that it pleased him to think that all such insolent and obstructive fools would soon be effaced, with all courts and cross-roads. Alfred Pye's return was without adventure. Certainly, he did pass a number of cars whose occupants had the serious and subdued faces of people who had seen some strange and rather terrible thing. In fact, by the Albury fork a scout signalled to the professor and shouted a warning to him.

"Better go slow, sir—there's been a bad accident along there."

Professor Pye, head in air, smiled at him.

"Thank you. I will be exceedingly careful."

VIII

Professor Pye left his car parked at the bottom of the lane and walked along the high road to observe in a proper scientific spirit the results of his experiment. There was still a considerable crowd here, and both the crowd and the traffic were being controlled by the police. Professor Pye wormed his way as far as the nearest policeman, but when he attempted to pass the officer he was ordered back. There were some twenty tenantless cars along that section of road. Police, ambulance men and volunteers had had to extract the dead motorists and lay them on the grass beside the road. Some of the bodies were still there.

It was a shocked, sober, quiet crowd. The whole business was a mystery, and Professor Pye was able to savour the elements of the sensation he had produced. He was not shocked by the tragedy. He was immensely curious as to the lethal effects of the On-force on the human body.

He listened to two men talking, educated men.

“It couldn’t have been carbon monoxide. How could it have been?”

“Well—what else? People just dead in their cars. The doctors tried artificial respiration.”

“No use. Something extraordinarily sinister and strange. Apparently, there was no explosion of any kind, nothing to be seen or heard. Just as though poison gas had been released.”

“Could there have been anything in one of those first cars?”

“What’s the idea?”

“I’m not a chemist, but supposing one of those cars had contained a carboy of some chemical that vaporized easily, and the gas was lethal?”

“It’s possible—I suppose.”

“People just collapsed where they sat or stood. Something very potent and deadly.”

“Anyhow it’s pretty ghastly.”

Someone was shouting in the field above the road, a farm hand who had come to collect those cows for milking, and had found them dead. The hedge happened to be a high one, and no one in the road had seen those dead beasts. The farm hand ran down to the hedge and shouted to one of the policeman.

“Hi—come and look, all our cows dead!”

People scrambled up the bank and tried to peer through the hedge. The driver of a van found a gate and climbed over it. The crowd followed him, and suddenly some premonition warned Professor Pye of possible complications. He hurried back to his car, drove it up and into the garage, and locking all doors, ascended to the top of the tower.

He crouched and looked over the parapet. The lower field was stippled with human figures. He saw faces turned towards the house on the hill. Someone was pointing, and sweeping an arm as though to indicate the direction and drift of a gas cloud. People were arguing.

“If you take that house on the hill, and these dead cows and the road—they line up, so to speak. What is that place up there?”

Someone pointed to the live cows in the upper field.

“What about those beasts? If your gas idea——”

“I’m thinking of that affair in Belgium when people were gassed by the emanations from a factory.”

“But that was foggy weather. Besides, who would emit a lethal gas on the top of the downs?”

“Yes, but supposing someone was experimenting? A heavy gas would roll downhill on a still day like this.”

“But, my dear sir—those other cows there are none the worse.”

“That’s so. Anyway it’s a pretty ghastly puzzle.”

“The autopsies on those poor devils ought to show something.”

“I suppose so.”

Professor Pye was thinking rapidly and logically, and for the first time his demonic egotism was tinged with fear. He had let death loose. He had stirred up the social hive, and these angry insects would be buzzing hither and thither seeking—what? No, the simile of the hive and the insect swarm did not apply. He and mankind were at war, and man was a creature of intelligence who could think, reflect and explore. His wits were at war with the wits of mankind.

At any moment he might have that crowd pouring up the hill to investigate. His experiment went to prove that for some unexplained reason his On-force did not exert its effect until it had travelled four hundred yards. If those people advanced into the non-lethal zone he and his discovery would be at their mercy.

His ruthlessness was reinforced by fear. After all—this was war, Alfred Pye *contra* Mundum. Was he—the new Jove—to flinch with the lightning in his hand? He stood up. He trained the atomic gun on the people in the field He opened the diaphragm and switched on the current. With a kind of cold and frozen glee he saw that death was there—painless, sudden death.

For some minutes a kind of frenzy possessed him. The gun was mounted on a ball and socket joint and roller bearings and could be slewed in any direction. He swung it south, west, north, east, keeping the hypothetical range low. He would create about him a circle of silence and security. He would efface any near possible interference. He must have time to think, time to act.

Was he aware of the silence that fell upon all that part of Surrey, such a silence as had not been known since the glaciers of the ice age piled up their deposits of gravel and sand? Motor-cars, suddenly released from control, ran on till they ended in hedges or ditches. Guildford High Street with its chaos of cars and of shoppers was a place where people seemed to have fallen asleep in cars and on pavements. At the foot of the steep hill runaway motors had piled themselves. Shop assistants lay dead behind their counters. There was not a sound to be heard, save perhaps the ticking of hundreds of clocks. Even the dogs and the cats and the birds were dead. At Newlands Corner the turf was covered with the figures of men, women and children who seemed to sleep. Spectral trains ran for a while past signal boxes and through stations where life had ceased. In a thicket a quarter-mile from the white house two lovers lay dead in each other’s arms.

Professor Pye walked down to the field where the dead lay. There was no anguish here, no distortion, merely the semblance of sleep. It would appear that the On-force acted upon the central nervous system, producing shock and syncope. The human heart ceased beating.

Professor Pye looked at the first dead in the war between a mad scientist and humanity. Almost, he felt kindly towards these victims. Had not they helped to prove his power?

Moreover, might he not be regarded as a beneficent being? He could give peace and sudden painless oblivion to a world of disease, and futile little strivings, discontents, poverty, bitternesses. The class war, votes, the dole, demos stupid and arrogant, politicians orating, the sensational puerilities of the press! He could put an end to all this. He could cleanse the earth, efface all the fools and mental deficients, and leaving perhaps a hardy remnant in some corner of Canada or Japan, renew the human experiment on scientific lines. He, Professor Pye, would be its god, and dictator.

Returning, he crossed the upper field where those live cows were still grazing. One of the beasts raised a head and stared at him with large, liquid eyes.

Professor Pye raised a hand as though blessing the beast.

“Behold your god, my dear. You shall be retained in his service.”

His madness had reached its zenith. It transcended even a great man’s folly. It was egotism that forgot both the bull and the cowherd. Who would milk those beasts? Or—did Professor Pye propose to live in a desert on wild apples and honey? But even the bees were dead. The only survivals were the trees and the grasses and all green things, and certain low forms of life whose central nervous system was not sufficiently sensitive to be shocked by the On-force.

IX

But the alarm was being sounded. Professor Pye had silenced everything within a radius of fifteen miles, but into that reservation other humans were beginning to penetrate. Waterloo Station was all crowds and chaos. Telephone operators, tired of calling, “Hallo, Guildford,” and finding themselves repulsed by a most strange silence in all that part of Surrey, left their instruments and became part of a London that stood in the streets and listened to monstrous rumours. The bus depots were disorganized. Such and such a bus had never returned. Scared motorists who had passed through that zone of death, pulled up when they rediscovered people who were living, and with white faces spread the incredible news.

“Half Surrey’s dead.”

“Miles of derelict cars and buses.”

“At Addlestone a train had stopped at the level crossing. Full of dead people. Signalman dead in his box. We couldn’t get through that way.”

The thing seemed too ghastly and immense to be true.

But already police cars and pressmen and adventurous motorists, and agonized city men were penetrating into that circle of death. The Prime Minister had called an emergency meeting of the Cabinet at No. 10, Downing Street. Scotland Yard was at work. The Press rushed out alarmist editions. Almost, they were fought for by the crowds in the streets. Press agencies were telephoning from all over the world.

“What Has Happened in Surrey?”

“Is it an Attack from Mars?”

Police cars, returning from the dead area, had to force their way through scared and eager crowds. Rumour became actuality, and as the news spread a shocked and bewildered silence seemed to spread over London. People were inarticulate. The thing was too vast, too terrible, too astounding. It was said that the P.M. himself had hurried down into Surrey. Aldershot had been wiped out as well as Guildford and Godalming. Woking, Byfleet and the districts along the river were full of dead people. The Guards were being paraded. The whole of the available police were being mobilized.

People rushed to their wireless sets. What had the B.B.C. to say?

The little voice of the announcer was official.

“The Prime Minister appeals to everyone to remain calm. He asks you to mistrust all wild rumours, and to avoid panic. All the possible causes of this unprecedented and terrible tragedy are being explored.”

Night.

Professor Pye had been sitting at his wireless set. It had an extensive range and he could listen in to London, Paris, Berlin, Milan. He picked up fragments of Continental agitation. Paris was commenting upon the incredible cataclysm in England. Had there been an escape of some strange subterranean gas through a crack in the earth’s crust? No seismic shock had been recorded. Milan was speculating as to cosmic dust. Or had the lethal atmosphere of some passing comet brushed across a portion of Great Britain? Eminent scientists were being asked to give their views upon a catastrophe that was of startling significance to the whole world.

Professor Pye went up to his tower. He looked out over Surrey. He heard the lowing of those abandoned and unmilked cows in the field below. He heard the sound of a car in the valley, and saw its headlights clearing the darkness. That ingenious and irrepressible insect man was buzzing back into the death zone. The car stopped in the valley. And then Professor Pye heard the drone of an aeroplane overhead.

His madness became cunning. He had left the lights in the laboratory, and he hurried downstairs and switched them off. If he showed a light—especially a stationary light—his enemies might infer that someone was alive. Life itself would inspire curiosity—suspicion. He had other brains pitted against his.

He returned to the tower. He had hurried up the staircase. He was agitated. That aeroplane was droning overhead, and its sound was angry and menacing. He would have to deal with aeroplanes. Just before dusk he had taken his bearings and left the atomic gun trained upon Brighton. Yes, he would try more current. It was a risk, but he would have to take that risk. He stood in the darkness behind the tube and released a larger volume of On-force.

The gun had stood the strain.

But just how far would its lethal effect carry? Supposing that the range was limited by the size of the apparatus? What then? Yes, he would have to experiment and discover how far this power extended. By listening in he would be able to define the dead zone from the living. If Paris remained vocal he would have discovered the limitations of his gun. What then? To maintain about him a zone of death, to repulse all penetration, until he had built a more powerful apparatus.

Ruthlessness, a kind of divine ruthlessness, was inevitable.

Meanwhile, these explorers, these angry human insects in cars and aeroplanes were beginning to buzz about him. They would have to be dealt with—and that instantly. He must make his desert so deadly that no human creature would dare to venture into it. It was necessary for him to have leisure, breathing space, security. He had food and water, electricity, oil.

Inexorably, but with a slight and significant tremor of the hands he slewed the gun this way and that. There had been voices, in the valley, but suddenly they were stilled, though the cars' headlights continued to blaze. Crouching, he pointed the gun skywards towards the sound of the cruising plane. The drone did not cease, but it seemed to slip and to descend. There was a sound of a crash in the valley, and presently a knot of flame sprang up.

X

Terror upon terror, sensation after sensation.

The Prime Minister had not returned from Surrey. None of those who had hurried down to investigate had returned.

Heston Aerodrome, which had sent out two scouting planes, reported both machines as missing.

Moreover, doctors in the area surrounding that centre of darkness and of silence were being summoned to hundreds of people who had fainted and remained unconscious for short periods of time. The On-force, lethal over a definite field, weakened upon dispersal until it produced nothing more than syncopic attacks, giddiness, nausea.

A telephone operator, speaking to the Brighton exchange, was left stranded in sudden silence.

“Hallo—Brighton, hallo.”

Brighton did not reply.

Other people who were speaking to friends in Brighton experienced the shock of that same silence. Voices died away, and did not return.

Trains that had left Brighton after dark, or were in the Brighton area, failed to arrive.

Horsham, Cuckfield, Hassocks were equally silent. So were Peacehaven and Shoreham, Steyning and Lewes. Worthing and Eastbourne reported hundreds of cases of people fainting in the streets, on the sea front, in cinemas, hotels, houses.

The area over which the On-force was active had the shape of an elongated egg. It spread gradually from its point of origin, reached a certain extreme width, and then contracted. Earth contours, hills and valleys, appeared to have no obstructing effect upon the force. It penetrated wherever there was air. People were killed in tunnels, subways and cellars.

During that first night very few people slept. A venturesome aviator, flying in the early morning over Surrey and Sussex, returned safely to Croydon Aerodrome. He and his observer had the stark faces of men who had looked upon some horror.

“Brighton’s a vast morgue. Yes, we flew low along Brighton front. Thousands of people lying dead there.”

The Cabinet, sitting at No. 10, Downing Street, received the news of this latest cataclysm. Already they had called in scientific experts, among them Professors James and Beddington. Maps were spread. With such facts as they could command, these ministers and experts attempted to define the area of death and to arrive at some explanation of the mystery.

There was the problem of a public panic and the Press.

“Better stop all the morning papers.”

“Wouldn’t that be more likely to produce a panic? Press has been asked to refrain from publishing too much detail.”

Professor Beddington, bending over a map, was shading certain portions of it with a blue pencil. He had a police report beside him.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer bent over Beddington’s shoulder.

“Any theory, Beddington?”

Beddington was a dispassionate, large-headed man who had the appearance of a farmer.

“There seems to be a definite focus. Our information goes to show that the focus is on the North Downs between Guildford and Dorking.”

The Leader of the House, standing by a window and smoking a pipe, asked the question that was at the back of every mind:

“It might happen—to London?”

Professor Beddington looked up.

“Yes. Obviously—so.”

Somewhere in the room a voice sounded a note of fear.

“What—is—the damned thing? My God—we must find out!”

“Any views on the Martian theory, Beddington?”

The man at the table tapped his teeth with the end of the blue pencil.

“Not very likely. If Mars was bombarding us with some kind of cosmic ray—there would be more dispersion. I mean, I think the area covered would be larger. We have had no reports from the Continent, have we, of similar happenings?”

“No.”

The Leader of the House, his pipe in his right hand, came and stood at the

table.

“Then the thing’s—human?”

“Inhumanly human. Satanic.”

“Well?”

Professor Beddington leaned back in his chair.

“Supposing some individual who was anti-social and not quite sane had discovered how to control and use such a thing as—shall we say—atomic energy.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Is that possible? Of course, Beddington, you are one of the few men——”

“It is what we have been working for—but beneficently so.”

“Then, the inference is that if some malignant genius had evolved something of the kind he could wipe out humanity?”

“Exactly.”

“Good God! how would one deal with him?”

Professor Beddington smiled.

“Ah—how?”

Professor James had been scribbling on a writing-pad. He raised his head suddenly and spoke.

“I have been jotting down names, Beddington, alphabetically. I have just come to Pye. Did you ever meet Pye?”

“Once.”

“Rather a poisonous little person, but infernally clever. I happen to know that Pye lives in Surrey. He had a grievance against—everybody and everything. He was supposed to be researching on his own. Now, supposing, for argument’s sake, a man like Pye——?”

Professor Beddington nodded his large head.

“That’s my feeling too, James. I think we have to deal with some infernally clever super-megalomaniac. One ought to try and put one’s hand on every physicist in the country.”

Said the Man with the Pipe, “Why not begin with this fellow—Pye? He can be located; he can be——”

Once again Professor Beddington smiled his quiet smile.

“Yes—but supposing Pye to be the man—Pye will be—unapproachable. We cannot raise Pye to the Teeth—by—just deciding to do so. Pye can elevate us all to Paradise—before——”

“Good God!” said the frightened voice—“we are like a lot of doomed rats in a ship.”

The Man with the Pipe relit it.

He said, “I never felt less like a rat.”

XI

Professor Pye had not slept. He had been listening to the aerial voices of the earth.

Soon after dawn he carried a chair to the top of the tower and sat down beside his infernal gun.

He was like a little grey spider in the midst of a web of silence.

Brighton—human Brighton—had ceased to be. He had picked up that news from French sources. He was able to infer that his On-force had not reached the coast of France.

He sat with a map on his knees. He looked haggard, and his eyelids were red. If London shivered on the edge of panic, Professor Pye was not very far from strange terror. His discovery was catastrophic, but in the clarity of that September dawn he confronted his limitations. Obviously, the range of his atomic gun was lethal up to perhaps a hundred miles, but beyond that point society was safe. The problem posed him. Either the gun as it was designed would have to be made mobile, or a larger and more powerful apparatus be constructed. If he mounted the gun on a car and lorry, he would need more current than a portable battery could supply. He might connect, of course, with local generating stations. But when he had dealt with England, Wales and Scotland, he would arrive at the sea. A fast motor-boat and a dash across the Channel! but he could infer that the air would be thick with patrolling aeroplanes waiting for “It” to emerge from England. He would have to clear the sky as he went.

He began to shrink inwardly from the vastness of his war upon society. It began to scare him. He went below and heated up some coffee, and into it he poured some of his old brandy. A little knot of warmth hardened in his stomach. He lit a cigar, and with a faint suggestion of swagger he walked up and down the laboratory. How silent the world was! Sounds that he would not have reacted to on a normal day now impressed themselves on him by their absence. No trains, no traffic on the road, no birds, no Hands, no dog. Even those few live cows had stampeded in a panic, crashed through hedges, and had ceased to be. He heard nothing but the ticking of the laboratory clock, and the sound of his own footfalls. When he stood still to listen he could hear his own breathing.

But what was that?

He was growing jumpy. He stiffened and bristled like a scared cat.

Yes, there was some sound, a vibration in the air. Aeroplanes—not one, but several! The distant roar of the engines and the hum of the propellers roused qualms in his stomach. Big drums beating, war-drums. He rushed up the stairs to the tower; he crouched. He saw five planes in formation flying from the north-east. Soon they would be over the tower.

He crawled to the gun, slewed it round and up, and covered those planes. He released the On-force. For a second or two the planes held on before their formation broke; they appeared to drift this way and that like errant leaves. They dived, spun—disappeared beyond the hill. He counted five faint crashes.

Professor Pye left the gun pointed skywards and rose to his feet. He had wiped out that R.A.F. squadron, but the appearance of that squadron over the North Downs gave him furiously to think. Did the world suspect? Had other brains than his spent sleepless hours over the elucidation of the problem, and were approaching the most probable solution? They were postulating the manifestations of some new form of energy controlled and applied by a human being who was hostile to his fellows. They were searching for the focus of the On-force and the man who controlled it. They were sending out planes to scout over Surrey.

A sudden frenzy took possession of Alfred Pye. They suspected him! They were trying to locate the new demi-god. These fools thought that they could destroy him and his discovery, a discovery that if wisely used could efface an idiot democracy and cleanse the earth of demagogues and claptrap. He had in his hands the power to create a new earth, to decide what should live and what should die. He was the new dictator, a super-eugenist who could purge the earth of the little people who preached the palsy of Socialism. Equality! Brains like so many peas in a pod! Preposterous nonsense! He would demonstrate to the mob that it had a master.

His ruthless sanity may have been inspired, for those who have vision look for an autocracy of science, a just and beneficent tyranny exercised by the enlightened few over the inferior many. Science will mount its Olympus and rule, holding perhaps the menace of lightning in its hands. But Professor Pye had no Olympian smile. He was both ruthlessly sane and malignantly mad. He was a megalomaniac in a hurry to impress a destructive ego upon a society that opposed him.

London?

Yes, London was the enemy. London must be destroyed, for its destruction would send such a shudder over the earth that civilization would fall on its knees and surrender.

He would hear aerial voices appealing for mercy.

“O Thou Unknown God and Master, have pity on us. Spare us and we will serve you.”

His face was the face of a man in a frenzy. He trained the atomic gun on London, and then suddenly he paused. He had a sardonic inspiration. He possessed a small portable wireless set which he used when the more powerful apparatus was not needed. He went below and carried the little cabinet up into the tower. He placed it beside the gun.

Was London speaking?

He switched on. London was speaking. He heard the little, refined and carefully standardized voice of the B.B.C. announcer. It was telling England that Mr. Percy Haldane—the Leader of the House—was about to broadcast on the crisis. Mr. Haldane wished to appeal to the country for calmness and courage. There must be no panic. The Government and its body of experts were convinced that they were on the brink of locating the origin of the catastrophe and also its originator.

Professor Pye moistened his thin lips. So, they thought, did they—that he would wait to be located? Fantastic fools! But he would hold his hand for a moment and listen in to that prince of platitudinarians, Mr. Percy Haldane. It was Mr. Percy Haldane’s Government that had presented Sir Philip Gasson with his knighthood. A tribute to science! Gasson a scientist? He was just an academic sneak-thief.

The announcer’s voice ceased. There was a short pause, and then the deliberate and slightly sententious and rolling voice of Mr. Haldane was heard.

“I am speaking to England. I am speaking to those who, in a crisis, have never failed to meet it, however acute and ominous that crisis has been. Within the last forty-eight hours this country has experienced a series of mysterious catastrophes, but may I once say that the mystery is on the point of being—resolved. We—the Cabinet and our body of experts—are confident—that there is—in this country a monstrous offender against—civilization and humanity. We believe and are sure—that we can deal—with this evil spirit in our midst. I have just left a conference in which several eminent scientists, Professors Beddington and James, and Sir Philip Gasson——”

Professor Pye’s head gave a jerk. A little malevolent smile shimmered over his face. So, Gasson was there, Gasson the slimy and debonair, Gasson of the black velvet coat and the cerise-coloured tie, Gasson who, when lecturing, posed as though all the women must think him Zeus. Professor Pye licked his

lips. Mr. Haldane’s voice was still booming.

Click! Professor Pye switched on the current. The wireless cabinet produced four more words from Mr. Percy Haldane.

“We English are people——”

Silence! Not a murmur. The little wooden cabinet was mute, and Professor Pye’s face malignantly triumphant. Exit—London, exit Mr. Percy Haldane, and Philip Gasson, and Whitehall and Somerset House, and Lambeth Palace, Whitechapel, all that suppurating sore which fools called a great city. Eros, on his pedestal in Piccadilly Circus, would be posing above an exhibit of corpses. For a few seconds there must have been infinite mechanical chaos, buses and cars running amok, charging each other and crashing through shop-fronts. The trains in the tubes had continued to circulate like toy trains until a confusion of collisions had jammed the tunnels.

Professor Pye’s cold frenzy continued. He swept the whole horizon with his gun. He would efface everything within the limit of its range, and then wait for the earth to surrender.

He would listen in to Europe’s terror and anguish.

Soon, they would be appealing to the Unknown God for mercy.

America, Asia, Africa, Australia, all would be on their knees to him in their transmission stations.

The world would surrender to him by wireless.

XII

Over the whole South-East of England, a large portion of East Anglia, the Midlands and the West there was silence. The death zone covered Bournemouth, Bristol, Gloucester, Birmingham, Leicester, Peterborough, Ipswich, Dover. Exeter, Cardiff, Derby, Nottingham and Norwich were alive. Calais and a small segment of the French coast had been affected. Just beyond the zone, life had been shocked but not effaced. There had been the same symptoms of nausea, giddiness, and in some cases temporary unconsciousness.

For some days panic prevailed. A few adventurous or anguished souls attempted to penetrate the lethal zone, only to be effaced by Professor Pye's drenching of that area with On-force. Once every hour the atomic gun covered every point of the compass. Half Somerset, Devon and Cornwall were isolated between the Channel and the Irish Sea. From villages and towns near the border line the population fled, pouring into Wales, Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire. Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield were flooded with refugees. During those first few days organized government, the very social scheme itself seemed in danger of dissolution.

It was in Manchester that resistance hardened. The Lord Mayor of Manchester and the city council formed themselves into a species of provisional government. The crisis was unprecedented, and improvisations were urgent and inevitable. The mayors of all the Yorkshire and Lancashire towns were gathered in. York proposed that the centre of authority should be located at Edinburgh.

Meanwhile, the whole world was in agitation.

Moscow both trembled and gloated. Bourgeois England had received a death-blow.

New York was all head-lines. Crowds filled the streets.

France, wounded at Calais, so near the terror, was arming with all its expert intelligence to combat the horror.

A deputation flew from Manchester to Paris to discuss with the French Government the confrontation of this crisis. Europe's international quarrels were forgotten for the moment. Berlin, Prague, Rome, Madrid, each sent a body of representatives and experts to Paris. Signor Mussolini flew in person to the French capital, bringing with him a little Italian physicist from Turin, Professor Pirelli. The discussions were informal and held at the Elysée. It was Mussolini's little professor who was in a position to bring forward data that

might explain the cataclysm. He too was working on the atom. He had released from it certain energy that when controlled was lethal to mice and rats. His work was as yet an affair of the laboratory, but he postulated that the earth was being assailed by some inspired lunatic who had discovered how to release and control atomic energy.

The English members could produce certain facts. London, before its destruction, had telegraphed confidential information to the municipal authorities in the provinces. The source of the mysterious force was centred in Surrey, and probably on the North Downs within a few miles of Guildford. It was known that a certain eccentric scientist had a house there, and that he lived the life of a misanthrope and a recluse. Professor Pye was under suspicion.

Europe's Council of War debated the problem. It was evident that the field of force was limited. The death area had not extended. It was like a spider's web, and in the centre of it crouched the spider.

Signor Mussolini was for instant action.

"Aeroplanes—bombs."

Reminded that the air was controlled over that area, he was not to be dissuaded.

"We must attack. Let our aeroplanes go out by the hundred, swarm after swarm, to observe, and to make sure. We must take risks, every risk."

Those round the table looked to Professor Pirelli. Had he anything to suggest? He smiled whimsically. No, he had nothing more subtle to propose. Crude explosives, or perhaps gas bombs, were the only retort science could provide at the moment. Even if one aeroplane survived, and discovered one live human being in that death area, it might be assumed that that one live man was the monster who was attacking humanity.

One German delegate suggested the construction of long-range guns that could be mounted on the French coast to bombard Surrey.

The French President, with certain unhappy memories in his mind, asked the German to say how long it would take to manufacture those guns, and the German was silent.

No, action must be instant and co-ordinated. The terror might spread. They must make what use they could of the instruments that were to hand. Every country must supply its quota of planes. It would be better to call for volunteers as aviators and observers.

Signor Mussolini flew back to Rome, the Germans to Berlin. Orders were

issued to the French Air Force. To begin with the air squadrons would patrol the outskirts of the death zone, observe and report, before attempting to locate and destroy the enemy.

XIII

Professor Pye waited for the earth to broadcast its appeal for mercy. The aerial voice might be English, French or German, but Alfred Pye spoke both French and German, and perhaps he expected the voice to be French.

Meanwhile, he had not had his clothes off for three days, nor had he slept, save in brief snatches. He was looking distinctly worn and dishevelled. He had omitted to shave that part of his face that was accustomed to be razored, and his eyes were the eyes of a man short of sleep.

He had carried a mattress and bed-clothes to the top of the tower. He took his perfunctory meals there beside his gun, with the portable wireless switched on, and a pair of binoculars slung round his neck. A dispassionate observer would have described him as a scraggy little man who was both scared and irritable, a grey rat on the alert. Professor Pye was feeling the strain of playing the part of Jupiter.

He was becoming more and more aware of the dreadful silence. He looked out upon a green world that was empty of all sound and movement, save the movement of the clouds and the trees. He was surrounded by a ghastly, stagnant greenness, and at night he was alone with the stars. Almost, he began to hunger for the sound of a human voice. The craving was illogical and absurd, but so strong was it that he carried a gramophone up to the tower and played Bach and Beethoven.

Moreover, the air was unaccountably silent. Even his large installation could pick up no voices. What was the earth doing? Had his On-force gradually penetrated over the whole globe, and had man ceased to be? But if so he himself should be dead, for the force would have circled the earth and returned to destroy him.

Most strange—this silence.

Or was it deliberate? Was civilization conspiring to isolate him? Were all the earth’s transmitting stations wilfully mute? Paris and Berlin and New York might be conferring by cable.

Now and again he would patrol the top of the tower and turn his glasses on the green emptiness of Surrey, and scan the whole horizon. There were moments when he imagined movement upon some hill-side, or fancied that he could spot an aeroplane in the distance. He would rush to his gun and apply On-force to the imagined menace.

He was beginning to look very wild about the eyes.

September continued warm and sunny. A gentle breeze blew from the east, and at noon the mercury stood at seventy.

It happened that Professor Pye had gone below to make himself some tea. He was using tinned milk. He carried the tea tray to the top of the tower, and as he reached it he became aware of a faint odour, sickly and strange. It was as though the whole atmosphere was tainted. He put the tray down on a table, and stood with his nose to the wind.

An odour of death, of decay? Yes, that was it, millions of dead bodies swelling in the September heat. He was scenting London, Greater London, all those towns and villages, the dead cows in the field below, the dead men and women in the valley. And Professor Pye's face looked suddenly bloodless and ashy. Almost, it was the face of a corpse. He left his tea untouched. He had not seen the horror he had perpetrated, but he could savour it.

Nausea attacked him. He went below and poured out two ounces of brandy.

XIV

Would nothing happen?

This silence was becoming unbearable.

He was possessed by a febrile and busy restlessness. He went out and walked along the downs—but that sickly smell of decay was everywhere. Even in green and solitary places he blundered upon death—bodies lying around a cloth with cups and plates and cushions, a dead lad and a girl, an old man with a book, a child and not far away a man and woman. He saw a dead dog lying in some rough grass. Was he himself alive or dead? More than once his fingers went to his throat. War, yes, war, but the silence and stench of a field after a battle! He slunk back to the white house. He found himself hungry for the face of Hands, yes, even for a disfigured face.

And what had become of Hands?

He fell into a kind of frenzy. He drank more brandy. Where were his enemies? Why did they not attack?

But the war of the world against Professor Pye was developing. To begin with the reconnaissance in force was crudely conceived. A hundred aeroplanes flying in a vast half-circle crossed the Channel and passed over Sussex. The hour was about noon on a clear day and the planes had the sun above and behind them. Professor Pye heard the faint roar of the massed machines as they crossed the South Downs, for his ears had been straining to catch some sound that might break the stagnant silence. He turned his field-glasses on that stretch of sky. He saw the little black silhouettes strung out across the horizon. The planes were flying fast and low.

Here—at last—was something tangible to deal with. The earth was alive, and it had not surrendered. Those planes were coming to attack him. Anger and hatred revived. Insolent fools! Did they imagine that an aerial cavalry charge could contend with his On-force.

He sat by his gun. He waited until that half-moon of flying folly was within a mile of him, and then, slewing his gun from left to right, he shot the machines down. They seemed to falter and fall one after another like so many crows.

Once more there was silence.

The attack was repeated twice that day on the same unimaginative lines, but the second assault came from the north. Professor Pye might be dishevelled

and wild of eye, but in annihilating those aerial enemies he recovered a kind of malignant exultation.

When would the fools realize that they had to deal with a superman who was their master?

This was the world's Waterloo. Flying cuirassiers charging a little cube of concrete that was invulnerable! He would teach humanity that its salvation would be secured only by surrender.

There followed more than twenty-four hours of silence, and the next night Professor Pye dared to sleep. He was urgently in need of sleep. Wrapped in a great-coat he sat on the tower till two o'clock in the morning. It was too cold here. He dragged the mattress and bed-clothes down into the laboratory. He would allow himself two hours sleep on the laboratory floor.

He slept, but half an hour after the break of day he was awakened by a rush and a roar overhead. Something had passed with the speed of a shell, and set the glass bottles and jars in the laboratory vibrating. For some seconds Professor Pye sat sodden with sleep, wondering whether the thing had happened or whether he had dreamed it, but a distant and diminishing roar warned him of the reality.

In brief, the Italians had brought a couple of flying-boats to Dunkirk, machines built for the Schneider Cup and capable of flying nearly four hundred miles an hour. It was one of these swift machines, which, trusting to its speed, had roared over Sussex and Surrey, and was now making for the Bristol Channel. Professor Pye grasped the significance of the machine's rush across his safety zone. It could enter the lethal zone, traverse its two hundred miles in half an hour, and escape to report.

He was in his pyjamas. He rushed upstairs to the tower. He shivered in the cold morning air. He saw a great yellow sun hanging above the Surrey hills. That screaming hydroplane was more than thirty miles away. In another ten minutes it would be beyond his reach. He ducked down behind his gun, slewed it round, and released the On-force. The hydroplane was over Reading and following the Thames when the force struck it. The machine crashed on to a roof in Friar Street and burst into flames. It started a conflagration that blazed for hours.

Professor Pye stood shivering.

"That fellow might have bombed me."

He realized that with such machines in action against him his margin of safety had been reduced to fifteen minutes. This was serious. It suggested that

he would have to sweep the air every quarter of an hour.

But had they located him? Were these machines merely groping for the enemy? Moreover, he could assume that there were not more than half a dozen machines in the world capable of such speed. Let them all come and crash, and the proof of his power would be all the more catastrophic.

But it was cold on the tower. There had been a slight ground frost. He regretted that warm bed; and that morning he mixed brandy with his coffee.

XV

In Paris there was gloom and consternation. Not an aeroplane had returned. The death zone had swallowed them up, and mocked the world with a malignant and ominous silence.

Was humanity helpless?

It was a delegate from Manchester University, a pawky and rather reticent young man with a squint, who brought psychology to bear upon the problem.

Said the Manchester lad: “Granted that there is something inhumanly human behind this devilment—that’s to say we have to deal with a man. He is using atomic force or some sort of ray. Let us presume that he has to function, eat, sleep, remain alert. Now, an apparatus or a machine may be more or less infallible—man is not. The flesh can fail, and so can concentration. Let him stew in silence for a week.”

The French President nodded.

“You suggest—that silence might unnerve him.”

“It might fool him. Imagine a man making war on the world. Silence, solitude, a ghastly and fantastic solitude. He might go potty.”

Continental gentlemen had to have “potty” explained to them.

“Mad? But yes, we understand——”

“Surely—the creature cannot be considered sane?”

“He’s most damnably sane,” said the psychologist, “but he must have sleep. Imagine a man sitting by some apparatus, listening and watching for days and nights. He won’t stand it for ever. He’ll break down. He’ll fall asleep. He might commit suicide.”

The shrewd common sense of Manchester was accepted, and the conference at Paris decided to blockade Professor Pye with silence.

For the first twenty-four hours Professor Pye examined this silence and its various and possible implications. His enemies had been profoundly discouraged, or perhaps they were trying to fool him into over-confidence. None the less, this silence worried him; it kept him on the alert—especially so at night. It was so profound and so inhuman. It chained him to the top of the tower. He had connected flexes and ear-phones to his larger installation, and for hours he sat on the tower listening and listening—to silence. Every quarter of an hour he had to sweep the horizon with his atomic gun.

Once more the silence began to frighten him. It was as though nothingness possessed powers of attrition, like dropping water or blowing sand. There was pressure in this silence. It became almost like a heavy hand upon the top of his head, bearing more and more heavily upon his brain. The stillness was both so alive and so dead. He began to long for sound, even for some hostile sound that was human.

The landscape had become a painted scene, the sky a kind of hard blue ceiling across which artificial clouds floated. It seemed to be pressing nearer and nearer. His eyes ached. Almost, he was conscious of his tense and overstrained ear-drums. He had aged; he looked haggard and grey and dishevelled.

Three days and three nights of that silence.

His brain was beginning to manufacture sounds, and sometimes these auditory hallucinations were so real, that he would jump up and look over the parapet. Surely he had heard voices down there? Or he would switch on his gun and sweep the horizon.

He had fed in snatches and slept in snatches. He fought sleep. His desire for sleep was as terrible as the silence. It menaced him like a dark wall of water. He fought it off. It would be fatal for him to sleep for any length of time.

Why had he not thought of this before? He should have been prepared with some mechanism that would keep his gun revolving while he rested.

Why did not those fools flash him a message of surrender?

He was becoming less and less of a superman, God Pye *contra* Mundum, but a little dishevelled ape of a man who was beginning to chatter to himself and to react to imaginary noises.

On the third night he was convinced that he heard a dog barking outside the house. Hands's dog—Jumbo? Had the little beast been near him all the time? But no, he had driven Hands and the dog to Guildford. Nevertheless, he rushed out in a state of strange excitement. He called; he appealed to the ghost dog in a wheedling voice.

"Hallo—doggie! Come here, good dog. Come along, old man. Nice bone for nice doggie."

He whistled and whistled and called, but the silence was like grey rock.

He cursed—"Go to hell, you beast."

He slammed the door and burst into sudden tears.

XVI

Mrs. Hector Hyde's landing at Le Bourget was not fortuitous. The famous airwoman had been engaged in one of her adventurous escapades over Asia, finding other hazards to conquer, when she had picked up an aerial message from Tashkent. This piece of world news had been sufficiently wild and improbable to pique Mrs. Hyde. She had turned the nose of her plane westwards, and landing at Baghdad, had asked to be enlightened.

"What is this absurd rumour?"

Baghdad could assure her that this was no rumour but very terrible reality.

Mrs. Hector Hyde ate, slept for two hours, had her machine refuelled, and took off for Paris. She arrived at Le Bourget late in the afternoon, and asked to be driven at once to the English embassy. Mrs. Hector Hyde, being both a gentlewoman and a world figure, was treated as a person of some significance. In fact she was to be supremely significant. If some nasty little male was—as usual—making a horrid mess of civilization, it was time for woman to intervene.

The ambassador gave her five minutes. He was due to attend a conference at the Elysée at six. Mrs. Hyde listened to all that he had to tell her, and then asked to be allowed to attend the conference with him.

"I would like to come as a volunteer. I might be of some use——"

She was calmly yet passionately determined to be of use. She had lost things in England, irreplaceable things—relations, friends, a home, dogs who were waiting for her.

"I want to be of use, Sir Hugh. No, there is nothing more to be said."

The ambassador took her with him. She was the only woman in the conference-room, and she sat and listened. Particularly did she listen to the young man from Manchester, Professor Cragg. His name, his appearance, his insurgent hair and strabismic eye might be somewhat uncouth and provincial, but he impressed her. These very eminent gentlemen, politicians, diplomats, savants sat round a table and conferred; they were dignified, formal, and a little helpless. Professor Cragg was combative, and logically so. He had no oratorical gifts. He was a doer, not a talker.

He argued that the hypothetical enemy in Surrey had been dosed with a week's potent silence. He might be mad or dead, or lulled into a sense of false security. Or he might be preparing further horrors. The psychological moment

had arrived for a raid upon Surrey.

“Just one plane, and an attempt to land on the downs and explore them. Yes, a night landing—if possible.”

Professor Cragg’s was a rational suggestion, but who would undertake this forlorn hope?

“I’d rather like to go myself,” said he, “if anybody will fly the plane.”

Mrs. Hector Hyde stood up.

“Gentlemen, I ask to be given the duty. There is a full moon to-night. I know that part of the country very well. I was born in Surrey. If Professor Cragg will accept me and my plane——”

Professor Cragg jumped up and gave her an awkward, boyish bow.

“Delighted. Now—we can do something.”

Professor Cragg and Mrs. Hyde were driven to Le Bourget. The weather reports were favourable, an anti-cyclone covered England and the north of France; there was little wind or cloud, but a danger of ground fog at night. Mrs. Hyde inspected her machine in person, and superintended the refuelling. The Professor was fitted out with a bag of bombs and a flying suit. Le Bourget gave them a meal, and Professor Cragg borrowed from the French an automatic pistol and a pair of glasses. They waited for the moon to rise before taking off. The aerodrome gave them a cheer.

Mrs. Hyde had laid her course. She proposed to fly straight across the Channel, strike the South Downs, and crossing the Weald, land on the North Downs. She knew the country from the air. She was sure that she could pick up St. Martha’s and the high ground beyond round Newlands Corner. She had danced at that most comfortable and pleasant of hotels at Newlands Corner. As a girl she had explored the Pilgrims’ Way, and ridden along the Drove Road. Her plan was to bring her plane down on that broad sweet stretch of rabbit-nibbled turf. It would be outlined for her by the wooded Roughs and the scrub and yews on the hill-side. Her face was as calm as the face of the full moon.

XVII

Seven days of silence and of sleeplessness had reduced Professor Pye to a state akin to senile dementia. He chattered to himself; his saliva ran into his beard; hands and head shook with a senile tremor. He was suffering from hallucinations. Imaginary voices threatened him; he was startled by apparitions.

Yet his intelligence retained an edge of sanity. A kind of coldly impersonal Professor Pye could consider and comment upon the figure of a dishevelled and tremulous old gentleman with a dewdrop hanging to his nose. Pye the physicist admonished Pye the man.

"What you need, my friend, is sleep, ten hours' sleep."

Obviously so. The human mechanism that was Pye cried out for sleep. Had it not sat on that tower hour by hour, sweeping the horizon with that gun? Sleep suborned him; it was more than a temptation; it was like the sea coming in. It was irresistible.

Sleep became a tyrant. It said: "No—I shall be satisfied with nothing but completeness. You will take that mattress and pillow and bolster and those bed-clothes and place them on my proper kingly bedstead. No—I refuse to be fobbed off with a shakedown on the floor. See to it that my commands are obeyed."

Professor Pye procrastinated. He climbed to the top of the tower. He saw the face of the full moon staring at him like a vast countenance that had just appeared above the edge of the world. He gibbered at the moon.

"How dare you stare at me like that!"

He turned the atomic gun on the moon.

"Take that, you insolent satellite."

But the moon frightened him. It was like the cold and accusing face of humanity. Yes, he would sleep. He blundered down the stairs, and dragged mattress and bed-clothes from the laboratory into his bedroom. He made his bed. He had left all the lights blazing in the laboratory and the blinds up. He was conscious of nothing but the crave for sleep. He closed the door of his bedroom, turned off the lights, and got into bed. He slept like one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

XVIII

Mrs. Hector Hyde turned her plane to the left about a mile from the wooded crest of the North Downs. They were somewhere over Farley Heath when she spoke to Professor Cragg.

“Do you see those lights?”

Professor Cragg saw them, and realized their significance.

“The only lights in Southern England. If someone is alive there, it means ____”

“The enemy.”

“That’s the inference. And we are still alive. Those lights are windows on the downs.”

“I think so. I am going to land near Newlands Corner.”

She brought the plane down perfectly on the broad and moonlit stretch of turf. They climbed out and stood side by side in that world of the dead. There was the most profound silence. Even here the faint odour of death and decay permeated the air. Almost, they spoke in whispers.

“We had better not waste any time.”

She shivered slightly.

“No, no—psychoanalysis. Those lights.”

Professor Cragg laid a hand on his bag of bombs.

“Yes—that’s our—objective. We are humanity’s forlorn hope. One can assume that life and electric light advertise—the enemy. If my theory holds—the devil has fallen asleep and left the lights burning.”

They followed the downland track under the full moon, nor had they gone thirty yards before they came upon the first dead, a man and a girl with a picnic basket between them. Professor Cragg turned his electric torch on the motionless figures. He said nothing, but quickly switched off the beam of light.

Mrs. Hyde’s voice sounded stifled. She had seen the faces of those dead.

“Let’s get on.”

He understood her. She was compelling herself to control instinctive terror. They passed on, having to step aside or diverge to avoid those dark objects on the grass. The moonlight made the scene more ghastly and macabre, those

derelict cars, the tea-tables in the tea-gardens, the odour of death.

Mrs. Hyde spoke.

“And to think I have danced over there.”

“Where?”

“The Newlands Corner Hotel. Such a pleasant place.”

His voice came like a little cold wind.

“Do you know how to use those bombs?”

“Yes. The French showed me.”

“You won’t hesitate?”

“Is it likely?”

They crossed the main road to Shere, and followed the downs.

There was silence between them. The tension was so acute that time became relative. They might have been walking for an hour or for ten seconds when they emerged from the shadow of a grove of beech trees and on a bluff of the chalk lulls saw those lights shining. Mrs. Hyde paused, her hand on her companion’s arm.

“Windows.”

Professor Cragg looked at the lights.

“I’ll go on—alone.”

But she would not hear of it.

“No. I don’t think I could bear to be left alone here.”

“I—understand. We had better not speak.”

She nodded.

The track forked in a hollow space below the beech wood, one path ascending, the other descending. Professor Cragg chose the upper path, but on the edge of the plateau a stout fence of netting and barbed wire closed the path. It was Professor Pye’s boundary fence erected to keep out hikers and picnic parties, and since Professor Cragg had no wire-cutters and the five-foot fence was unclimbable, they had to retrace their steps and explore the lower path. It brought them out into Professor Pye’s private lane, whose rough and flinty surface had been loosened by a spell of dry weather. In fact, Professor Cragg trod on a loose flint, and the stone went rattling down the slope. He stood very

still for a moment, inwardly cursing. If the house with the lights could be assumed to be the house of the ogre, then it was more than probable that its ingenious owner had installed some apparatus for the registration and amplifying of sound.

He spoke in a whisper.

“That damned flint may have betrayed us.”

But his companion was in no mood for loitering. Hesitation and delay might rupture an overstrained self-control. Professor Cragg saw her face in the moonlight. She pointed upwards, like some pale figure of Fate urging him on. The lane had a narrow grass verge on either side of it, and taking to the grass they pressed up and on. The lane ended in a cindered space outside the gates of the courtyard, and the white gates were closed.

Mrs. Hyde and Professor Cragg stood and looked at each other for a moment. He made a gesture with his right hand. He was telling her to sit down. She shook her head and remained standing, and Professor Cragg, realizing that her courage had to be humoured, sat down on the grass and removed his boots. He left the pistol and the field-glasses at her feet. He advanced on his socked feet to the white gates. Very cautiously he tried the latch. The gates were not locked, and Mrs. Hyde saw him swing one leaf back and disappear.

There was not a sound. In less than a minute she saw him reappear carrying what appeared to be an empty deal box. He moved round the house and along a terrace of grass and weeds under the front windows. She changed her position so as to be able to watch his movements. She saw him place the box under one of the laboratory windows. He unhitched his bag of bombs and lowered it to the ground, and climbing on to the box raised his head with infinite and deliberate caution.

He was looking in at one of the laboratory windows. They were casements, opening outwards, and Professor Cragg raised the casement stay from its iron leg, swung the window back, and put his hands on the sill. She held her breath. She saw the long, gawky figure raise itself and slip through the window. He disappeared.

Silence.

Professor Cragg was prowling like a cat round the laboratory, examining its contents. He came to the laboratory door; it stood ajar. Inch by inch he pulled it open until he could slip through into the corridor. He had pushed up the button of his torch before entering the laboratory, and with the electric torch in his left hand he crept along the corridor. He came to another door

which stood ajar. He listened.

A sound of life, a most unmistakable sound, the heavy breathing of someone asleep! Professor Cragg put his hand to that door; so gradual was his pressure that the door hardly seemed to move. Very cautiously he shone his light into the room. The ray rested for a moment on a figure lying on a bed.

Professor Cragg drew back. He stood in the corridor for a moment listening to the sleeper's heavy breathing. There was no break in the rhythm, and Professor Cragg crept step by step back into the laboratory. The bedroom was next to the laboratory, and he had noticed that the window was open and the blind down. He slipped out through the laboratory window, and shifted his box and his bag of bombs along the house. His movements were swift and easy.

He took a bomb from the bag, stood on the box, pushed the blind back with his lighted torch, and gave one glance into the room to make sure. He dropped the torch on the grass, pulled the bomb pin, and lobbing the bomb into the room, crouched down behind the wall. There was a moment's silence, and then—the crash of the explosion. Fragments of broken window glass flew out and fell upon Professor Cragg's head and shoulders.

He bent down and picked up two more bombs, and hurled them one after the other into the room.

A profound silence seemed to surge back like water that had been troubled by an explosion. Mrs. Hyde saw Professor Cragg standing on the box and shining his torch into that room. He gave a leap from the box to clear the broken glass, and came across the grass towards her. His face was very pale, and a stream of blood showed on his forehead.

He spoke.

"There was life—in there. I've effaced it. One had to be ruthless."

She nodded.

He went for his shoes, sat down, put them on, and rejoined her.

"We'll wait five minutes. He may have an understudy. Then—I'll explore."

They waited, motionless, voiceless. Not a sound came from the white house, and with a glance at his companion, Professor Cragg went forward to explore.

"Better stay there. One has to remember—that there may be other devilments—live wires, traps."

She watched him climb in through the same window. The minutes went by in silence, and then she saw a flash of light up above, and heard his voice.

“Eureka!”

She saw him head and shoulders on the tower silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

“There’s a damned contraption up here—rather the sort of thing I expected to find. I daren’t touch it. It is better that nobody should touch it. I’m coming down.”

He rejoined her on the moonlit hill-side, and his face was grim.

“Genius gone mad. In one’s imaginative moments one has postulated the case of some anti-social intelligence making war on humanity. My God, but what a war! We little fellows who dabble in mysteries—will have to be watched—in the future.”

She looked up at the tower.

“So—your theory was sound.”

“Yes, even a super-scientist is human. He had to sleep. Sleep saved us. Well, let’s spread the news and prepare the funeral.”

“Funeral?”

“Yes, of Professor Pye and his infernal creation.”

They made their way along the moonlit hill-side to Newlands Corner. The silence was still profound, but it had lost its ghastly menace. They talked, and the sound of their voices seemed to fill the silence with a vibration of life reborn. The dead were there, but their destroyer was dead with them. The moonlight seemed to play more mysterious in the branches of the old yews and beeches.

Standing beside the motionless plane, Professor Cragg pulled out his watch.

“Another hour—and the dawn will be here. I should like to fly over that place.”

She nodded.

And then he glanced at the spread wings of her machine.

“I rather think that this plane of yours ought to be preserved—say—in St. Paul’s Cathedral, or a bronze model of it set up on these downs.”

She smiled faintly.

“I think I’d rather have some sandwiches and hot coffee. They are in the cockpit. Of course—I never knew—whether—we should need them. I’ll fetch the Thermos.”

XIX

Mrs. Hector Hyde's plane took off as the sun cleared the horizon, and with the level rays making the machine glow like some golden dragon-fly, it climbed and, gaining height, it made a left-hand turn over the downs. Professor Cragg was leaning over the side and observing the white house below. He could see the white parapet of the tower like a marble plinth surrounding a grave.

He thought: "Yes, better to take no chances. I shall suggest that they drop bombs on that hill-side until nothing is left of Professor Pye and his machine and his discovery. The world is not yet ripe for so much knowledge."

Mrs. Hyde headed south. They saw the shimmer of the sea and then the outline of the French coast. She laid her course for Paris, and at Le Bourget men were watching the sky, and when they saw that aeroplane coming out of the north, an indescribable excitement infected the aerodrome. Those two adventurous souls had dared the death zone and had survived.

When the plane bumped along the landing ground and came to rest a crowd rushed towards it—politicians, diplomats, savants, pilots, aerodrome staff. What had happened? What news did they bring?

Professor Cragg, one leg hanging over the side of the plane's body, waved his airman's helmet.

"We found one live man in Surrey, and he's dead. Satan was sleeping, and we bombed him."

The crowd went mad. Almost, it seemed ready to carry the plane and its crew in triumph round the aerodrome. It shouted and cheered and behaved quite foolishly, only to realize that Mrs. Hyde was still sitting in the pilot's seat, and Professor Cragg standing up as though to address them.

Professor Cragg held up a hand, and there was gradual silence.

"Gentlemen, we are going back. A little breakfast and then—the final ceremony. I want a dozen bombing machines. We will show them their target."

Telephones and wireless stations became busy. Signor Mussolini, who had just arrived from Rome, was one of the elect few who were permitted to go as passengers. The squadron of huge machines roared northwards led by Mrs. Hyde's plane. It was Professor Cragg who dropped the pilot bomb on the white building above the Shere valley. Mrs. Hyde swung her plane clear for the big fellows to come into action. Plane after plane flew low over the house of

Professor Pye. The hill-top seemed to spout flame and smoke and debris. In a little while the work was finished. That which had been a building was a crater-field over which little tattered flames flickered. Even the grass and the trees were alight. Professor Pye and his atomic gun—and his notebooks full of cypher—were ashes and particles of shattered metal.

LUCKY SHIP

GLENLUCE stood in the doorway of the dug-out. The officers of B Company had finished lunch, and the mess-orderly was clearing the table. Captain Sherring had lit his pipe, and it was a very foul old pipe, but it was his prerogative to smoke it where he pleased. A batch of letters waiting to be censored lay on a shelf behind Second Lieut. Jackson. He reached for them and tossed half the batch across the table to young Fothergill.

"Your bunch, Archie. Got a pencil?"

"I have."

"Well—that's news. Archie's got a pencil, Skipper. He's beginning to grow up. Got any matches, Archie?"

"Yes."

"Chuck the box over. I lent you a pencil yesterday."

Young Fothergill had lit a cigarette. He tossed the matches to Jackson, and ignoring the letters on the table, looked with questioning blue eyes at Glenluce. He was aware of the sag of his friend's shoulders, of the moody lassitude of the figure in the doorway. Smith, the mess-orderly, carrying a pile of enamelled plates and mugs, was asking for egress.

" 'Scuse me, sir."

Glenluce drew aside sharply as though the man's voice had startled him like the sound of a shell. His head gave a jerk, and for an instant Fothergill saw his friend's profile, and it looked sharp and pinched like one of those profiles seen after death has come to the trenches. But those letters waited. Fothergill got out a pencil, and having read through one simple scrawl in which the writer announced that he was in the pink, he glanced over his shoulder and saw that Glenluce had disappeared.

Young Fothergill straightened on his biscuit box. Sherring, his pipe well

alight, was also staring at the empty doorway, and suddenly the eyes of the two men met. Fothergill seemed to be about to speak, but Sherring nodded at him and there was infinite understanding in that movement of the head. It said: “Yes, I know, kid. Jimmie’s got the needle. He’s been out here too long, and he’s been through too much. I’m sorry about Friday. I couldn’t help it. The Old Man ordered me to detail him for the show. And you too. I’m sorry, but it’s got to be. Yes, clear out.”

Fothergill drew in his heels, and tossed his share of the letters across to Jackson, and Jackson, with his pencil poised above a page, looked protestingly at the youngster.

“Here—I say——”

“Sorry, Jacker, I’ll do the whole lot to-morrow.”

Fothergill was on his feet, and Sherring, putting out a big brown hand, gathered up a wad of letters.

“All right, kid. I’ll do your lot. Yes, clear.”

Fothergill slipped out to the narrow terrace cut in the cliff above the Great Gully. The 3rd N.F.’s were in rest here, if any situation could be described as restful at Helles. In two days’ time the battalion was going back to the trenches, and B Company was to carry out a stunt. A certain poisonous pimple in the Turkish line known officially as The Thatched House, and unofficially as The Dung Heap, had been mined by the R.E.’s. The mine was to be blown at three o’clock on the Friday afternoon, and two platoons of B Company were to go over and seize and consolidate the crater. Lieut. Glenluce had been detailed to lead the party, with Fothergill as his second.

Archie, seeing nothing of his friend, scrambled up a path leading to the plateau above. The Great Gully below him was full of its usual life, a brown cleft in the earth peopled with brown figures. The day was serene and peaceful, almost poignantly peaceful, a golden interlude between autumn and winter. Not a gun was to be heard. The shaggy and war-worn scrub on the plateau sleeked itself in the sunlight.

Fothergill saw a solitary figure moving towards the cliff edge and the sea. He followed Glenluce’s figure. He did not attempt to overtake his friend, but he shadowed him like some protecting presence. He had seen enough of the war to know that it was a bad sign when a fellow wandered off to be alone and went about with a kind of starved look in his eyes. Glenluce had the black shadow on him.

Fothergill saw Glenluce sit down on the edge of the cliff. Two naval guns

were in screened pits less than fifty yards away, but their ugly mouths were mute. Had those same guns popped off suddenly, young Fothergill's impulse would have been to spread his fingers—"Think you'd make me jump, did you? Go to hell." But on this November afternoon even this callow, cheeky, blue-eyed child was moved by the quality that we mortals describe as beauty. Over there lay Imbros like a soft, violet cloud floating in the sea, an Imbros that flushed pink in the dawn. O Blessed Isle, where no shells screamed, and sacred to G.H.Q.! The sea was serene and still. It had a limpid loveliness. Along by Gully Beach men were bathing. The sky was as silky as the sea.

Glenluce was sitting there with his knees drawn up, and his arms folded over them, like a man knotted up and trussed. He had plucked a twig of heather and was chewing it. Sea and sky were a blue vastness, and yet he was feeling like a little animal in a trap. How futile it all was! He was twenty-five years old, and what had he got out of life? How much he had missed! Damned fool! And in two days' time he believed that he would be one of those brown and bloody bundles that are huddled into a hole in the ground or left to rot in the foulness of No Man's Land.

Young Fothergill was within five yards of his friend, and Glenluce had not heard him. He was away in the desert of his own dreadful despair, and Fothergill covering those last five yards, plopped down on the edge of the cliff.

"Marvellous day for a bathe, Jimmie."

Glenluce seemed to wince.

"Hallo, kid."

Fothergill lay prone and gazed at Imbros.

"Reminds me—of a day I had in Scotland. Might be one of the Scotch islands."

Glenluce's face looked all twisted.

"Might be! Good lord! The might-have-beens make one sick."

"You wait till we get to Alex."

"We're here for the winter, or some of us."

Fothergill turned on his back, and gazed at the sky.

"You've got Friday on your soul, Jimmy."

Glenluce glanced at him sharply.

"Have I? Perhaps. I've been feeling—like a bit of raw meat that didn't

want to be cooked. Oh, hell—the things one's missed! We're only a couple of kids."

"You'll get through all right on Friday, Jimmie."

"I shan't."

"Rot."

"I've scraped through too often. One's luck can't last for ever."

"Oh, rot."

From the distance came the sound of men cheering, an unexpected and strange sound in a world of sickness, flies and disillusionment. Young Fothergill sat up, for when you were both frightened and fed up the fluttering wings of rumour can stir a whole army. The obvious canard might be an absurd creature stuffed with straw, but it could appear as a symbol of salvation and of hope.

"What the devil are they cheering for?"

Glenluce gloomed:

"Someone has had a bread issue. Or the French have captured half a cemetery in France."

Fothergill got on his feet. He saw the dead earth sprouting men. They seemed to appear from clefts in the ground. He saw brown figures running towards the cliff edge, waving caps, and shouting.

"Something's up, Jimmie."

And then he beheld that most trivial and amazing object. It appeared round one of the yellow brown bluffs of the cliffs, a naval pinnace gliding over the blue sea within fifty yards or so of the shore, and in this magic craft were women, three or four nurses in blue cloaks. Someone was having a day out. Someone was superior to all regulations, if any regulations forbade such an adventure.

Fothergill shouted.

"Jimmie—girls!"

For, in all probability not one man in a hundred among all those thousands had seen a woman for many months. The whole of Helles seemed to be streaming to the cliff. There were cheers, wavings, a kind of wistful and vibrant excitement. The nurses in the pinnace waved back to the men upon the cliff.

Glenluce looked angry, strangely angry.

“The damned fools! Bringing a boatload of women in range of the guns.”

“They’re all right, Jimmie. They’re keeping close in. Abdul can’t see them. And if he can—he’s a bit of a sport.”

“Good Lord, has everyone gone potty!”

But he was addressing the air. Young Fothergill had taken to his heels, and was running like a hare for B Company lines. He was going to tell Sherring and Jackson. He was going to collect a pair of field-glasses. He was just a little mad.

He returned flushed and out of breath with other brown figures streaming after him. The pinnace had put about just beyond Gully Beach, and Fothergill squatted down and turned the glasses on the boat. His hands trembled.

“I say—Jimmie!”

Glenluce was gazing with an air of sullen resignation at those fortunate naval men and their guests.

“Have a look, Jimmie. One of them’s quite young and pretty.”

He pushed the glasses at Glenluce, who, with a farouche air, focused them on the pinnace. The faces were very distinct. A girl with dark eyes and white teeth was smiling and waving. She seemed to be smiling and waving at him.

“O, damn!”

Almost fiercely he tossed the glasses back to Fothergill, but Sherring and Jackson had come up, and the binoculars were the prize of seniority.

“Hand ’em over, my lad.”

Sherring stood and gazed at the pinnace and those things in petticoats. He was smiling. His great knees showing below his khaki shorts looked as brown as the soil.

“My God!”

“O, damn the navy!”

“No, bless ’em, Jacker. Here, have a look. One of ’em’s a real peach.”

They were too absorbed in the affair to notice Glenluce. He had turned his back on the sea, and was lying prone and staring at a patch of heather. His eyes had a kind of hopeless hunger. The voice of his youth was crying, “This is a bit too bitter. I can’t bear it. I’m going to be killed on Friday.” For he was still

seeing the face of that smiling girl, her eyes and teeth and two soft loops of dark hair. The anguish of sex burned in him. He wanted to live, he wanted the beauty of loving. And in two days' time he might be a brown and bloody bundle hidden away in the earth.

He got up suddenly and walked off. He went blindly across the open, and his movements were inco-ordinate and aimless. He fell into a gun-pit, was cursed by somebody, and crawled out to resume that fierce, desperate striding. He was trying to escape from the anguish of blue sea and blue sky, a face, the mockery of that other world where youth could be youth, a world of beauty and freedom and desire. What bloody nonsense war was! How futile and yet how merciless.

The other men on the cliff edge were still watching the pinnace making for the cape where the great white hospital ships lay out in the blue sea.

"Good-by-ee. God bless 'em."

"O, damn those naval chaps."

"Shut up, Jacker, and be grateful."

Young Fothergill's voice piped up. "Hallo, where's old Jimmie?" They looked at the spot where Glenluce had been, and where he was not. Sherring and young Fothergill exchanged glances, and perhaps both of them understood the sudden flight of Glenluce. The experience had been too tantalizing. It had bitten deep into the warm flesh of youth.

Flies buzzed, and the tea tasted of chloride of lime, and from the gully below rose the rancid smell of empty tins being burnt in an incinerator. Glenluce had not turned up, but the Mess refrained from remarking on his absence. Glenluce might have gone for a walk, for people could go for walks on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Or he had gone to call upon that Scotch friend of his who was the adjutant of a battalion of the Lowland Division. There was one blessed thing about Skipper Sherring; he was not a fusser. He did not rub in his authority.

"Pass the jam, Archie."

A swarm of flies hovered over the jampot.

"Say, young fellow, you might go along to B.H.Q. and ask the doc. to come and dine with us."

Fothergill understood. He nodded at Sherring. The big man was a father to them all.

The hour of dinner arrived, and with it Captain Martin, the M.O. of the 3rd N.F.'s. He was a thick-set, hard-bitten wag of a man whom the whole battalion treated with respect. Flies might abound, but there were no flies on Captain Martin. It was quite a cheery party, but no Glenluce appeared, and these other men threw a casual cloak over his absence.

"Where's Jimmie?"

"Gone to see the Scotties, I think."

"Good lad, Jimmie."

Sherring kept his own counsel. If he was going to say anything to the doctor it would be in private.

"Yes, Jimmie's been a sticker. Not like that little literary gent we had, doc. Remember how the miserable little swine tried to wangle things and get off?"

Martin grinned. "I do. Highbrow hysterics. Anyhow he squirmed himself into a Corps job. That sort does."

It grew dark, night stealing out of Asia on the heels of a stupendous sunset. Imbros had flamed, and the sea turned to molten gold. Somewhere on the cliff above Lancashire Landing Glenluce was lying in the heather, watching those great white ships become as ghosts. The Red Cross! And he, with the youth in him crucified, saw the red and green lights shine out upon those ships of mercy. O, lucky men who were ferried over the blue water and taken into the bosoms of those ships. What were wounds and sickness when you were reprieved from this hell of dust and heat and flies and death! To be going to Egypt, or Malta, or England! To lie in a bunk, to feel your soul and body relaxed, released from a dreadful and ever present fear.

That girl was on one of those ships. She was looking at men with her dark eyes. She was being looked at by them. And on Friday he would be waiting in a trench, shaken to the very marrow, clenching his soul to confound that crisis. An explosion, earth, sandbags, men blown into the air, and he—scrambling up and over into the dust and the smoke!

He buried his head in the heather. If the ghastly business was over! If he could be at peace; if he could be just nothing; a mere part of the soil that was unvexed by the anguish of living! Peace, peace, oblivion, sleep. For sleep had become to him like a little syrup left at the bottom of a pot, to be scraped at avidly with a spoon.

Suddenly, he rose to his knees. He tried to pray.

"O God, keep me from playing the rotter."

He looked at the lights of the hospital ships, and they seemed to smile at him like the eyes of the young nurse. He could not say why or how, but the bitterness in him began to lose its ragged edge.

He stood up. He followed the road along the plateau, with the sea on his left. Stars were out, and when he came to the great dark gulf of the gulley he saw it sprinkled with lights like spangles on black velvet. It had a strange beauty, and its beauty was part of that human fellowship, of all the hearts of those men beating in exile. He was but one of many. All those obscure and rather simple men were but children of circumstance, just as he was. They were sick, and they were afraid, and they endured.

Young Fothergill had blown out the candle and was settling himself in his bunk in a dug-out that he shared with Glenluce when he saw the opening of the recess darkened by a figure. A moment ago the space had been pricked with stars, but now it was obscured by the shadow of a man.

“In bed, Archie?”

“Hallo, Jimmie.”

Glenluce slipped in and sat down on the edge of the other bunk. There was a moment of silence, and then he said, “I’ve been mooching around. There are a wonderful lot of stars to-night.”

Fothergill was sitting up in his bunk.

“Want the candles, Jimmie?”

“No.”

“Had any dinner?”

“Dinner! I clean forgot about dinner. O, by the way, kid, I want you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“If I make a muck of things on Friday—I mean—if I go potty—or—just give me one through the head with your little squirt.”

Young Fothergill put out a hand in the darkness.

“Rot, old man. You’re going to get through. I’ll take any offers you like on it.”

Friday was another golden and tranquil day, but when, at three o’clock those at sea heard the rumble of an explosion and the hammering of guns, they knew that some little affair had been staged ashore. It was only some little

sideshow like a damp squib let off when all the set pieces had burned themselves out, a futile anticlimax tagged to a great and tragic failure. The nurses on the hospital ships heard the uproar. The ships had been warned to expect wounded.

Said one nurse, looking through a porthole across the blue sea to the dim-coloured coast, “It seems such horrible waste.”

Her companion had grown more callous.

“Well, they have to do something to make a show. I suppose it keeps the boys’ spirits up.”

Said the younger woman—“I wonder.”

In that vast saucer of raw earth men were digging for their lives, filling sandbags and piling them, and cutting a sap from the front line to the crater. The attack had been a success. There had been very little resistance, and as yet no counter attack had developed. The 3rd N.F.’s had lost three men killed and seven wounded. The dead lay in the centre of the hollow to be dealt with later. Stretcher-bearers had carried off the wounded.

Glenluce, with a face like a man who has been starved for a week, was watching the men consolidate the position. Young Fothergill was filling sandbags. Neither of the officers had been touched.

“What about those bombs, Archie?”

Fothergill tried to smile at his friend.

“All O.K. I sent Corporal Baines back. They’re coming up. Well, I’ve won my bet, old lad.”

Glenluce looked at the dead men.

“We haven’t begun yet. Wait till——”

He seemed to stiffen. His face sharpened. He was listening, for his ears were more wise to the sounds of the war than were young Fothergill’s.

“Look out, you men.”

There was a sound as of a vast pipe blowing off water, a kind of rending of the sky, and the earth spouted on the edge of the crater. Glenluce went flat. Fothergill only ducked. The men crouched under the lip of soil.

Glenluce picked himself up, looking white and angry.

“Get on, you chaps, dig like hell.”

“What was that, Jimmie?”

“An eight-inch ‘How.’ He’s going to give us——. Look out, here’s another.”

The second shell burst behind the crater, and threw clods and earth into the hole. A clod hit Glenluce on the shoulder. He staggered, looked surprised, put a hand to his shoulder, and smiled a little, stiff, whimsical smile.

“Thought I’d won, kid.”

Young Fothergill, rather white but grinning, felt for his cigarette case.

“Have one, Jimmie.”

“Thanks.”

Glenluce struck a match, but the hand that held the match was terribly unsteady.

“Stand still, damn you. You haven’t forgotten, kid, what I said to you?”

“Rot—old boy, rot.”

It was growing dusk when that fatal shell pitched into the crater. It knocked out five men, Glenluce among them. There was confusion, a moment of panic, some of the men crowding back into the half finished communication trench that was to link up with the front line. Fothergill was bending over his friend.

“Jimmie——”

The body of Glenluce was down in the dirt, but now that fate had smitten him his courage somehow transcended the horror and the confusion.

“All right—I’ve got it in the leg, kid. Get the men back, make ’em line the lip of the crater. He’ll attack in a moment.”

Fothergill hesitated, and Glenluce cursed him.

“Don’t you understand an order? Damn it, we’ve got to hold this hole. Get ’em steady. Get ’em glued to the earth on the edge facing Abdul. Use your pistol if necessary. And grin, kid, grin.”

Young Fothergill seemed to catch the flame of his friend’s courage. He rushed into the half-dug trench where some twenty men were huddled. He cursed them.

“Come on you chaps. Abdul’s going to attack. Do you want to be spitted like a lot of pigs. Line the lip of the crater. Come on.”

He got these men out of the trench. They were raw hands many of them,

lads who had come out with a draft, and he shepherded them to the ledge of soil and sandbags where a dozen die-hards were pressing their tummies against the earth, and waiting with rifles levelled.

“Sergeant Bloxom.”

“Here, sir.”

“Abdul’ll be coming over in two ticks. We’ve got to hold on. Better fix bayonets.”

“Right, sir.”

Fothergill turned to where Glenluce was lying with his face to the sky, and his face looked as frail as a piece of paper.

“I want to get you back, Jimmie. I’ll send a man over for stretcher bearers.”

“Oh—I’ll just stick here, old lad. Keep him out—for God’s sake keep him out. I’ve got a chance if you do.”

The counter-attack came and was beaten off, one solitary Turk reaching the crater and remaining in it as a prisoner. Just when the rifle fire had slackened a crowd of brown figures poured through into the work. The communicating trench had been linked up by those digging forward from the front line, and with these reinforcements came stretcher-bearers, and Dr. Martin.

“Doc—Jimmie’s hit.”

“Badly?”

“In the leg, I think. He’s here.”

Martin bent over Glenluce who lay with a little smile on his white-paper face.

“I’ve got it in the leg, doc.”

“Let’s have a look at you, my lad.”

Martin had a torch with him, and when he flashed it on that twisted and stained limb with its torn khaki, his lips pressed themselves together.

“I’ll get you back to the aid-post. Someone give me a rifle. Here, Johnson, bandages.”

He lashed the rifle to Glenluce’s leg and body, had him lifted carefully on to a stretcher, and gave him a pat on the head.

“Be with you in ten minutes, Jimmie. Blighty, my lad. Must have a look at the others.”

Glenluce was carried down the new trench and back to the aid-post in “Chester Row.” Martin was busy with another case, and Fothergill, having seen that his men were ready for any second assault on the crater, came and stood by the doctor.

“Tell me the truth about Jimmie, doc.”

Martin was examining a man who had been hit in the chest. It was a hopeless case.

“Jimmie’s out of the show, my lad.”

“Not——”

“No, not that. Tell you later. I’m busy.”

Fothergill lit a cigarette.

“Damned rotten luck if he went under, doc., after the show he put up here.”

“I don’t think he’ll go under.”

When Captain Martin went back to the aid-post he found Sherring sitting on a box beside Glenluce’s stretcher. He had lit a cigarette for Glenluce and tucked it between the wounded man’s lips. He looked up at Martin, and made way for him.

“Get him down to the ambulance, doc.”

“My friend, he’ll be on board a hospital ship in half a jiffy. Now—Jimmie, my lad, I want to patch you up for the first stage.”

Glenluce lay and stared at the tin roof of the aid-post. He was aware of a needle pricking his wrist and of Martin’s busy hands, and the snipping of scissors. He made no attempt to look at his smashed leg. He was surprised that it pained him so little. A gradual and exquisite feeling of peace possessed him.

“Does it mean—home, doc?”

Martin grunted.

“Hurting much?”

“No.”

“No more war for you, Jimmie. You’ll be an interesting veteran drilling drafts at home.”

“I’m going to lose that leg?”

“Did I say so? You just play the babe and take things easy. A cushy time

for you, my lad, and you've earned it."

Stars were shining when the stretcher-bearers raised Glenluce and carried him out into the trench on his way to the ambulance dressing-station. Sherring walked for a hundred yards beside the stretcher, and when they reached "Oxford Circus" someone came running behind them. It was young Fothergill.

"That Jimmie?"

"Hallo—kid."

"Won my bet, old man. Good luck. Sorry, Skipper. Yes, it's quite all right. Old Jacker took over for ten minutes. He said I could buzz off to see Jimmie."

Glenluce put out a hand.

"Wish you were coming, kid."

Fothergill's voice was just a little unsteady.

"God, so do I! Give my love to the girls, Jimmie. Perhaps you'll see that pretty nurse."

Sherring and Fothergill had turned back, and Glenluce lay and looked at the sky. The stretcher-squad were moving down the gully, and the stretcher swayed gently, and now and again it tilted slightly or gave a jerk, but Glenluce felt no pain. He was under the influence of morphia; he had been released from hell, the torture of his doubtings and self dreads. He felt that he was both asleep and awake in a starlit world of wonderful peace.

One of the stretcher-bearers spoke to him.

"Feeling all right, sir?"

"Absolutely."

They called at the Advanced Dressing Station, where a little doctor with big spectacles and a bald head examined him. Glenluce smiled at him as though the doctor carried wings.

"Quite all right, doc. Martin fixed me up."

The journey was resumed, and at the mouth of the Great Gully Glenluce saw the sea. He could smell it and hear it. Little waves were rolling in and making a moist plash along the shore. Shadowy figures passed him and over yonder he could divine the shadows of Imbros. The sea seemed to be waiting for him like some beautiful, unvexed world where war was not.

They carried him into the sandbagged shelter of the Main Dressing Station, and here—yet another doctor—summoned from the Field Ambulance mess,

examined him and his tally. His passage from the Peninsula was full of pauses, a slow measure set to an official rhythm that could not be hastened. He began to be a little impatient, with the peevishness of a sick child.

“I’m so tired, doc.”

Once more the stretcher was raised, and four men carried him along the sandy road and up the cliff to where an ambulance was waiting. He found himself inside the ambulance with two of his own men. He recognised Smith, a little red-headed fellow whom nothing could depress.

“Hallo—Smith.”

“Why, it’s you, sir. Got a good one?”

“I hope so.”

“High-tiddle-di-ity, take me home to Blighty. It’s a blinking good war, sir, when you’re out of it.”

To Glenluce time had ceased to be a reality. He just drifted. He seemed to be carried along like a body floating down a stream, caught every now and again by some obstruction, but moving inevitably towards the sea. He was being carried into a lighter. There was faint movement. He was at sea. The dreadful earth has been left behind, and the dark space above him was full of stars.

Lights, a dim white cliff which was the side of a ship, voices, swayings. More lights, other voices strangely dim and muffled. He found himself lying in a cot, and someone was standing and looking at him. It was the young nurse whom he had seen in the pinnace.

Was he alive or dead, awake or dreaming? He lay and stared, and then his lips moved.

“Excuse me, nurse, but you are real, aren’t you?”

She smiled at him.

“I think so.”

He seemed to draw a breath of deep relief.

“I just want to look at you, nurse. You don’t mind, do you? I just want to look at you.”

A WAXWORK SHOW

NOBODY recognized him, though there were a few people left in Barfleet who might have done so.

He appeared as a little old man with very bright eyes, and rather wild white hair. He put up at the Queen's Hotel. He gave his name as Joshua T. Toil, and his habits were as simple as his name.

Rumour had it that he came from America, and before long rumour could add that he was eccentric, but just how eccentric he was going to be Barfleet did not foresee. It saw him wandering about the cliffs overlooking the estuary; also, he appeared to have an affection for the gardens between Royal Row and the foreshore. He pottered about them, following the paths as though they were familiar to him. He seemed to know all the trees, the funny old oaks in the playground, and particularly that forked and twisted tree that years ago had held a seat. He could be seen touching the trees as though they were old friends of his.

He talked to very few people, but he talked with a purpose. He and old George the head porter at the Queen's Hotel were often in conversation.

"I should say this place is pretty prosperous."

"It is that, sir."

"That's a nice row of houses above the gardens."

"You mean Royal Row, sir."

"Sure, I do. Prosperity Place I call it."

George laughed.

"You're right on the mark, sir. When anyone strikes it rich in Barfleet he takes a house in Royal Row."

"Just twenty houses, George."

“Yes, sir.”

“And who lives in them? Sort of interesting to hear about the life of a town.”

“Oh, there’s old Huggins and young Huggins, sir, the big drapers. And the Smellies, and Pym the ironmonger, and two doctors, and a lawyer, and Mr. Corf who’s commodore of the yacht club, and Mrs. Blower whose husband owned the brewery. And two or three old ladies, and a retired stockbroker, and a few more.”

Said Mr. Toil—“I see No. 11 is to let.”

“I believe it is, sir. It won’t be to let long.”

It wasn’t. Mr. Joshua Toil called on the house-agents in High Street and made inquiries about No. 11, Royal Row. Rent it? Oh, no, he wanted to buy it. He more than hinted that No. 11 was marked down for him by fate, and that money did not matter. The agents were a little casual with him until with a kind of grim gentleness he produced a banker’s letter, and let it be known that he might be interested in other properties. Yes, very seriously so.

No. 11, Royal Row became his. The title deeds went back a good many years, and the name of Thomas Vance cropped up in them. Old Tom Vance had lived here nearly fifty years ago. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Jude, and for many years a local florist had received a cheque for keeping the grave in order. Flowers were to be placed on it four times a year. The florist was an honest man and did his job, though no one was there to see.

Mr. Toil had visited that grave on his first day in Barfleet. It had been April and the 19th, and Mr. Toil had found a large wreath of primroses lying on the strip of grass in front of the headstone. He had purloined one of the primroses and put it in his buttonhole.

Residents in Royal Row began to remark on No. 11. Alterations were in progress, and Royal Row—being conservative—did not approve of these alterations. The two windows of the front ground-floor room were being converted into one big window. It looked like a shop-front.

There were murmurings. It was expressly stated in the deeds that no house in Royal Row could be used for the purposes of trade, and old Huggins of Huggins & Huggins who still stalked Barfleet like a haberdashery Jehovah, showed signs of truculence. He was a large old man with a pendulous jowl, and a red and looming face, an unpleasant old man who had bullied more people in his day than any other man in Barfleet. He had big hands and big feet, and he had used them.

It was old Huggins who accosted Mr. Toil one morning in May. He pointed with his stick.

“What’s this—what’s this? I’m informed, sir, you are the new owner of No. 11.”

Mr. Toil’s eyes seemed to emit a faint glittering.

“Sure, that’s so. And that, sir, is a window.”

“Looks like a shop window to me. I may as well tell you, sir——”

“It is no shop window, sir. I like plenty of light.”

“Ha—light.”

“Especially in dark places.”

Old Huggins glared at him, cleared his throat, and stumped on.

“Just warning you, sir—that’s all.”

Mr. Toil smiled after him. He made a strange remark.

“Don’t throw stones.”

But other evidences of Mr. Toil’s eccentricity began to accumulate. Two Chinese servants arrived, demure, inscrutable men. The walls of the old dining-room of No. 11 were coloured red, and powerful lights were installed. As to furniture it contained nothing but an oak table and two oak chairs. Mr. Toil dined there in solitary state with the blinds up, and waited on by his Chinese servants.

People began to peer in as they went by. Children sometimes congregated at the railings. Mr. Toil appeared to be fond of children. He would stand at the window and throw coins. Another scandal. Children—especially common children—were not encouraged to frequent the pavement of Royal Row. It was not a through street for traffic. It was sequestered and aloof.

Old Mr. Huggins began to growl and to agitate. He called on other residents. This damned interloper was spoiling the amenities. He was not quite right in the head. Obviously. You had only to look at the fellow’s eyes and hair. And who was he—anyway?

A polite inspector of police called on Mr. Toil.

“I am sorry, sir, but we have had complaints.”

Mr. Toil offered him a cigar and a whisky and soda.

“From my neighbours? About the children?”

“That’s so, sir. I’m not a busybody myself.”

“Sure, you don’t look like one, inspector. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“That’s quite all right, sir.”

“Those are good cee-gars. Put a couple in your pocket. Besides, could you prevent me throwing a few sixpences to the youngsters?”

“Well, that might depend, sir. If you caused an obstruction—so to speak.”

“The pith of the matter is, inspector, I’m up against the gentleman who lives in No. 7.”

“Between you and me, sir.”

“Yes, an old rogue elephant. I quite understand your position in a place like this. Don’t get warm, inspector, I’ll look after Mr. Huggins.”

From his green balcony which overlooked the gardens and the estuary and the shipping that came and went, Joshua Toil could watch Royal Row going upon its affairs. Old Huggins stumped past regularly to the Yacht Club, while young Huggins—who was three and forty—passed on his way to supervise the store in High Street. Young Huggins was smug and well larded. Mr. Smellie, the son of the succulent and sanctimonious Smellie who had helped old Huggins to break Tom Vance, went sleekly to the sugar and tea. Reginald Pym, who furnished and ironmongered Barfleet, was a vast creature who overflowed his collar. With the rest of the residents Mr. Toil had no argument. He liked the look of the doctor. Mr. Corf, the commodore, was a cheery old swashbuckler with a roving eye, a human sort of person, and usually at loggerheads with old Huggins. Mrs. Blower went out driving in her car with a very fat dog in a very fat lap. The lawyer was busy and preoccupied, and reminded Joshua Toil of a rat nibbling cheese.

But he sat and reflected upon the world of Huggins, Smellie, Pym, and agreed that the sins of the fathers might be visited upon the children. But old Huggins remained, the first and primordial offence.

Strange packing-cases arrived at No. 11. They disappeared in the grip of the two Chinese. A little dapper fellow who looked like a Frenchman visited Mr. Toil very frequently. He would sit on the balcony with him, drawing caricatures, and looking at old photographs. Joshua addressed him as Mr. Tolly. He appeared to supply Mr. Tolly with hints and suggestions.

“Remember, in those days, he had whiskers, black Piccadilly weepers.”

Mr. Tolly would pass him one of the sketches.

“How’s that, sir, for a Victorian gent?”

“You’ve got him, Tolly, exactly. Can you make a nice picture of that?”

“Tussaud couldn’t do better, sir.”

Mr. Toil was very active on his legs. He was much younger than his white hair suggested, but Barfleet did not know it, and not only did he use his legs in exploring the town, he hired an aeroplane from somewhere and flew over it. He made the pilot circle round and round while he surveyed Barfleet and its growth. He could trace all those new threads of brick and tile and concrete spreading their meshes into the surrounding country. But the new Barfleet was following the sun. It was shut in on the east by the old harbour and land that had been marsh. The town was losing its balance, and the congested and narrow High Street no longer served it as a central artery. It looked like a knitting-needle stuck through the superficies of a ball of wool.

Mr. Toil drew his own conclusions.

“The town’s going west, and the trade that doesn’t move west with it will go west in other senses. Huggins, Smellie, Pym & Co. still stuck in the High Street. No vision.”

Having spied out Canaan Mr. Toil prepared the attack. He located the new heart of Barfleet in Western Avenue, a broad, tree-lined street that would be the inevitable chord of the new arc. Here a large market garden still lingered. Mr. Toil fell upon that piece of ground. The transaction was carried through for him by a well-known firm of London agents. His name did not appear.

The market garden with its sheds and glasshouses vanished.

The Borough of Barfleet was asked to pass plans for the building that was to be erected. Young Huggins was on the Council, but such opposition as he was able to supply proved useless. The plans went through, and with astonishing suddenness a firm of contractors descended upon that piece of ground. It was an invasion, with girders and concrete-mixers and steel and lorries in chunks and masses. The great building began to rise like magic, and Barfleet, wondering, remained mystified. Report had it that a syndicate was opening a new store, a super-store.

There was alarm in certain quarters. Young Huggins began to worry. The premises in High Street seemed to sink into insignificance. But old Huggins scoffed.

“Let ’em build and bust themselves. Another Tower of Babel, that’s all.”

In secret the three firms of Huggins, Smellie and Pym assured themselves but not each other that the competition would be limited.

Smellie thought that the new business would cut into Huggins.

Huggins thought it would cramp Smellie.

Pym believed that it might complicate things for Huggins and Smellie, but that it would not harm him.

Optimists, and selfish at that.

The new building grew bigger and bigger, a great white cliff. It began to develop vast windows. It suggested universality, and still the mystery remained. The traders in Barfleet became nervous. Who was to be hit?

Then on a particular day in April Barfleet High Street witnessed a strange sight. A country wagon drawn by four horses and piled with spring flowers made its way down the street and turned off to St. Jude's churchyard. A curious crowd followed it. Half a dozen men in smocks unloaded the wagon and piled those mountains of flowers over a particular grave, the grave of Thomas Vance. The grave was completely hidden by daffodils, primroses and violets. The wagon and the smocked men drove away.

On the same day an immense placard appeared on the façade of the new building. It announced: —

THE ADVANCE STORES

This building will open on September 1st. On that day the Directorate will issue a cordial invitation to the town to inspect the various departments.
We shall specialise as Drapers and Clothiers,
Ironmongers and Furnishers,
Grocers.

September 1st. Old Huggins, malevolently strolling past the new Tower of Babel, was arrested by the name and the date. Advance. Vance. September 1st. Oh, yes, he had not forgotten that particular day. His face loomed. It seemed to lose a little of its truculent colour. But what nonsense! Just a coincidence. This confounded syndicate could know nothing of September 1st.

The date approached. The white building proceeded to dress itself. It began to put on an air of sumptuousness, to fill with marble and polished wood and frescoes and gilding. Were the directors mad? How could they expect to get their money back?

Windows began to fill. Fleets of lorries disgorged goods. A black-coated staff and packers and porters became active. But a week before the opening day all windows were screened. The building maintained its mystery.

Not so the window of No. 11, Royal Row. Holiday folk strolling and residents passing to and fro discovered a strange thing. The dining-room of No. 11, held two figures, but they were waxwork figures. An elderly man and a boy in old-fashioned clothes sat opposite each other at a Victorian dining-table. The boy was laughing; the old man appeared to be making a joke.

Old Huggins, on his way to the club for a game of bridge, joined the small crowd by the green railings. He looked in. His heavy jowl seemed to grow more pendulous. His eyes protruded.

For he saw a dead man sitting there dressed just as he remembered him—old Tom Vance, with his high colour, and white head and whiskers and his black swallow-tail coat. And the boy! That little, mischievous devil of a Joe ——! It was a resurrection in wax.

Old Huggins turned yellow.

He did not go to the club. He stumped back home, and looking turgid, went to bed.

At nine o’clock on September 1st the Advance Stores opened its glass doors. In the panelled vestibule stood the figure of an old man in a swallow-tail coat. He was posed on a pedestal, with hand extended, as though welcoming the town. The wax face had a genial smile.

To begin with the crowd was thin, but as the day advanced the housewives and girls of Barfleet began to assemble. Each household had received an invitation. Moreover, strange rumours had spread. They continued to spread.

The pavements became congested. The feminine world crowded at the windows.

For the prices!

Every article was priced, and the prices amazed the feminine mind. The place seemed a blaze of bargains. Articles that cost you thirty shillings or two and eleven at Huggins & Huggins could be purchased here for a pound, and one and sixpence. Moreover, the stock was superb. The dresses, the hats, the lingerie, the pretty-pretties, the silks and shoes and scarves and jumpers! The windows bloomed like an immense flower shop. Women began to grow excited.

Everyone who entered received a present:

With the Compliments of the Advance Stores.

A band played in a gilded gallery.

Towards the middle of the afternoon all Barfleet seemed to have crowded into the building. Suave shopwalkers answered questions.

“I suppose these are opening-day prices?”

“It must be a stunt.”

“No, madam, the prices are normal—for us. We expect our turnover to justify them.”

Mr. Joshua Toil was one of the crowd. He threaded his way from department to department like any member of the public. He had an air of whimsical gaiety.

Elsewhere there were alarums and consternation. Young Huggins appeared in Mr. Smellie’s shop and asked for the proprietor. He was taken to Smellie’s private room.

“Have you been to see——?”

Mr. Smellie had. He looked sick, but he scoffed.

“Oh, just a stunt. Selling at cost prices. Besides, they’ll be in trouble with the wholesalers and the manufacturers.”

“Think so?”

“Sure of it.”

“But did you notice——? The ordinary brands—I mean in your show. Much the usual price. But they are packed full of other stuff. Imported goods—and cheap—as——”

“Damned dumping-mongers.”

“It’s a scandal.”

Perhaps it was; though the Advance Stores were doing to Messrs. Huggins, Smellie & Pym what they had done to old Tom Vance who had refused to sell anything that was not English. Old Vance might have been a bit of an oddity. He had fought on his principles to the last ditch. Oh, yes, some of the Huggins business had been more than dirty. Who was it that had secretly bought up bills and presented them in a bunch? Had there been no surreptitious syndicate that had cut prices and received imported sweated goods in order to smother old Tom Vance?

But if the new stores drew the housewives for miles around, the window of No. 11 continued to attract more and more attention. The wax figures of Mr. Vance and Joseph Vance had given place to three other figures. They sat round the table as though in council, young Huggins as he was then, complete with black beard and Piccadilly weepers. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand. A placard hung on the wall:

THE THREE PATRIOTS

The Draper. The Ironmonger. The Grocer
or
How to Capture Trade.

If the owner of No. 11 was mad, there seemed to be some purpose in his madness.

Huggins senior, having seen his bearded self, that masterful and merciless young man of the ’seventies, called on his lawyers. He bellowed. But the situation was unique and singular, beyond precedent. How to proceed against a waxwork figure? If Mr. Toil chose to display dummies in his dining-room without any printed matter to cause a scandal, where did one’s case against him begin? It was a bit of a poser.

The lawyers wrote Mr. Toil a letter:

> “Dear Sir, “We understand that you are exposing to the public view a portrait in wax of a client of ours. Unless this figure is removed, we shall be compelled to consider what proceedings can be taken.”

Mr. Toil replied:

> “Please specify which figure represents your client, and supply me with his name.”

That, too, was something of a poser, but after discussing the problem with old Huggins the lawyers wrote again:

> “Our client objects to the figure of the draper.”

The wax figure of Mr. Huggins disappeared, and in its place appeared a notice:

Exit the Draper.

Another poser for the professional! Also, there was something prophetic and menacing in those three words.

For Barfleet and the neighbourhood were not showing that loyalty to an old-established firm that such a firm might count on. Custom was crowding to the Advance Stores.

Messrs. Huggins dropped their prices.

The Stores dropped theirs.

Moreover, they carried a more varied stock, a better stock, more stylish and attractive goods. They could display six dresses to Messrs. Huggins' one. They offered bargains from Paris.

Old Huggins went about with a jowl that looked more pendulous. He had begun to suspect that the sour bread that he had cast upon the waters was returning to him. He continued to bluster, but there was fear behind his bluster. He said to his son: "They must be losing thousands a year. If we have to lose money too, we'll do it and outlast them. I'm not afraid of Waterloo."

A year passed. The Advance Stores had made a loss of some fifty thousand pounds, but that was not of serious importance to a man who was worth three millions. Huggins were drawing on capital, and more and more so. Smellie was trying to sell his business and get out, but was unable to attract a purchaser. Pym, never too prosperous, was drifting for the rocks.

The big window of No. 11, Royal Row had been empty for six months, but now another group of figures appeared in it.

Mr. Thomas Vance returns to life and meets three citizens of Barfleet.

The whole town came to gaze. It saw Messrs. Huggins, Pym & Smellie—contemporary and life-like—huddled in a corner of the room, while Thomas Vance sat at the table and smiled at them.

The lawyers wrote more letters.

Mr. Toil replied to these letters:

"Please state specifically how I am detracting from the characters of your clients. In what way are the figures offensive? The portraits of the three citizens are excellent."

The lawyers retorted: “We shall take action.”

Mr. Toil responded:

> “Do so. But it seems that I shall be compelled to take action against myself. You will find me included in the tableau.”

A fifth figure appeared, that of Mr. Joshua Toil reproduced to the life. He stood behind Mr. Vance’s chair. Messrs. Huggins, Pym & Smellie remained huddled in the corner.

Mr. Joe Vance returns to Barfleet.

The secret was out, the battle flag displayed. The wax figures disappeared, and Mr. Joshua Vance reoccupied his dining-room in the flesh. The enemy lay low; the law remained in its kennel.

But the battle went on. The house of Huggins & Huggins attempted a bold flourish. They put in new windows; they attained a certain evanescent flashiness. They appealed to the public by poster:

Deal with the Old Firm.
Buy English Goods.

Their enemy replied. The Advance Stores became Vance’s Stores. Mr. Toil advertised it. “This firm was founded by Mr. Thomas Vance in the year 1863.”

Pym was the first to smash. He disappeared. Smellie, after two years of wriggling, surrendered, and was bought up by Vance’s Stores. The Hugginses held on for three years.

Old Huggins took to his bed.

All his life he had loved money, and as an old man he had loved it with a sonorous and greedy miserliness. And his money and his repute and the business he had created were slipping away, but he was incapable of any human gesture. That little beast of a Joe Vance, who, fifty or so years ago, had knocked his hat off with a snowball, had returned to smother him with other snow. This vendetta! Certainly, he had broken old Tom, but that had happened in the course of business, and the strange and avenging reappearance of old Tom’s son was not business.

Messrs. Huggins were groggy and ripe for the knock-out.

Mr. Vance wrote a letter to young Huggins:

> “I am open to purchase your business. If you care to treat, come and see me.”

Young Huggins was a beaten man. He was ready to clutch at a straw. He said nothing to his father, and when Mr. Vance offered him ten thousand pounds for the business and agreed to carry all the Huggins’ business debts, young Huggins jumped at the offer. The firm was utterly insolvent.

Young Huggins said nothing to his father, but when the agreement had been drawn up he signed it, and then went in search of his father’s signature.

It was a capitulation. Old Huggins glared at his son. His head sank deep into the pillow. He was dead.

But Vance’s Stores carried on. Business and prices resumed normality. The conduct of the enterprise was beneficent. Mr. Vance was careful not to cut the throats of smaller men.

He became Barfleet’s most popular figure. The little Anglo-American was three times mayor. He gave much to the town. When there was trouble in Barfleet people said “Go and see old Joe.”

COMPASSION

SHE was on edge, worried, overworked.

"Nurse Horrocks, No. 3's tea."

"Yes, Sister."

"Oh, do hurry up."

She was aware of him gliding towards her noiselessly on the wheeled stretcher, and in the rather dark corridor his face looked like a sharp, white edge. A grey blanket reached to his chin. And beside him walked a little woman in black whose face was almost as white as his. Yes, obviously his wife, and frightened. Old Tombs the porter, stertorous and purple and a makeshift of the war, puffed at her from under his walrus moustache:

"No. 5, Sister."

"Yes, we're ready."

Her smile was a little perfunctory, and her secret self waiting to escape for half an hour from No. 7, Vernon Street into an affair that was very much her own. Another man was waiting for her, a man who was home on leave, and the urge of her youth was tending towards him in the green spring of the year. A seat in the Park, a few intimate moments snatched from the day's routine, the provocation of his impatience.

"Hang it all—you don't give me much, Nellie."

"But I'm so busy, Jack."

"And I've only got seven more days."

Perhaps she found pleasure in his impatience, even in counting those days and thinking that they were as precious to her as to him, only differently so. It may be that she tantalized herself and him with the withholding of the ultimate climax. Yes, until the very last she would hold back, for as a woman she liked

the impatience of her lover. In not giving easily she would give the more.

The white doors of No. 5 Room were thrown open, a window showed a jumble of chimney stacks, pots and roofs and the large blue and whiteness of a broken sky. The figure under the grey blanket went in feet first, and his wife was about to follow when Sister Armitage interposed,

“No, will you please wait.”

The other woman hung back with a scared docility. No. 7, Vernon Street had frightened her, and already she had been sufficiently frightened. Everything was so stark and clean here, so efficient, so impersonal, yet so sinister, for even the odour of disinfectant seemed to mask the smell of tragedy.

“Yes—Sister. Can I——?”

Sister Armitage’s blue eyes dwelt for a moment on Mary Marden’s brown ones.

“You can go and wait in my room—if you like. Second door on left. When we have put your husband to bed, you may sit with him for ten minutes.”

“Just ten minutes?”

Sister Armitage nodded.

“An operation case, isn’t it? We like to keep our——”

“Yes, I quite understand.”

She melted away from the white doors, and the Sister went in and, helped by the porter, transferred Richard Marden from the stretcher to the bed. She was a strong young woman with fine arms and a well-shaped throat, and the man seemed no more heavy than a child. He looked up at her like a child with wide grey eyes, and the little flicker of a smile, and something in her strong young self went out to the helplessness in him.

“How’s that? Like another pillow?”

“No, it’s quite comfortable, thank you.”

The fingers of his right hand plucked at the sheet.

“I feel so cold, Sister.”

“I’ll get you a hot bottle.”

She was about to move away, but his eyes held her.

“Sister, can she come in for a little while?”

“Just for a little while.”

“You see she’s so—so frightened. She’s——”

Sister Armitage laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

“Now, try and not worry. You understand? Just try and give up and leave things to us.”

She went out into the corridor, and softly closed the doors, and hung a red label on the handle. Her pleasant, open face was a little overcast. She frowned. This was to be one of those difficult cases when the heart-beats of life were a little too evident, and yet she liked a difficult case. It challenged her, demanded the best from her, and Sister Armitage’s best was unapproachable. She had both understanding and vitality, strength and gentleness. She knew when to coax and when to scold.

But this other woman who was frightened?

She passed down the corridor to her own room and found Mrs. Marden sitting on the edge of a chair. The wife had the air of a little creature paralysed by fear, and she moved her eyes while keeping her head and body rigid.

Sister Armitage stood in the doorway.

“I’m just going to get your husband a hot-water bottle. And then I’m having tea. Care to have a cup?”

The pale lips moved.

“Yes—Sister—— And then—may I——?”

“We’ll see.”

Yet, even while she was thinking of the man she was to meet, Nellie Armitage did not see herself tangled up in the lives of these two people. She was not a sentimentalist, and she believed in keeping life cool and clean and calculable, save on those exceptional occasions when some strong urge moved you. So she sat down for ten minutes and drank her tea and talked like a frank sister to Mrs. Marden, and Mrs. Marden said “Yes, I know” to everything this nice autocrat had to say, and that look of fear seemed to sink a little more deeply into her eyes like a little animal retreating into a dark corner.

Then someone knocked at Sister Armitage’s door.

“Sister.”

“Come in.”

“Oh, Sister—Nurse James has a temperature. She won’t be able to go on

night duty.”

Sister Armitage stood up with lips closing over a word that could not be uttered.

“Oh, all right. But that leaves only the two of us. Oh, yes, we’ll have to carry on.”

She turned to Mrs. Marden.

“You can go in for ten minutes. Don’t tire him. I shall have to get busy.”

“Yes, I know he will need all his strength.”

She would need all her own strength, but of the nearness and the poignancy of that crisis she was not conscious, for life has a way of stealing upon you surreptitiously and laying a sudden hand upon your shoulder. For Nellie Armitage was thinking “Damn Nurse James and her temperature. She always chucks up just when she’s wanted. Well—anyway, I shall be able to meet Jack to-morrow. I suppose I shall say yes to him before he goes back to France.”

At six o’clock the surgeon came, and spent twenty minutes beside Marden’s bed, and Sister Armitage, standing by, noticed that Marden’s eyes never seemed to leave the doctor’s face. They said: “I know I’m pretty bad, but you’ll get me through, won’t you? I must get through.” Mr. Pallant the surgeon was a terse little man with a hook nose and tight lips, and black hair that fitted his head like a cap, and kinder than he looked. He said good night to Marden, and went out into the corridor with Eleanor Armitage. He, too, looked tired and overworked.

“Touch and go, Sister.”

“He’s very frail.”

“If he stands the op., it will be a question of nursing. Nurse James, isn’t it?”

“She’s in bed with a temperature.”

Mr. Pallant’s bright eyes seemed to snap.

“That means Nurse Horrocks—or you.”

“Quite so. Impossible to get anyone else in. The Matron is nearly off her head as it is.”

Mr. Pallant nodded.

“Nurse Horrocks——”

She knew that she was saying to herself what she was thinking, that Nurse Horrocks was a perfect fool who buzzed and blundered like a bluebottle, and could extinguish a frail flame by the mere draught of her presence. And suddenly she spoke.

“I suppose it will have to be me.”

He looked at her approvingly.

“Take the afternoons off and sleep. If you could hold on for a couple of days. I’ll speak to Matron.”

Her blue eyes stared.

“Oh, I’ll manage—somehow. I must get out for a little air once a day. His little wife is terrified.”

“Poor kid.”

He hurried off to see other cases on the floor below, and Sister Armitage went and sat on her bed for a minute and faced things out. She felt a little rebellious and desperate. Why should life tie her up like this just when she wanted to be free?

The floor-maid, a little drab who for some strange reason had not become involved in the making of munitions, came clattering up from below with the patients’ dinner-trays.

“There’s a note for you, Sister. A gen’leman left it.”

The letter was from her lover, and when Sister Armitage had read it, she put it away in a drawer and looked troubled. Inconsiderate and exacting creatures—men, for her lover’s letter was both peevish and passionate, and rather too full of savage self-pity. It suggested that she was not giving him as much of herself as he had expected. In a day or two he would be back in that bloody business—the war, and she was giving too much of herself to her confounded patients, a lot of old crocks who did not count in a world’s crisis. He said that he would be waiting for her in Vernon Street at four o’clock tomorrow. The very letter had a lowering, passionate face.

She felt ruffled, hurt. She went about her affairs, and presently she found herself opening the door of No. 5. Dusk had come, and the room was in half darkness, the window showing the dim outlines of roofs and chimneys, and high up the flicker of a star. The figure in the bed lay very still.

“You want a light. I shall have to draw the curtains. Had your dinner?”

“Yes.”

She moved to the window, and was about to draw the curtains when he spoke.

“Could they stay like that, Sister?”

“But you can’t have a light—unless——”

“I don’t want a light. I don’t want to be shut in.”

She turned and came towards the bed, and was suddenly aware of a groping hand.

“Sister—I shall get through this, shan’t I?”

“Of course.”

“I must——”

She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. She was aware of the dim hollows that were his eyes.

“You see—it isn’t as though she would get a pension if I get put out. They wouldn’t take me in the army; I tried twice. And if I die—she’ll have nothing.”

She echoed the word: “Nothing?”

“Absolutely—nothing.”

He lay very still a moment, gripping her hand.

“If I can get through this it will be all right. I have quite a good job, and my people are being very decent. I must get through, Sister. You’ll help me?”

Something in her was deeply moved. She had dealt with hundreds of sick people, peevish people, frightened people, selfish people, but the quiet anguish of this man was somehow different. He did not appear to be thinking of himself. She knew that he was in pain, but the worst pain was not physical.

She pressed his hand.

“Yes—I’ll stick by you. It’s a promise.”

“A promise. Sister, you’re——”

“Oh, nonsense, it’s my job. We’ll get you through.”

And when she had uttered the words she knew that she had made a promise that was sacred, and that she would have to abide by it for good or ill.

Marden was operated on at ten o’clock next morning, and the operation was successful, but whether he had sufficient strength to rally after it was another matter. He was taken back to bed, still only half conscious, and Dr.

Pallant and Sister Armitage faced each other across the bed. They nodded at each other, for Marden had hardly any pulse.

“Touch and go. He can’t be left, Sister.”

“I shan’t leave him.”

While, below, in the Matron’s room little Mrs. Marden waited large-eyed for the verdict, her cold hands clasped together. When Pallant entered the room she remained as though paralysed, staring at him.

“The operation has been successful.”

“Oh, doctor——”

“Yes. But he is very weak. It is only fair that I should warn you——”

Her eyes seemed to grow larger and larger.

“He’s not going to die?”

“I hope not. He’s got an excellent nurse, but as I say——”

“Can I see him, doctor?”

“Not yet. He must be kept perfectly quiet.”

And Mrs. Marden went off alone to her shabby little hotel looking like a ghost, and a lonely ghost, and Sister Armitage sat by Marden’s bed. He had been given an injection; his pulse had improved, and he was rallying. His sleepy, grey eyes looked at her.

“Is it all over, Sister?”

“Yes, all over, successfully.”

“Thank God. Does she know?”

“Yes. Now, you mustn’t talk. Lie quite still. We want you to sleep.”

“Yes, Sister.”

“Much pain?”

“No, Sister.”

She rose, and going to the window softly drew the curtains. And in doing so she remembered that she was to meet Jack Harkness at four o’clock. Oh, well, probably it could be managed, and Nurse Horrocks could be allowed to carry on for an hour. Also, Marden’s condition might have improved. She glanced at the patient and saw that his eyes were closed, and going out she met the Matron in the corridor, and the Matron was a woman who always hunted

her worry to death.

“Oh—Sister, how’s No. 5?”

“He has rallied a little.”

“I’m glad. I want you to go to bed and get some sleep this afternoon. You’ll have to be on duty to-night. I’m sorry, but we can’t get help.”

Sister Armitage’s colour rose. She hated fussy interference.

“That’s all right. I’ll manage. I’ll lie down at six and sleep till ten. I want to go out for an hour.”

The Matron was about to raise some objection, but Eleanor suppressed it.

“Yes—I must get some exercise and fresh air. If I crock—it will be bad business. I’m not a fool.”

The Matron was constrained to agree with her.

“Very well. I rely on your common sense, Sister.”

At half-past three Nellie Armitage opened the door of No. 5 and looked in. Marden appeared to be asleep, and she closed the door silently and went to speak to Nurse Horrocks.

“I’m going out for an hour. No. 5 is asleep. Put in your head at half-past four, and if he’s awake get him to take some egg-albumen.”

Nurse Horrocks was not only a fool, but an opinionated fool.

“Yes, Sister, I quite understand.”

A solid, hot-coloured man in khaki was walking up and down Vernon Street. He had a little black moustache, and thick lips, and brown eyes that were quickly angered. Other men were sometimes afraid of Captain Harkness, for the war had not improved his temper. He could bully. And when he saw Nellie Armitage emerge from the door of No. 7 in her nurse’s uniform he was annoyed.

His salute was sulky.

“Well, here you are. But why those damned clothes?”

Her eyes met his.

“What’s the matter with my clothes?”

“You might have put on something—nice. One’s sick of any sort of uniform. Too much like the war.”

She said: “I’ve only got an hour, Jack. I have to sit up all night with a bad case. I’m sorry.”

But he was in one of those awkward moods that would not be appeased. They walked into the Park and sat on a seat, and he kept jabbing at the gravel with the point of his cane. His mouth looked ugly.

“Look here—I want one whole evening. We’ll dine at Florio’s in a private room. I haven’t had much jam.”

Her eyes looked hurt.

“Don’t be a beast to me, Jack. I’ve got my job. One can’t——”

He glared.

“Well—I like that! I’ve been eating my soul out, and you seem to care more for——”

“I don’t. But—somehow—one can’t chuck one’s job.”

“Yes, you can. If you care. Look here, Thursday night. I have to catch that damned train on Friday morning. I’ll call for you at seven.”

She closed her eyes for a moment.

“I can’t promise——”

He clutched her wrist.

“Yes, you can. I want you. Damn it, you may never see me again. Promise.”

She sat rigid, and then gave a little shudder.

“All right. I promise. I’ll meet you in Vernon Street at seven.”

She went back to her job, but not with any feeling of happiness or peace. Oh, this ghastly war that seemed to fill some men with a sort of savage hunger! They wanted life, raw, hot elemental life, and though she could understand it and feel compassion, it shocked her a little. She climbed the stairs and was about to enter her room when Nurse Horrocks appeared.

“You’d better go and see No. 5, Sister.”

“What’s the matter?”

“He’s one of those funny cases. A bit hysterical.”

Sister Armitage’s face suddenly looked tired. She went into her room and took off her hat and cloak, and glanced at her face in a small mirror. Oh,

confound the Horrocks woman! She was like a clumsy cow in a crisis.

She pulled herself together and went and opened the door of No. 5. She was aware of two eyes looking at her. They seemed to brighten when they saw her face.

“Well—feeling better?”

He put out a hand.

“I’m glad you’ve come back, Sister. I can’t——”

“Can’t what, my dear?”

“She worries me. She’s got such—ugly hands.”

Sister Armitage smoothed his pillow.

“Now, now, mustn’t get excited. It’s all right; I shall be here with you.”

“I’m glad. You’re good for me, Sister, somehow.”

“Well, go on feeling good.”

That she had both a soothing and strengthening effect on him was evident, for she was a born nurse, perhaps because she had never ceased to be woman. Her urge was to help people, not only with her capable hands but with her sympathy and good-will, and all the drudgery of a nurse’s life had not killed this spirit in her. She watched him all that night, stealing in and out on silent feet and sometimes sitting beside his bed to listen to his breathing. He made little noises in his sleep, sighings, murmurings, and sometimes he would utter a faint moan. From time to time he woke and always her shadowy shape was there beside him.

“You there, Sister?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Can I have a little water?”

“Yes, my dear, and something else.”

She spoke to him like a child. She was ready with a feeding-cup to coax him to take the nourishment that he needed.

“Now, drink this.”

“Must I?”

“Yes. Got to keep your strength up.”

She supported his head while he drank, and her compassion seemed to bear

up his courage.

“You’re awfully good, Sister. Don’t know what I should do without you.”

“Oh, I just want to help you, my dear.”

For the next two days she fought death with him, growing more and more tired, and yet enduring. Scrutinizing her face in her mirror she would see herself looking haggard and almost old, for there was that other strife within her. She thought: “I shall look pretty cheap on Thursday.” At six o’clock she would undress and sleep till ten. She did not go out of doors. Dr. Pallant, observing her with his shrewd eyes, paid homage to the nurse in her.

“I believe you are going to pull him through, Sister.”

On the morning of the Thursday she came up against her crisis. She saw it in his frail figure, in the flicker of the flame, in the eyes of little Mrs. Marden, on the face of the doctor. She seemed to hold her breath. She was conscious of something wild and rebellious in herself, compassion for that other man, the urges of her own youth. She wanted to give and to get, to spend those last hours with her lover, for even a man’s raw selfishness somehow called to her compassion.

She heard Pallant saying to her, “You are being perfectly splendid, Sister. If you can get him through to-night I think he will live.”

She was listening to the wife.

“You are going to save him, Sister. I shall never be able to thank you.”

She saw herself involved in a double crisis, her own and Marden’s, and inevitably she knew that she would have to make her choice for both of them. One night, a few short hours, one of the lyric moments in her life! Why should she sacrifice it to this comparative stranger, this man who belonged to another woman, while her own lover waited? She knew a moment of anger and revolt. She found herself half-way down the stairs to the Matron’s room, and with those words ready on her lips: “I must have to-night off. Someone is going back to France to-morrow. It’s my right.”

Yet, she paused on the stairs; she hesitated; she stood leaning against the wall. She thought: “No, I can’t do it, somehow. If I went I should be feeling torn. It’s just as though he were to sneak out of the trenches and leave his men when the shells began to fall. I can’t do it. I’ve got to see this job through.”

She went back to her room and wrote a letter.

“JACK,

It's terrible, but I can't come to-night. I have a case that can't be left. Oh, my dear, try and understand. I want to come to you, and I can't. I'll try and be at the train to-morrow. Forgive me.

NELLIE."

She wrote "Captain Harkness" on the envelope and sealed it up, and going downstairs found old Tombs the porter reading the paper.

She said, "Tombs, I want you to do something for me."

He was ready to do anything for her, and she gave him the letter.

"I was going out with a friend, but I can't leave No. 5. I want you to find an officer who will be waiting in Vernon Street at seven. Captain Harkness is the name. Find him and give him this letter."

Old Tombs looked at her very kindly.

"I'll find him, Sister. Don't you worry."

At six o'clock, when she should have been lying down, she took a chair and carried it to the landing window. To Nurse Horrocks she said, "One can get some fresh air here. Yes—I shan't sleep till he's safely through." She could watch Vernon Street from the window, and at five minutes to seven she saw the brown figure of her lover appear. He walked up and down. And then she saw old Tombs' bald head and round shoulders. The porter accosted Captain Harkness; the letter passed between them. Tombs disappeared.

She saw her lover reading the letter, and suddenly she threw up the lower sash of the window and leaned out. She dared to outrage the etiquette of No. 7 by calling to a man.

"Jack."

He heard her; he looked up, and she waved, but there was no answering signal from him. For a moment she had a glimpse of his upturned, sullen face. She saw that he was tearing up her letter. He scattered the pieces on the pavement, turned, and walked away.

She closed the window. She sat down and stared at the chimney-pots of the houses across the way. She wanted to cry out, and no sound came. Her lover's love was without understanding or compassion.

Sudden anger came to her aid. She could not be comforted, but she could be sustained by pride. She stood up, and with a flushed calmness opened the door of No. 5.

Marden’s eyes were waiting for her. He smiled faintly.

“Sister, you ought to be resting now.”

“Oh—I’m all right.”

He frowned slightly.

“No. I shan’t feel comfortable—unless you’re resting. I shan’t—really. Do go and lie down.”

And suddenly her eyes felt hot.

“All right, my dear. I’ve got to get you through to-night. And then you are going to get well.”

He answered her with a kind of serenity.

“Yes, I am going to get well.”

Never had she had to suffer such a night. A thirst for sleep assailed her; she felt both numb and in pain. She made herself strong coffee, and walked noiselessly up and down the corridor. Those hours were slipping away, hours that should have been her lover’s, and yet something in her consented. She went softly in and out of Marden’s room, and sat by his bed. It was as though even his sleeping self divined her presence, and was at rest. He was sleeping as he had not slept before. The restlessness had passed, those little moanings and twitchings. And something in her was glad with a gladness that gradually transcended her self’s pain. As she listened to his quiet breathing she too began to feel at peace. Something seemed to die in her, while other happiness became alive.

She watched the dawn come up. She had no wish now to hurry to the station and see the face of her lover. All that seemed far away, a dead thing, a pain that had passed. She felt strangely wakeful and alert, and presently she began to busy herself with all the day’s affairs, and to be glad of them. This was her life.

Pallant came at nine. He had to be early.

“How’s No. 5?”

“The best night he has had.”

She let Pallant go in alone. She waited. And presently he came out with a little, satisfied smile on his thin face.

“Splendid. He’ll do. Your case, Sister.”

Later still she was sitting on her own bed with an arm round the waist of

Marden’s wife, and Marden’s wife was weeping.

“Oh, it seems too good to be true. It’s all through you, Sister. The doctor said so.”

Nellie Armitage gave a little laugh.

“My dear, that’s all right. But I can tell you one thing, I’m going to have a jolly good sleep to-night. And so—will you.”

FRANÇOIS

FRANÇOIS was a good soul. He loved his dinner and he loved his daughter, but it could be said of him that his desire to dine had failed him whenever Désirée had been ill. A delicate child, and motherless, she had caused François many emotional qualms and some dyspepsia, and truthfully François could say to the world:

"You see, when I am worried it goes to my stomach."

Incidentally, François had very little to worry about now that the war was over, and the franc had become stabilized. Désirée had grown up into a capable, clear-skinned, comely young blonde, and she had ceased to cause her father gastric qualms. She was an excellent cook and an expert needle-woman and she managed her father's little villa on the hill-side below the Hotel Hesperides. On Sundays when François and his daughter drove in their Citroen coupé to spend the afternoon in the casino of St. Pierre, Désirée had the men round her. She could dance and she could dress; she was no fool, and she was the daughter of François.

It troubled François just a little. He might say to himself, "Of course—the girl will have to marry. It is nature, but I do not wish to be left alone. A man is so helpless, yes; a second marriage—no—no. Housekeepers can be the devil. Besides, how shall we find the man who is fit to marry my daughter—and inherit my fortune? If it is a question of happiness, well—well—the woman must be the autocrat in the home."

At the Hotel Hesperides the unenlightened among the guests patronized François.

"Morning, François, what's the weather going to do?"

Always, according to François, the weather was going to be fine. Fat, bland, sallow, and just a little sardonic, he was never out of countenance, or out of temper. He ruled the under-porters and the chasseurs like a Napoleon.

Perched on his stool, or poised on his short, stout legs with his waistcoat bulging against the mahogany of the bureau, he issued stamps and changed money, dealt with letters, and supplied information.

François had been the concierge at the Hotel Hesperides for seventeen years, and since the hotel had prospered François had prospered with it. He had deserved to prosper. Certain of the hotel's yearly patrons asserted that François was the hotel, and that without him things would have been very different. They were not far wrong.

François had gathered his golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides. In tips and perquisites his post was worth some hundred thousand francs a year. But there were other pickings, presents from the local garage and from the St. Pierre shops, even douceurs from the St. Pierre physicians. François could recommend or he could damn, and being a Frenchman who had climbed industriously to his particular perch he behaved as the logician. He had created his position and its opportunities and he used them. He took toll of those sycophantic shopkeepers who were eager to sell their millinery, bijouterie, and antiques. A particular barber shaved Monsieur François gratis during the season.

But that was not all. François had turned his savings to good account. He was part owner of an hotel at Vichy; he financed the local motor-bus service between St. Pierre and Cannes. He owned his own villa, and two or three other villas. He was a very warm man.

More than once an intimate had asked him the obvious question:

"Why do you continue as concierge——?"

François' little eyes had twinkled.

"Because I like it. Because I am used to it. Because it brings me in—oh, well—never mind."

His confession was candid and honest. He liked the life of the hotel, the coming and going, and the consciousness of secret power. He was the Hotel Hesperides, oh—yes, much more than people knew. Sitting in his bureau he could watch and listen and keep a finger on the hotel's pulse. He knew at once when the patrons were grumbling, and just what that grumbling was worth. He knew the people who mattered, and those whom it was necessary to put upon the black list. Another year, when they wrote for rooms, there would be no accommodation.

People amused him, especially those who were haughty. He was bland and polite even to the snobs and the new rich, but he chuckled in his wise belly. To

many of these casual creatures he was just a little fat man in a frock coat, a servant, an underling to whom they chucked fifty-franc notes.

“François, I want the bus to call at the chemist’s.”

“Certainly, madame.”

“Give me some clean notes. These are too filthy.”

“Certainly, madame.”

But François had his dislikes, and among them could be counted Mrs. Billington-Smythe who had patronized the Hesperides for two successive winters. Mrs. Billington-Smythe patronized everybody. She was an elderly widow and excessively wealthy, with a face like a macaw’s, and a voice that was metallic. To her François applied the word: “Formidable.” She was a terror, and like many rich women—as mean as skimmed milk.

When the Management received a letter from Mrs. Billington-Smythe stating that she was to be expected at the Hotel Hesperides late in January, and that the little suite that she had occupied for two seasons was to be reserved for her, the Management consulted François.

“What shall we do about it?”

Monsieur Martino the proprietor lacked the succulent swagger and the smooth aplomb of the born hotelier. He was too sensitive, and he took complaints too seriously.

François shrugged.

“Formidable! Is it necessary?”

Monsieur Martino argued that considering the world crisis—one could not afford to offend clients.

“Last year—she offended a general, two colonels, and an ex-lord mayor of London,” said François. “She cannot play cards without losing her temper. She went away without tipping the head-waiter.”

“We have a different head-waiter this year.”

Again François shrugged.

“Well, give her that suite over the kitchen close to the luggage lift. If she makes a row about it”—and again he shrugged.

Monsieur Martino blinked at him.

“I must put someone very important into that suite—then we can assure her

that it is impossible to make a change.”

“Put the Baron Bergamo into it. He has tusks.”

“Excellent. I see madame says that she is bringing her own chauffeur.”

“Poor devil!” said François.

He was more of a prophet than he knew. Mrs. Billington-Smythe arrived on a Friday with a new and luxurious car and a new and most unluxurious chauffeur. Not that the fellow’s appearance was out of keeping with the polish of the car. He was a dark, thin, good-looking young man whose eyes somehow suggested anxieties, secret humiliations and hunger. He helped his mistress out of the car, and François noticed that Mrs. Billington-Smythe’s hand lingered rather possessingly on the young man’s arm.

François bowed. He met the whole world and bowed to it. Besides, he and the Management were prepared for a fracas.

“Madame has had a good journey?”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe was tired and out of temper.

“Your roads get worse and worse.”

François might have said the same thing about her temper.

He passed her to Monsieur Martino. Monsieur Martino would have to explain the situation. And then François heard the chauffeur addressing him in very good French.

“Where do I garage? And where do I—quarter myself?”

François gave the young man a quick scrutiny. He knew his English pretty thoroughly. He could tell who was “it” and who was not, and obviously Mrs. Billington-Smythe’s chauffeur was a gentleman rigged out in a smart uniform of buff and black.

“The garage is behind the hotel. Turn to the left.”

He smiled with friendliness, and the tired young man seemed glad of any friendliness.

“Thanks. Yes—I ought to have remembered. I stayed here once before.”

And then François remembered him. The young man had been a visitor and not a chauffeur. Well—well! The world was upside down.

François returned to the white and gold vestibule of the Hotel Hesperides in time to hear the angry voice of Mrs. Billington-Smythe scolding poor

Monsieur Martino.

“It is perfectly disgraceful. I shall go on to Cannes. I have spent hundreds of pounds in your hotel and you put someone else in my suite.”

Monsieur Martino kept bowing and rubbing his hands.

“I am very sorry, madame, but we had already arranged our reservations before madame’s letter arrived.”

“I told you when I left that you might expect me this winter.”

“But, madame, one can never be sure.”

“I—always keep my word. Show me this other suite. I will stay a few nights and then go on to Cannes.”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe was conducted upstairs in the lift and introduced to her new apartments. She did not like them and she said so, but she deigned to accept them. Monsieur Martino would give her the first refusal of any other suite that became vacant. And who was this Baron Bergamo—anyway? An Italian? Monsieur Martino had put Italy before England! Some people had no sense of proportion.

“Send up my luggage—at once.”

“Yes, madame.”

“And send me the floor-waiter. I want tea.”

Monsieur Martino went downstairs and spoke to François.

“She says she will go on to Cannes next week.”

François smiled a little cynical smile.

“I think—not. She has the skin of an elephant. She will stay here. Our food is very good.”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe behaved as François said she would behave, for the Hotel Hesperides had many advantages. The golf course lay just at the foot of the hill, and in the evening some sixty people sat down to play bridge. Also, the cuisine was excellent. Mrs. Billington-Smythe played golf; it was execrable and formidable golf, but she played it, and every morning her chauffeur—Mr. Jack Kenneth Woodhill—had to parade outside the hotel with her golf clubs. He stood there, erect and rigid, like a self-conscious and shy young guardsman on sentry-go. He had an air of not wishing to be looked at. Probably, it was not a question of snobbery, but he was ashamed of being the property of Mrs. Billington-Smythe.

François observed things.

He noted that Mr. Woodhill had to report to the lady three times a day, at half-past eight in the morning, at two, and at six-thirty. He received orders, and François had a suspicion that he might receive more than orders. He carried himself as though he loathed his livery and his own soul; he was a mixture of shyness and defiance. He kept very much to himself.

The Hotel Hesperides had to have its joke about Mrs. Billington-Smythe and her pretty lad. Jack Woodhill's hair had a natural wave, but the hotel would have it that Mrs. Billington-Smythe produced that wave with her caresses.

When Mr. Woodhill was not on duty he changed into an old but well-pressed lounge suit and went for long and solitary walks. He climbed the hills and followed the paths through the pinewoods. He was a very unhappy young man.

François, lunching at home at the Villa des Fleurs, spoke to his daughter concerning Mr. Woodhill.

"Presumably, it is a case of Cain. He is—perhaps—what the English call a 'rotter.' And yet—the young man has good eyes. I remember him and his parents. They were *gentil*. He was not much more than a boy when he stayed here."

Désirée was interested. All good women are interested in rotters, especially tragic rotters, and Désirée had come to know Mr. Woodhill by sight. He did not look *méchant*. He seemed to carry about with him a forlorn indignation. His eyes might have said: "Don't speak to me, please. I'm unspeakable. I should have died in the war."

Désirée asked no questions. Some women do not need to ask questions. She had inherited her father's shrewdness. She was not sentimental, but she had feelings. She would always know, too, just what she wanted and how to get it. She was the only person who could make François do that which he might not wish to do.

She said: "Why should we not be kind to the poor young man?"

François sipped his coffee.

"Ah, yes, perhaps. We will see."

Now, François, fat and fiftyish, could be as full of resource as any D'Artagnan. He could seize an occasion, and the occasion chanced as follows. François was walking down the hill path to his villa, and it so happened that

Mrs. Billington-Smythe's chauffeur was behind him. Mr. Woodhill was going for a walk. François contrived to drop his wallet on the path. He knew just how much money that wallet contained. It was a hot day, and he walked on, holding his hat and wiping his forehead with a large handkerchief. He did not look back. He was fat innocence in a frock coat.

He was within fifty yards of the villa when he heard himself hailed.

"Monsieur François."

He faced about. Mr. Woodhill was coming down the path with the wallet in his hand.

"Excuse me, but did you drop this?"

François raised astonished hands.

"*Voilà*—how careless of me! It must have come out with my handkerchief. I heard nothing fall."

Mr. Woodhill smiled, handed him the wallet, was thanked, and growing suddenly shy, passed on.

Inside his own gate François examined the contents of the wallet. A one-thousand franc note, five-hundred franc notes, six ten-franc notes, seven five-franc notes. All correct!

He smiled. Mr. Woodhill had not pinched a penny.

Said François to his daughter: "I think we might be a little kind to that Mr. Woodhill. I think he is *bon garçon*. We will see."

But François prevaricated. Supposing——? If Désirée was to have a husband, he—François—— Meanwhile, circumstances intervened and challenged François's prevarications.

When going shopping in St. Pierre it was possible to save half a mile by taking the hill path that snaked its way among the heather and the cistus and the aromatic shrubs and cork oaks of that southern country. Désirée often took this path, for the road was so very dusty and full of autos. She was coming back from St. Pierre one afternoon after having her hair attended by to Monsieur Paul, when she was waylaid by a swarthy little vagabond who sprang out of the undergrowth. He demanded money. He had expected to plunder one of the rich English ladies from the Hesperides.

Désirée had courage. She confronted the fellow, and told him exactly what she thought of him. Such behaviour was fatuous. It would only land him in prison, and if it was a matter of hunger, he could come to the Villa des Fleurs

and a meal would be given him.

The bandit grinned at her.

“Hand over your purse, my dear.”

He blocked the path, and when she still hesitated he produced a rather ugly-looking knife. He was making suggestive gestures with the knife when Mrs. Billington-Smythe’s chauffeur appeared round a curve of the path.

Mr. Woodhill had his hands in his pockets. He stood still and stared, and having summed up the situation he removed his hands from his pockets, bent down and collected two hefty stones from the rough edge of the path. The stones were as large as Jaffa oranges. He advanced with one in either hand.

“Permit me, mademoiselle.”

He addressed the brigand.

“Clear out, quit. I’m not feeling sweet-tempered to-day.”

The fellow snarled at him, and then made a quick lunge in Mr. Woodhill’s direction, ducking and putting up an arm to shield his face. The knife, held point upwards, suggested the ripping horn of a rhino. Mr. Woodhill swung a long leg, and his boot made a lucky contact with the fellow’s fist, and almost at the same moment he discharged one of his young rocks downwards upon the blackguard’s head. It sufficed. The fellow pitched forward, rolled into the maquis, and lay still.

Mr. Woodhill and Désirée looked at each other.

Said Mr. Woodhill, “That was a lucky one. I think I had better see you home. Afterwards I can phone to the police.”

Désirée had one of those vellum skins that do not flush with facility, but when a flush did appear there was no doubt about it.

“How brave of monsieur! I cannot thank——”

Mr. Woodhill glanced at the prone figure.

“Well, never mind just now, mademoiselle. I don’t want to have to use this other stone on the fellow.”

Inevitably, all Monsieur François’ prevarications were swimming in the potage. When he heard of his daughter’s adventure he ceased to possess prevarications. He even fell upon Mr. Woodhill in the hotel vestibule, embraced him, and kissed him on both cheeks.

Mr. Woodhill was embarrassed, and all the more so because Mrs.

Billington-Smythe happened to witness the incident. He had come in to make his evening report, and to receive his orders for to-morrow.

“Woodhill.”

“Madam?”

Everybody was dressing for dinner, and the lounge was empty, and Mrs. Billington-Smythe interviewed her chauffeur in the lounge.

“What is the meaning of this extraordinary behaviour?”

“What behaviour, madam?”

“You and François. A disgusting habit, men kissing each other. And François, of all people.”

“I had done François a small service, madam.”

“Indeed! And he kissed you for it. Just tell me exactly——”

But Mr. Woodhill showed sudden temper.

“A private affair of my own, madam. It happened—when I was not on duty. What orders for to-morrow, please?”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe looked slightly astonished.

“I am going to Cannes.”

“At what hour, madam?”

“Ten o’clock.”

He bowed to her, and withdrew to the vestibule.

François was waiting for him, a François who had been listening to the conversation, and whose good-will wished to express itself in solid acknowledgment.

“Ah, Mr. Woodhill—there must be a little celebration. Yes, the police have locked up the bandit. We must have a little dinner, my friend. You will do us the honour of dining with us to-morrow at my villa?”

Mr. Woodhill appeared to be in a curious temper.

“I am sorry, Monsieur François—but I may be on duty to-morrow——”

He walked towards the glass doors and François followed him. In fact he followed Mr. Woodhill out on to the gravelled space outside the hotel. It was empty and the stars were shining, and François took the young man by the arm.

“My friend—my daughter insists. We will make dinner any hour you please.”

Mr. Woodhill stood rigid and self-conscious.

“Thank you and your daughter, but——”

“You cannot refuse. Désirée——”

And suddenly Mr. Woodhill let himself go.

“Look here, François—I don’t feel that I’m fit to dine with your daughter. I’m nothing but a—— Oh, well, never mind. I can’t call my soul my own. That damned woman——!”

François retained his hold of Mr. Woodhill’s arm.

“Yes, that damned woman. Do you remember my people, François, when we were here before the war?”

“Yes—I remember them. Your mother——”

Mr. Woodhill seemed to wince.

“Look here, François, you’re a man and so am I, though there are times when I feel like a cross between a lounge lizard and a Pekingese.”

“That would be a strange animal, Monsieur Jack.”

“Oh, don’t laugh at me, man.”

“The good God forbid!”

“I suppose I may as well tell you how I got into this livery. My old pater crashed badly in the money market. When he died he left my mother with about twopence a year. I had a job out in India, quite a good job. They fired me. Yes, economy. I couldn’t get another job out there, and I came home—steerage. I had sent the mater all my spare cash. I thought I could get some sort of job in England, but could I? Not—on your life. I spent six months on my feet, getting shabbier and shabbier. I hadn’t a bean. I was living with my mother in her small flat, a working-man’s flat. Yes, sponging, and my mother is the sort of woman—— Oh, well, I felt pretty desperate. Some of the bright lads seem to swallow that sort of thing quite easily. Living on women! Well, someone put me on to this. The lady wanted a courier-chauffeur who could speak French. I tell you I jumped at the chance, but—my God——!”

He was trembling as with some secret indignation.

“She’s—she’s an old vampire, François. It’s—— Oh, well, I’ve been sticking it because I could send a little money home. The mater’s been ill. Fact

is—she won’t live very long, so what does my damned pride matter? I may as well swallow the medicine so long as I can. But look here, I am not coming to dine with your daughter. I don’t feel fit to——”

François drew Mr. Woodhill to the stone balustrade of the terrace and spoke to him with unusual gentleness. The night was clear and sweet, and the stars were shining.

“Monsieur Jack, we are grateful to you. The dinner will be an excellent dinner. You must try my daughter’s soufflé. Désirée is——”

“I’m not coming, François.”

“Chocolate soufflé. And I have some bottles of 1919——”

“I’m not coming.”

“And a little ‘fin’—Imperial ‘fin.’ ”

“Damn you, François—why can’t you——?”

François laughed.

“My daughter has a new Paris frock. She will be so——”

Mr. Woodhill threw up his head like a man confronting a crisis.

“All right—I’ll come, just for the once. It’s awfully decent of you, François. I’ve been so damned lonely here.”

“I quite understand, my dear. You come to us and enjoy your dinner. My daughter would like to hang a medal on you. To—‘Le Brave Jack.’ ”

Mr. Woodhill still possessed a dinner jacket that had travelled from England in his old suit-case. He had brought that jacket with him, not because he had expected to wear it, but because it symbolized a self-regarding and more prosperous past. Désirée wore her new Paris frock, and when they stood together in François’ salon they looked as comely a couple as any fat little father could wish to see. They appraised each other, and in their eyes was a mutual liking. François, mixing little drinks at a side-table, smiled, rubbed his chin, and reflected. For the last three years he had been keeping his eyes open for a particular sort of young man. The young man would have to be good looking, possess a presence, character, knowledge of the world. He would need good eyes and a good head. It was essential that he should be able to speak English, French, and German.

François clinked a glass against a bottle.

“Monsieur Jack, can you speak German?”

Mr. Woodhill turned and looked at him questioningly.

“German? Yes, a little. But why?”

François chuckled.

“Oh—I just wondered. I just wondered.”

When Mr. Woodhill returned to the hotel full of wine and dinner and Désirée, the night porter met him. Chauffeurs, maids and valets lived in a wing at the back of the Hesperides, and Mr. Woodhill always used the front door. Madame might have left some instructions for him at the bureau.

“Madame has been on the telephone.”

“My madame?”

The man grinned.

“You are to report to her—at once. She is waiting up.”

Mr. Woodhill was smoking the last third of a third cigar. He tossed it into a metal fern pot and looked grim.

“Many thanks. I go.”

When he knocked at the door of Mrs. Billington-Smythe’s suite, he heard the lady’s voice from the deeps within.

“Who’s that?”

“Woodhill, madam.”

“Come in.”

He knew by her voice’s frayed edge that his mistress was in a temper, which was not unusual, and especially after three hours of cold and concentrated bridge in the fug of the hotel lounge. He had forgotten that he was wearing a dinner jacket. It had sat on him so naturally down there at François’s villa that it had become like his old and accustomed skin.

Mrs. Billington-Smythe appeared from the bathroom in a brilliant cerise and green dressing-jacket. She looked flushed. Her brassy hair might have been blown about by a high wind. She stared at Mr. Woodhill. She was surprised, and offended by his dinner-jacket. What was the fellow doing wearing a dinner-jacket? How dared he wear a dinner-jacket without consulting her preference for pyjamas?

“Where have you been?”

The warmth of the François home seemed to die out of Jack Woodhill. He

felt cold, murderously cold.

“Out, madam.”

“Out—where?”

“Dining, madam.”

“Dining! What do you mean by going off for hours without letting me know——?”

He was icy.

“When I am not on duty, madam, I presume——”

“Where have you been dining?”

“As a matter of fact—I have been dining with François.”

“François?”

“Yes.”

“In that get up?”

“There are occasions, madam, when Monsieur François wears a dinner jacket. What orders for to-morrow?”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe changed her tone. You might be angry with your pet dog, but you were not angry all the time.

“Golf—as usual. I shall want my clubs.”

“Certainly, madam. The usual hour? Yes. Good night madam,” and before she could find anything else to say he had walked out and closed the door.

But in the course of the next few days the affair of Mr. Woodhill, the brigand and the maiden had become public gossip in the Hotel Hesperides. People made a point of enlarging upon it to Mrs. Billington-Smythe. “I hear your chauffeur’s quite the hero.” “Almost, the Ronald Colman touch.” “A most romantic affair. They tell me the fellow was a most desperate character, and was badly wanted by the police.” Mrs. Billington-Smythe smiled through clenched teeth. She was not going to have her chauffeur behaving like a mountebank or a cinema star. He was just her paid servant—and——

She made the announcement to Mr. Woodhill.

“We are leaving for Cannes the day after to-morrow.”

“Yes, madam. But—unfortunately—I shall be needed here as a witness. The police have warned me.”

“A witness?”

“Yes, against that fellow—who——”

Mrs. Billington-Smythe flared.

“Perfectly preposterous! I engaged you as a chauffeur, and not to get mixed up in affairs like this. We leave for Cannes the day after to-morrow. Damn the police.”

“Certainly, madam.”

He was preparing to walk out, but she called him back.

“Woodhill, unless—you arrange—to be at my service—properly—I shall sack you. You understand?”

“Quite, madam.”

“Well, don’t let me have any more nonsense of this kind.”

What Mrs. Billington-Smythe described as nonsense was interference of any kind by any person or public body with her pleasures and her passions. She was a spoilt child of fifty, and she believed in exercising the power of the purse. She rather thought that she had Mr. Woodhill on the leash, and he—examining the contents of his wallet in the privacy of his bedroom, was moved to rage against life’s limitations. He was the possessor of seventy-three francs, fifteen centimes. Ten days ago his spare cash had travelled to England on duty.

“O, damn it!”

He was in love, with the daughter of François. How impossible the whole thing was! He supposed that he would have to continue in the service of Mrs. Billington-Smythe. Even if he indulged in a magnificent gesture and discharged himself he had not the price of a ticket home.

But he did not allow for the prepossessions of Mademoiselle Désirée. Like many Frenchwomen she had very decided opinions, and plump and determined affections. Many men had made love to her, and she had encouraged them, but Mr. Jack Woodhill was the man whom she had decided to marry. She was quite sure that he would satisfy her both as a lover and a husband. Like her father she had a nice sense of property.

Also, she was a charming, affectionate, capable creature. She wanted to stroke her poor Jack’s worried head.

She had always been frank with her father. She said—“Papa, about the new hotel at Aix? I have had an idea.”

François had been juggling with the same idea.

“Ah, yes—I need a manager. I have been keeping my eyes open for a manager, a gentlemanly fellow who would be willing to learn the business.”

Father and daughter looked at each other.

Said Désirée—“I—know—quite a lot about the management of hotels, papa. You have talked to me for years about hotels.”

“You wish to manage my new ‘Splendide’?”

She smiled at him.

“You could arrange the new directorate, papa. You would be the chief director, and I——”

François chuckled.

“There should be a man on the spot too. I have thought of proposing to Mr. Woodhill that—with some instruction and supervision—he might make an excellent director. He has a presence, manners, language. He has had a business training. He is honest. Do you think, my dear, that Mr. Woodhill would make a successful director?”

His daughter gave him a droll and affectionate look.

“I think he would make an excellent director.”

“In partnership?”

She nodded. “Yes, in partnership with François.”

François had dined, and he lit a cigar.

“Shall I talk business to Mr. Woodhill or will you?”

“You, naturally,” said the daughter.

“It will surprise him. What if he should refuse?”

“Then—I shall have to support you, papa.”

François, having smoked his cigar, walked up to the Hotel Hesperides, and half-way up the path he met a melancholy and loitering figure. It was Mr. Woodhill coveting the moon.

“What, you, my friend? I was coming to see you.”

He laid a plump hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“I hear Madame Formidable is leaving for Cannes.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“And you?”

“I am her chauffeur.”

François looked up at the moon.

“Listen, Monsieur Jack. I have a proposal to make. Leave Mrs. Smythe to engage a new chauffeur, and come into business with me.”

Mr. Woodhill stiffened.

“What do you mean? At the Hesperides?”

“No, no. I—François—am a man of capital. Next season I open a new hotel at Aix. I need a director.”

“Well——?”

“Why should not you be my director?”

Mr. Woodhill was momentarily voiceless.

“You’re not serious, François?”

“Absolutely.”

“But I know nothing about hotels. It’s perfectly amazing of you, but my dear François—I’m not such a cad as all that. I could not justify——”

“Then—you refuse?”

“Absolutely. I’m not going to let you down.”

François patted Mr. Woodhill’s shoulder.

“Well—well—how disappointing, I will say no more. But go down to the villa, my friend; I shall be back in half an hour and we will share a little drink. You will find Désirée doing the household accounts. Tell her to give you a cigar.”

Mr. Woodhill hesitated.

“Look here, François, you’ve been most awfully kind to me, and I——”

Again, François patted Mr. Woodhill’s shoulder.

“Nothing, my friend, nothing. Go and sit in my chair and wait for me. Désirée will not feel disturbed. She will finish her accounts.”

Mr. Woodhill surrendered, and went unsuspectingly to that more subtle temptation, and François walked up and down the path for three-quarters of an

hour. He did not go to the Hotel Hesperides. He lit a second cigar. And presently he toddled back to the gate of the Villa des Fleurs. He looked at the moon and he heard voices.

He sidled along the wall and stood listening. The voices came from the little terrace where the bougainvillea and the Banksia roses were in flower, and inwardly François chuckled.

“But, my darling, it’s all so wonderful. I know nothing about hotels. How can I let your father——?”

Someone’s fingers pinched a young man’s ear.

“Are you so very old, Jack, so very, very old? Too old to learn?”

“Well—I don’t know. I——”

“I—know—quite a lot about hotels, *mon cheri*. But—of course—the proud Anglais would not learn from a woman.”

“O—wouldn’t he? I’m learning the most marvellous things.”

“Well, my Jack, learn to be an hotelier, and go and *saboter* the engine of Madame’s car.”

There was sudden laughter, and other sounds, and François, setting up a humming in his throat, announced the parental presence.

“Hallo, hallo! Do I hear voices?”

Mr. Woodhill leaned over the wall.

“That you, sir?”

“I think so.”

“Do you despise a man who changes his mind?”

François chuckled.

“Ask my daughter, Monsieur Jack. Who persuaded Adam——?”

And as he entered the gate his daughter met him on the steps and kissed the top of her father’s bald head.

Incidentally, Mrs. Billington-Smythe travelled to Cannes with a new chauffeur hired for a month from the local garage. She had threatened Mr. Woodhill with legal proceedings; he had broken his contract; she would interview the English consul at Cannes. She would——

Mr. Woodhill, out of livery and dressed in his lounge suit, had been polite

and a little ironic.

“My address, madam, will be the Hotel Splendide—at Aix. I am going into partnership with Monsieur François. Yes, the ‘Splendide’ belongs to Monsieur François. I am to manage the hotel.”

She had glared at him.

“You—manage an hotel! Well—really!”

“Yes, really. After all—it may be less difficult—than driving madam’s car.”

JACK AND ANDREW

THEY had served together in the war, and been wounded within three yards of each other, and they resided in the same post-war street of the same post-war suburb. Foster lived with his people; Snaith was in rooms. Neither of them had married, Foster because he was always falling in and out of love, Snaith because he took himself and life and women so seriously that he appraised and handled the romance until the glamour had gone.

They caught the same train to town, and went to dances together and played tennis and golf, and were—to a point—inseparable. Snaith, dark, intense, and prone to reticence, found the smooth and cheerful casualness of Foster rather pleasant. And Foster admired "Old Andrew. A bit solemn and serious, you know, but utterly white."

Snaith was in a shipping office and hating it. Foster had a billet in one of the London stores, and he accepted his job so cheerfully and regarded it so obviously as a makeshift that when economy became the order of the day Foster was one of the first to be axed. He treated the catastrophe as a joke. He was not depressed by the glum faces of his parents, or chafed by his sister Rachel's candour.

"It doesn't seem to worry you, Jack."

"Not a bit. I'm a gentleman at large."

"A sponge at large."

"A what?"

"I said—a sponge."

"Oh, cat's claws! Fact is—I've got a scheme in view."

"Oh! Lounge lizardry—or something?"

"No. Old Andrew's joining up with me. He's fed to the teeth with Bluett & Bolsover. We've got some capital between us."

“Capital?”

“Well—I’ve still got the three hundred Aunt Mary left me. Old Andrew can put down a thousand. We’re going to grow fruit and breed chickens in Sussex. No end of a life. No damned trains to catch. No ‘Heads’ getting swollen and sniffy.”

His sister blew down her cigarette holder, and frowned at the fire.

“Well, if Andrew’s in it—I won’t say it’s damned silly. Neither of you know a pullet from a cockerel.”

“What a little blighter you are. We’re both going as students for three months to a chap down at Horsham. Old Andrew’s as keen as mustard. Says he’s choking in this crowd community.”

She glanced slantwise and with half-closed eyes at her brother.

“Oh, yes, Andrew’s all right. He’s got a head.”

“Thanks, Rachel. Mine’s not exactly a pumpkin.”

They served their apprenticeship with the man at Horsham, and during the week-ends they explored Sussex in a dilapidated two-seater. The perfect place was not easy to find, for Snaith, who was risking more capital in the enterprise, utterly refused to consider anything in the way of an inflamed wart—otherwise a bungalow. He called them sore spots in Sussex. His idea was an old farm half-way up the Forest Ridge, a place that could be regarded as a bargain and mortgaged if needs be.

They found their farm one March day. It was sufficiently wild even for Snaith. It reposed on the shoulder of the ridge, a little red house guarded by a group of wind-blown pines. The outbuildings were not too bad, the slope of the ground south-west and dryish, grass and patched with furze. The Weald was a blue green carpet stretching to the silver grey distance of the Downs. A rather muddy lane led to the high-road.

“Absolutely O.K., old man.”

“Absolutely. Plenty of storage room. The barn roof wants a little attention.”

“Have to pump our own water. Still, never mind. No damned water rate.”

They called the place “Journey’s End.” Jack, who had come to fancy himself considerably as a carpenter, made and painted a board and fastened it on the gate at the end of the lane.

They moved in in April with a collection of very odd furniture, two

second-hand fowl-houses, two brooders, two Sussex arks, and a number of young birds, Leghorns and Rhodes. They proposed to spend the spring and summer in putting “Journey’s End” into order and preparing it to function as a farm. They planned to erect wire and build their own fowl-houses. Next winter they would plant fruit trees in a field that was sheltered by a wood belonging to the farm.

Those spring and summer months were like a holiday to both these men. They had no morning train to catch, no dull office routine to bore them. Life was comparatively easy, with no fires to light or lamps to look to, for they rose early and went to bed at dusk. Certainly, their meals were rough and ready, and the washing up and bed-making somewhat scrappy. Jack fancied himself as a cook. He fancied himself at most things, and to begin with life on a farm was rather a joke.

They turned the barn into a food-store and a carpenter’s shop. A little ingenuity promised to convert the stable into an incubator-house. They erected wire pens. They explored the south coast for future markets. Someone gave Snaith an introduction to the manager of a biggish hotel, and the manager was ready to enter into a contract with them for birds and eggs, provided they would promise a regular supply.

Cheerfully they promised it.

Jack lived largely among shavings and sawdust. He was the designer and creator of the firm’s houses. Certainly the construction of fowl-houses was new to him, but he had one to copy, and if he scamped some of the work and introduced improvisations of his own, destiny had not yet come home to roost.

“Saving three quid or so—on every house, old lad.”

Snaith smiled upon him. During those first few months he accepted Jack as the ideal partner.

Their young stock was growing up, and in September they purchased fifty pullets from a breeder who advertised a special laying strain. As yet food had to be purchased, and the meal and corn-bins emptied themselves, and rats became attentive, and no money was coming in, but that was all part of the game.

“When we get going, old lad, we’ll show ’em something.”

They supposed that they would get going in October.

Meanwhile, the purchase and planting of fruit trees had to be postponed since most of their capital had been involved, and the grocer and the milkman

insisted upon being paid. They could command some garden produce of their own, greens and a potato crop that had been rushed in. Jack fancied himself at chip potatoes and sausages, and if he served up a greasy mess Snaith's stomach held out till October. He was a dyspeptic subject, but you could not quarrel with a volunteer cook.

Suddenly, the scene seemed to change. Autumn descended upon them, an autumn that was more like winter. Sussex gales arrived, and mud, and early darkness, and dim damp dawns. The golden edge of the adventure seemed to tarnish. It became necessary to light a fire in that brute of a fire-place in the sitting-room, a sulky, smoky cavern.

Snaith took this on. After all, Foster prepared breakfast.

It blew, it rained, and one day it snowed. Even the birds seemed to mope on the hill-side. Their owners expected them to lay.

"The Rhodes are reddening up, Andie."

"It's about time. I think they ought to have more shelter. A few hurdles."

"Where are we to get 'em?"

"There are a lot of faggots lying in the wood. We might hump some up."

They did, but the faggots were three years old and when Jack and Andrew tried to improvise hedges, the bands broke and the brittle stuff fell to bits.

"Damn the bloody things."

Their tempers were not quite so serene as they had been.

The arrangement was that they should take turns at the feeding, week by week, and that the partner who was not feeding should clean houses and do odd jobs. It happened to be Snaith's turn to clean houses. Now, Snaith was a tall fellow, and Foster no more than five feet six, and Foster appeared to have designed his houses for a little chap to work in. Snaith was always bumping his head, or finding his hat rubbing against a perch, and to begin with he blamed himself. "How damned silly of me." But as the adventure lost its glamour, and the world became muddied, and Foster's filthy Irish stew and soapy potatoes and greasy bacon began to lie heavy on Snaith's soul, he ceased to blame himself. He found himself blaming Foster for the smallness of the houses and for the absurd places in which he had fixed perches, and for nesting boxes whose roofs became polluted and had to be scraped.

"Damn Foster. Couldn't the fool have given a chap more head-room?"

Scraping the excreta of fowls into a bucket did not appear to be the right

sort of job for a man of intelligence. Moreover, the houses were odoriferous, and indigestion was making Snaith squeamish. He remarked during lunch on the smallness of the houses, and as usual Foster had produced Irish stew.

“A bit smelly? They want limewashing, old lad.”

Jack was showing signs of becoming a noisy feeder. He devoured the sloppy mess as though he enjoyed it. He had a rosy face and a stomach that was never discouraged.

Andrew was curt with him.

“Well, you’d better do it.”

“Me? It’s your work, my dear.”

“Well, you made the damned houses.”

“What’s wrong with the houses?”

“Packing-cases on legs. No room to move. Why didn’t you turn out an efficient, practical job? Having to crawl, and twist yourself into knots.”

Jack’s colour seemed to freshen. Really, old Andrew was growing very peevish.

“Well, they weren’t designed for a camel.”

Andrew pushed his plate away.

“Pass the cheese. I can’t manage this——”

Almost he had referred to Jack’s stew as “muck” but he refrained. He realized that life was becoming a matter of much reticence. He was always refraining with regard to Jack, and to Jack’s casual cocksureness, his untidy habits, his cooking, his facetiousness, his eternal cigarettes, even his personal appearance. Why didn’t the fellow brush his hair properly and get it cut? As for Jack, he had secret things to say about Andrew. Really, old Andie was becoming the limit, regular fussy and nagging old woman.

So, the rift between them widened until Jack thought Andrew “funny,” and Andrew thought Jack a fool.

They were too much together, and the house was becoming a regular piggery, a place that would have justified the plain housewife’s dictum that “Men are dirty beasts.” The incipient squalor did not worry Jack. After all, it was nothing like the war. But Snaith, more squeamish both in stomach and soul, began to fret and to rebel in secret. A squatter’s life—minus feminine hands—was a loathsome business. Washing your own socks! His sense of

humour was so much in abeyance that he did not allow that woman might have something to say on the assumption that all domestic functioning is female.

Moreover, those infernal pullets were refusing to lay.

“That chap’s done the dirty on us, old man.”

“He guaranteed them to be March birds.”

“Let’s write him a stinker.”

“No good. He’ll say it’s our fault.”

And no doubt it was.

That was not all. Snaith began to discover in his partner symptoms of slackness. Jack was not a good getter-up, especially on bleak black mornings when bed was pleasant and the atmosphere of that old farm-house raw and icy. It was full of draughts, and Snaith was always leaving doors open. Though lean and long he appeared less sensitive to cold than Foster. Yet, Jack’s lying in bed would not have been so serious a matter had he continued to carry out his share of the feeding efficiently. They were serving hot mash to the birds, and Andrew discovered that Jack was producing a sloppy mess instead of a nice, crumbling porridge. Also, when inspecting some of the dry-mash hoppers he found that Jack had forgotten to fill them.

He spoke upon the subject.

“No wonder the birds aren’t laying. There was no feed in the hoppers of Nos. 1 and 6.”

“I filled ’em yesterday, old dear.”

“Don’t talk rot. You can’t have done. And you’re making the wet mash too sloppy.”

“Oh, all right, all right, old Brass Hat. Official tour of inspection, what!”

Andrew was icy.

“May I point out that I have supplied more than three-quarters of the capital for this show.”

“So—you expect me to do three-quarters of the work?”

“Don’t be silly. You’re not thorough. You’re slapdash——”

“Shut up.”

“It’s a fact.”

“Oh, shut up. Supposing you do the cooking for a change.”

“Well—I couldn’t be worse at it.”

“My God—you’re just like a nagging old woman.”

The rift widened into sulky silences, and monosyllabic aloofness, and perhaps because of the incipient gloom Jack began to seek distractions. He wasn’t a celibate creature. He was always crashing off in the two-seater on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, dressed up and with somewhere to go. Girls? Obviously. Jack was marvellously popular with the women. He danced well, and could be so gaillard and irresponsible.

Snaith gloomed and stayed at home to work and read D. H. Lawrence or Virginia Woolf. He could be that sort of man. No one had taught him to laugh.

The crisis gathered.

Andrew sallied forth on one dark December morning. It was his week’s tour of feeding. He carried with him the bucket of hot mash, and since a bitter north-easter was blowing he decided to feed the birds inside the houses. As was usual he banged his head and banged it badly in one of Jack’s preposterous doorways. He swore.

“Curse you.”

His maledictions included the birds, creatures who mopped up food, and only a quarter of whom were laying.

Returning with the empty bucket to the farm he found the fire unlit and no breakfast in prospect. He had cooked up the mash on an oil stove. He was cold, and for once he was hungry, and that blighter—Jack——. He floundered up the narrow stairs, and shoved his partner’s door open. Ah—of course, Foster was still snoozing in bed.

Snaith went in, and with one fierce grab, stripped the clothes from the happy sluggard.

“Get up, you lazy swine.”

The epithet might have been forgiven, but if there was one thing that spoilt Jack’s temper it was being disturbed abruptly and dragged from sweet repose. He sat up. He glared. His hair was a mop.

“What the devil——?”

“Get up. It’s half-past eight.”

“Well, what of it?”

“You lazy devil.”

“Here, damn you, get out of my room.”

Jack whisked out of bed, and seizing a large sponge from the washhand stand threw it at Andrew. It caught him full in the face. It was a cold and slimy sponge, suggestive of inefficient rinsings and too much soap. Contact with it roused in Snaith a chilly and profound disgust.

He picked up the sponge and tossed it into Jack’s bed.

“Why don’t you wash properly. That thing’s filthy.”

“Get out of my room, damn you.”

Snaith went, but dourly so and at his leisure. He was not going to be browbeaten by this cocky young slacker. He retired below and prepared his own breakfast, but there was just enough tea in the pot for one. Foster could get his own grub, damn him!

There followed two sullen, sulky days. Christmas was in the air, but the spirit of it did not penetrate to “Journey’s End.” Snaith was on his dignity, Foster suffering from a sense of wrong. He had begun to think that the City was not such a bad place, and that though an office might be a little overcharged with managerial guff it was less poisonous than living in a lone farm-house with a moody introvert like Snaith. Jack did not use the word “Introvert.” He had never heard of the term. He referred to Andrew in secret and in the vulgar tongue as a sneering, liverish swine. Andrew needed regular doses of Kruschen. Andrew ought to be taken in hand by an amorous negress. Andrew needed a new stomachic outfit.

The life in this Sussex mud-patch had reduced them to the crude naturalism of the war, without any of the war’s compensating comradeship. The place was a piggery. Neither of them could be held guiltless of a casual and coarsened attitude to life. For Mother Earth is not by nature kind to her children. She may appear merciless to those who have not been born and bred in her lap. She may offer them—not beauty—but mud, monotony, and boiled potatoes.

No. Jack was preparing to assert that trying to make a living on the land was a disgusting illusion. It might be all very well for some rich chap to farm as a hobby, but farming for profit, and with a partner like old Aguecheek! Yes, there were limits.

He had arranged to spend Christmas Day at the Imperial Hotel, Brighton. A girl he knew was staying there with her people. Dinner and dance! Fizz, crackers, a jazz band! Ye gods—that was the stuff!

He issued an ultimatum to Andrew.

“I’m blowing off on Christmas Day. You can have Boxing Day.”

“Thanks. I’m going to stick to the job.”

“You would do.”

“Charmed—I’m sure. Somebody paying for you?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Then there arrived a letter for Jack. It came from his sister Rachel, and it told him that she was proposing to visit them on Christmas Day. The pater had promised her the car. She might help to cook their dinner for them. And if they could improvise a bed she would stay the night.

Jack was annoyed.

“Cook our dinner! She’s cooked my goose.”

“Take her to Brighton with you.”

“Gooseberry! No thanks. Well—I don’t see why you shouldn’t entertain her.”

“What about the proprieties?”

“My god, you’re not as bad as all that, are you? Good lord! What about that night at Amiens when you——”

“May I suggest that your sister and a French——”

“Rot! Just women——. Of course—in a damned suburb you have to pretend——”

“I’m not pretending. Your sister——”

“Why not say—‘I’ve a great respect for your sister, my dear Foster?’ ”

“Well—I have.”

“Good lord! Rachel’s a——”

“Look here, you shut up. You haven’t the mind to appreciate a decent woman.”

“You call Rachel decent to her face, and just see——”

“Perhaps I shall.”

Christmas Day should have inspired them. There had been a slight frost, and the day was thin gold, keen and clear and still. Snaith, going the round of

the houses, found half the mash hoppers empty. It was Foster's feeding week, and Foster had a mind that postponed things till to-morrow. Snaith flared. He did not notice that the sky was blue and the oaks in their wood shining like goblin trees. He stalked back to the barn, and found Jack sitting on one of the meal bins and lighting a cigarette.

"Half the hoppers empty again."

"Really!"

"Why don't you try to do your job?"

"Dear, dear, peevish as usual."

Jack got off the bin and opened the lid, and reached for the bowl that was used as a scoop.

"What's the use of trying to work with a fool like you?"

"What about your temper, old dear?"

"I'm just about fed up with your rotten slackness."

"Well, try that."

Foster had filled the scoop with meal, and with a quick turn of the body, and a sweep of the arm he flung the meal at Snaith. It smothered him, head, face and chest. He was such a figure of fun that Jack burst out laughing.

"Hallo, old Dusty Miller!"

But Snaith's anger raged from words into action. He swung a fist and knocked Jack backwards over the bin, and then closed with him. The fat was completely in the fire, and Jack as much a mad dog as Andrew. Half submerged in the bin he struck out, but Snaith's hands were at his throat. They struggled together with blind ferocity, the suppressed hatred of weeks boiling up in them. Snaith had Foster pinned down inside the bin, and Jack's writhing legs were trying to get a purchase round Snaith's body.

Fortunately for both of them their madness was challenged by a sudden voice.

"Jack—Andrew——!"

Snaith recovered himself and drew back as though something had stung him. Rachel was standing in the doorway of the barn.

"Hallo. Sorry, Rachel. We——"

She glanced from his meal smothered figure to Jack who was heaving

himself out of the bin. He, too, was powdered white, but his face was bloody.

She turned on Snaith.

“You beast.”

He looked abashed, crestfallen.

“Awfully sorry, Rachel.”

“Fighting. What do you mean by it? Perfectly disgusting. Jack, your mouth’s bleeding.”

Jack looked sullen.

“He knocked me into the bin.”

“And what had you done?”

“Just chucked some meal over him.”

They were a sorry couple, both ridiculous and pathetic, like a couple of dogs whom someone had drenched with a pail of water. It was Rachel’s turn to be angry. And yet they were so like a pair of sulky, silly boys conscious of being in complete disgrace.

She said—“What’s the matter with you two? Seems to me I’ve got to give you both a licking. I’ve been in the house. It’s a disgrace, an absolute piggery. I come down here on Christmas morning and find squalor and fighting. What’s it all mean? You, Andrew, tell me.”

Snaith looked at her rather helplessly.

“Oh—I suppose I’ve got a beastly temper. And things have gone all wrong—somehow. I’m sorry. I’ll apologize to Jack.”

She turned on her brother.

“And you?”

He smiled a little sulky smile.

“Oh—I’m fed up. It’s no life for a civilized creature. And old Andrew there always has a pain in his tummy.”

“Who did the cooking?”

“I did.”

She had to restrain her laughter, for they were so crestfallen and pathetic.

“Well, you had better go and clean up. And then we’ll clear up that filthy

house. Nice Christmas Day—for all of us.”

Andrew spoke humbly.

“Jack was going into Brighton for a show. I don’t mind him having some fun. I’ll turn to.”

“A girl, Jack?”

“What’s that to do with it?”

“Well, you’d better go. You’ll have to tell her some nice fib about your mouth.”

Coolly she took control of the situation. Both those sheepish males slunk off to the house and in their respective bedrooms changed their mealy clothes and cleansed themselves. Meanwhile, Rachel, surveying a pile of dirty crockery in the kitchen, attended to a dying fire and prepared for the production of much hot water. Being more modern than the moderns she had passed through a course of Domestic Economy, and when the two men came downstairs she took them in hand.

“Jack, what time’s your dance?”

“I said I’d be there for tea.”

“Righto. Plenty of time. We’ll get busy. Were you proposing to produce anything in the way of a Christmas dinner?”

“No, not exactly.”

“All right. We’ll have a Christmas festival. Andrew, you can help me with the washing up. Jack, take those rugs up.”

“Which rugs?”

“You might well ask. Those things that look like dirty sacks. Take ’em outside and beat them, and then you can scrub the floor.”

She kept those two tamed men at it all through the morning. They washed and they scrubbed and they dusted, while she mysteriously busy in the kitchen, forbade them to enter it, but looked in on them from time to time. A savoury smell began to permeate the house. It challenged the nostrils of both those shamefaced men.

Said Jack to Andrew—“What’s Rachel at?”

Snaith sniffed the air.

“Smells like something—roasting. I say, she has made us look pretty silly.

I’m sorry, old man—I——”

“My fault, Andie. I shouldn’t have chucked that stuff over you. Fact is—I don’t think I’m cut out for this sort of job. Too temperamental.”

At one o’clock they were still busy upstairs when she called them down. “Come on, you boys.” She had laid the table, and produced from a hamper that she had brought with her in the car mince pies and crackers and dessert. The savoury smell disclosed its origin, a roast duck.

Andrew looked at Jack. He said—“Rachel has scourged us with scorpions. But this is——”

Jack’s face had recovered its cheerful, boyish colour.

“I say, Rache, you are a bit of a marvel.”

“Now—behave. Somebody say grace. You, Andrew.”

Solemnly he stood behind his chair.

“For what we have received and are about to receive—may we be grateful—to Rachel.”

Later she sent her brother off to Brighton. She still controlled the situation. She said—“I want to have a talk to Andrew. I’ll stay for tea and then buzz home. Yes—I’ve got a show on to-morrow. Run away to your fairy, Jacko.”

It was a most perfect afternoon and she announced to Andrew that she would like to walk round the farm, and in some mysterious way “Journey’s End” seemed to have taken to itself a new temper. The winter sunlight touched the world gently. The downs silvered the distance. The old Scotch firs warmed their throats in the sunlight. The place had recovered its beauty.

They walked down to the wood where last year’s bracken was the colour of red rust.

“It’s a lovely spot, Andie.”

He had an air of surprise, as though he had lost some precious possession and had suddenly rediscovered it.

“Yes—I suppose it is.”

“For you.”

“Why—for me?”

She stood leaning against the gate and looking at the sunlit spaces of the winter wood.

“Oh, you seem to fit here, somehow. But Jack doesn’t. Jack’s Threadneedle Street and the Brompton Road. As a matter of fact the pater had heard of a billet for him. I think he ought to slip into it.”

Snaith glanced at her pleasant, clean, capable face. She was the sort of girl who, with all the superficial attributes of smartness, contradicted all that was garish and topical in a particular cult.

“Yes—I don’t think Jack’s made for this life. Fact is, Rachel, two men shouldn’t live alone together. They rub each other raw. They don’t mix.”

“Probably. What shall you do?”

He turned and looked at the farm-house and its clump of firs.

“Oh—I suppose I shall stick on here, and worry through. There’s something in the soil that gets me.”

“Pretty lonely.”

“It’s better to be alone—unless the one inevitable partner comes along, but how could you expect any modern girl to put up with a life like this?”

Her smile was whimsical.

“Andrew, what is the modern girl?”

“The modern girl.”

“Yes. Explain her. Define her. I suppose you’d begin with her complexion and its requirements.”

He met her eyes and saw in them something that made the soul of him straighten and marvel. Good heavens, was it possible? And he had not dared ——!

“Sorry, Rachel. Talking newspaper stuff. But do you really think a girl could take on a job like this?”

“Why not?”

“Well—the life’s pretty rough. You don’t make much money, if you make any money at all. Of course—I do believe—that with work and some ideas—and enterprise—one could make the place pay. And one is free—in a sense. You have the sky over your head and the earth at your feet.”

She smiled.

“Andrew, may not a girl—even a modern girl—sometimes feel like that too? After all, it’s nature.”

He looked at her with a kind of wonder.

“You—Rache?”

“Yes.”

He leaned upon the gate with his chin between his two fists.

“By God—I never thought it possible. My dear, be careful. It would mean—it does mean—such a terrible lot to me.”

She leaned with him against the gate, her shoulder close to his.

“What about the dinner, Andie?”

“Marvellous.”

“I’m quite a decent cook.”

“You’re marvellous.”

OUT OF THE SEA

MR. MILLER was looking out of the office window at the royal blue of the Royal Hotel bus as it swung in between the two stone pillars of the main gate. Mr. Miller had managed the Royal Hotel at Seabourne for ten-and-a-half years. He had found it in a state of respectable and dyspeptic stuffiness and by gradual persuasion and with the enthusiasm of one who loved his job, he had made of it the most successful and luxurious hotel on the south coast.

The blue bus drew up under the *porte-cochère*. Corcoran, the head porter, was there ready to receive its occupants, but on this afternoon in September the bus deposited one solitary male.

"Mr. Brown, sir?"

Corcoran extracted a golf-bag from the bus.

"Yes. I have a room booked."

"We were expecting you, sir."

It had taken Mr. Miller three years to collect and train a staff and to educate the hotel to behave to the new arrival as though he or she were welcome and not some anonymous package pushed in by a casual postman. Mr. Brown was getting out of the bus. He had the appearance of the ordinary well-to-do, hard-bitten, game-playing Englishman. He was dressed in grey, and wore a grey felt hat, and his brown boots were perfectly polished.

"All the luggage here, sir?"

"Yes."

"You are in No. 47, sir."

Mr. Brown had turned towards the hotel doorway, and Mr. Miller saw his face. It was ruddy and round and hard. The blue eyes were very blue, the hogged moustache faintly red and definitely aggressive. It suggested the face of a military man, and Mr. Miller, who had proposed to walk out and meet the

visitor in the vestibule, suddenly refrained.

For something had happened to Mr. Miller. The stranger's face had associated itself with some vague and unpleasant memory, no definite memory, but all the more baffling on that account. It was sinister. It produced in Mr. Miller's mind the effect of a sudden shadow, fear, a dread of something he knew not what.

He remained by the window, turning over the money and the keys in his trouser pockets.

"Now—where the devil——?"

Probably, Mr. Miller had as clean a balance sheet as any hotelier in the kingdom. He was a solid, sturdy, kindly little man, and few people knew or remembered that he was Swiss. He had married an English wife and had three very English children, and was himself so English that he too had forgotten that he had been christened Otto Friedrich. When the Union Jack was hoisted above the Royal Hotel it was very much the flag of Friedrich Miller, and not the emblem of that Otto Friedrich Müller who had come to England with one shabby trunk in the days before the war.

Now, Mr. Miller, in spite of his air of solidity, was more sensitive than he appeared. There was a boyishness about him. There were moments when he would rush off to his wife to be reassured and have his head patted. All artists are creatures of temperament and Mr. Miller was very much an artist in all the details connected with an hotel. He was a connoisseur of wines, food and cigars. A flat entrée or bad coffee could produce in him both physical and spiritual nausea. His hotel had a soul.

Mr. Miller walked out of the office and down the private passage leading into the garden. He and his wife and family occupied a little house in a quiet corner of the hotel grounds. He walked rapidly, with his head bent, his hands still in his trouser pockets. Mary Miller, sitting at an open window, saw him coming and was aware of his hunched shoulders and air of solid haste. Something had upset her husband. She was wise as to his characteristic postures.

Mary Miller was one of those large, fair women who suggest the shape and the colour of a yellow rose. She was a wide-eyed, tranquil, consoling creature with a leisurely, deep voice. Nothing ever seemed to fluster her, and she had all the strength of a wise tranquillity.

She rose and put her work away. The table was laid for tea, and when her husband entered the room she was sitting at the table.

“Tea’s just coming, Fred.”

Admirable woman! His eyes lit up as he looked at her. She never fussed a man or asked him unnecessary questions. For years she had helped him unostentatiously in his work. She knew that a hotel produces discords, and that to control a family that consists of five porters, a dozen or so chambermaids, fifteen waiters, and a kitchen staff, is no light matter. Perhaps the chef was in love, or a waiter had been hectored by the *maître d’hôtel*? Or Florrie of the third floor had had words with the housekeeper? Mr. Miller had to please two different sections of a large community. Visitors might complain. There are certain people who cannot help complaining. There is too much noise in their corridor, or the lounge is not properly ventilated, so they ventilate a grievance.

Mr. Miller sat down.

“Kids out?”

“Yes, on the sands.”

A small maid appeared with the teapot. There were cucumber sandwiches on the table, and Mr. Miller loved cucumber sandwiches. He grabbed three.

“Mary, it’s quite absurd, but I have seen a ghost.”

His wife passed him his teacup.

“What kind of ghost, Fred?”

“It got out of the hotel bus.”

Mary Miller was filling her own cup. She was not a woman who looked at her husband with glances that said—“Don’t be silly.” Moreover, Mr. Miller was absolutely no fool. He might be just a little emotional and excitable on occasions, but his worries were tangible realities.

“A visitor, Fred?”

Her husband was munching sandwiches. His face was the face of a man who was trying to remember some important fact.

“Yes. Man named Brown.”

“Sounds very English, Fred.”

“Absolutely. Golf clubs, grey suit, red face; looks army.”

Mary Miller smiled faintly.

“Well—Fred?”

“Don’t laugh, my dear. Directly I saw his face—I felt—well—a kind of

shock. I felt that I had met him before—somewhere—and under circumstances ——”

“Unpleasant circumstances?”

“Yes.”

“Has he been here before?”

“I don’t think so. He wrote from the ‘Majestic’ in town to book a room.”

“Are you sure he hasn’t been here before? He didn’t welsh you?”

Mr. Miller frowned at the teapot.

“I can’t remember him—and yet—somewhere—years ago—I must have met him.”

Mary Miller was not worried about her husband’s hypothetical past. She had been married to him for eight years, and there was no skeleton in their cupboard. Her faith in Otto Friedrich was founded upon eight years of mutual faith; theirs had been a very happy and successful marriage.

“Well—I shouldn’t worry, Fred. What can the man mean to you? You have never had any trouble?”

“No.”

And then Mr. Miller qualified that negative.

“O, well, nothing to be ashamed of. There was a certain incident—before we were married. No, nothing to do with a woman.”

“Something to do with a man?”

“Men.”

“You’ve never told me.”

“O, that’s all dead and buried like the war. I’ve never told anybody, and I never shall. Besides——”

And then he laughed.

“No—I did not have lobster for lunch, my dear. I suppose it’s some silly complex or other, like one’s loathing for vinegar or a woman with pale eyelashes. Do you ever feel like that?”

“Oh, often, Fred, but one doesn’t talk about it.”

“No. Well, we won’t say anything more about Mr. Brown.”

The Royal Hotel was what is known as a *de luxe* hotel. Its prices were beyond the pockets of ordinary people. It had an air, though it did not always sound its h's. Nor do *de luxe* incomes invariably attach themselves to *de luxe* breeding. The Royal Hotel housed both cabinet ministers and successful butchers. Its Rolls Royces, and they were many, were not wholly the property of gentlemen of distinction. Mr. Miller was a man of the world. He understood the various cliques into which his clientele segregated. He could adapt himself to varying atmospheres.

He observed people. He was here, there, and everywhere, debonair, watchful, polite, and during the next two or three days he made a point of observing Mr. Brown. The man might have a plain name, but he possessed a certain air of distinction. He was well-dressed, easy in his manners, quietly self-assured. He strolled into the dining-room with the detachment of a man who had no need to feel self-conscious. He spoke to the waiters with an air of casual authority. Moreover, Mr. Miller saw that Mr. Brown had attached himself to the most exclusive clique. He was accepted. He danced well, played a good game of golf, and almost too good a game of bridge. His clothes and his carriage were meticulously it.

Mr. Miller said to his wife—"The fellow seems perfectly normal. He's in the Carpmael-Maltravers set. He dances with the Maltravers girl. He plays golf with Carpmael and Sir John Windlesham. I believe young Dunning is lending him his speed-boat."

Mary Miller was going through the inventory of the hotel linen. She helped her husband in many ways, and when towels and sheets and pillow-cases had to be checked by the hundred Mary Miller functioned as a kind of super-housekeeper.

"Do you still feel the same way about him, Fred?"

Mr. Miller rubbed his firm, round chin.

"Well, yes, in a way. Whenever I meet the man a funny little shiver seems to go through me."

Obviously, Mr. Brown was popular in the hotel. At the end of the first week he paid his bills in cash and did not query a single item. He and Mr. Miller met occasionally in the lounge or vestibule, and Mr. Miller got the impression that Mr. Brown's eyes stared rather hard. But then his eyes were made that way. They smiled upon each other.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning."

Mr. Miller compelled himself to overcome that curious shrinking feeling that attacked him in the presence of Mr. Brown.

“I hope you are quite comfortable, sir?”

“Quite.”

Did Mr. Miller imagine it, or was there a flicker of irony on the other man’s hard, well-groomed face? But—why irony? Moreover, if Mr. Brown was comfortable, Mr. Miller had every reason to feel that all was well with his particular world. The Royal Hotel was paying a dividend of fifteen per cent. Its private owners were so well pleased with the property and with Mr. Miller’s ten years of managerial enthusiasm that on January 1st of the incoming year he was to become a partner, a member of the syndicate. He had saved some two thousand pounds. He was married to a woman who filled the emotional side of his life. He had three healthy, and good-tempered children—Tom, and Irene, and Babs the baby, aged three. He loved his hotel. He was always planning some new refinement, polishing the corners of its already excellent service. During the previous year they had added twenty new huts to the bathing establishment, and built a small jetty and breakwater in the cove where motor-boats could be moored. The garage accommodation was perfect. Mr. Miller was even thinking in terms of the air. Why should not the Royal Hotel at Seabourne be the first hotel to possess its own private aerodrome? Progress sped upon the pinions of speed.

On that particular morning Mr. Miller had been down inspecting the bathing-huts. The attendant was not quite as thorough as Mr. Miller wished him to be, and someone had complained of finding a soiled towel on one of the seats. The day was blue as to sea and sky, the sand in the cove a yellow sickle. Mr. Miller was climbing the winding path through the gardens, and thinking of nothing so disconcerting as some unpleasant adventure out of the past, when a voice addressed him.

“Good morning, Müller.”

Mr. Miller stopped as though a hand had been thrust against his chest. Almost he went backwards. He found himself staring at Mr. Brown, who, in white flannels and tennis shoes, had come silently down the path, and was standing just above him. And there was that curious flicker of irony in Mr. Brown’s sea-blue eyes.

Mr. Miller hesitated.

“Good morning, sir. Perfect weather for a bathe.”

He made as though to pass by, but Mr. Brown was neither bathing nor

allowing Mr. Miller to escape.

“You don’t remember me, Müller?”

Mr. Miller stuck out his chin.

“No—I don’t.”

“Quite sure?”

“I must admit, sir, that there’s something just a little familiar——”

The other man’s smile was sardonic.

“Familiar! Well—I should say so. Oblige me a moment by turning round and looking at that nice blue bay. Imagine it to be hazed over by the dusk of a September evening. Imagine a certain—something—appearing out of the water.”

Mr. Miller was not a man of much colour but his face looked grey. For suddenly the thing had come back to him. He remembered. He was conscious of a sense of emptiness at the pit of his stomach.

He said, “I suppose you must have your little joke, Mr. Brown—but I don’t quite see the jest of it.”

“No?”

“Absolutely no.”

Mr. Brown looked about him, and then he addressed Mr. Miller in German.

“Sometimes it is rather intriguing to revive those old war memories. I presume you have ten minutes to spare? Shall we find a quiet place?”

Mr. Miller hesitated and surrendered. There was a little garden house along the cliff, and Mr. Miller led the way, towards it. The place was empty, and no one could approach it unobserved.

Mr. Brown sat down in a deck chair, and lit a cigarette. He was very much in control of the situation.

“I suppose you must be doing pretty well here, Müller?”

Mr. Miller stood in the doorway.

“Yes, fairly well.”

“And you never reported that most peculiar incident.”

Mr. Miller showed sudden heat.

“Look here, what has a certain incident to do with you? I don’t like this air of mystery.”

Mr. Brown lay back in his chair and gazed at the sea.

“No, perhaps you don’t. Let us redescribe the occasion. On a September evening three gentlemen in mufti strolled into your hotel. They were presumed to be officers from the camp at Headworth. They spoke perfect English. They had an excellent dinner. After dinner they asked to see the manager. You remember?”

Mr. Miller gave a jerk of the head.

“You received them in your office. You discovered yourself covered by a pistol. The three officers were Germans; they had landed from a submarine. Incredible, but true. They desired you to give them certain information about the camp at Headworth. You gave it.”

Mr. Miller turned on the tormentor.

“Yes—I told them some rubbish. And who—the devil—are you?”

“Captain von Braun of the German Navy, retired. If you remember—I held the pistol.”

Mr. Miller did remember it.

“Well—what about it? All that happened——”

“So long ago! Exactly. But you never reported the affair to the authorities.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you are still here. Because it would have been extremely awkward for you——”

Mr. Miller showed heat.

“Look here, Captain von Braun—I’m a busy man with work to do, and I ——”

The German smiled up at him ironically.

“Of course. You are a most successful man, Müller. You are to become a partner. Your hotel is an excellent hotel. But if it became known that during the war you received German officers and gave them information——”

“It’s a lie.”

“O, come, come!”

Mr. Miller’s fists were clenched. He confronted the crisis.

“Look here, you clear out. If you think you are going to blackmail me ——”

“My dear Müller, that’s a vulgar word. The position is—that I’m damned hard up. I came over here on business, and the business went flat. I need a little capital. We might call it a loan.”

Mr. Miller walked out of the shelter, hesitated, and returned to the doorway.

“Captain von Braun—you are just a common blackmailer. Supposing I ——?”

The German stretched out his legs.

“Well—let us suppose you appeal to the police. The whole story will come out. It will be known that you were in communication with the enemy.”

“A lie.”

“How are you going to prove it? You can’t. And do you think it likely that you would retain the management of this hotel? Would you become a partner? Hardly. Not good business, eh?”

Mr. Miller thrust his fists into his trouser pockets.

“What do you want?”

“Cash.”

“How much?”

“A thousand pounds.”

“Impossible, absurd.”

“I said—a thousand pounds.”

Mr. Miller glared at the German.

“Well—what if I say no?”

“Oh—I shall have a rather amusing story to tell in your hotel. I shall make a joke of it. I shall say that I had a nice little joke with you. But it won’t be a joke, Müller, for you.”

He lit a second cigarette, drew up his long legs, and at his leisure rose from the deck chair.

“I’m going for a spin in Mr. Dunning’s speed-boat. Yes, he has lent it to

me. Think it over, Müller, and let me know to-night.”

As he passed the Swiss he patted him ironically on the shoulder.

“You people over here won the war, you know. You owe us something, my dear Müller. The luck of the throw. Yes, that little sum will be extremely useful to me. The generous gesture, what! Well—till to-night. Come to my room after dinner.”

He walked off down the path to the cove where Dunning’s white speed-boat lay at the jetty, and Mr. Miller stood for some seconds like a little black-coated Prometheus chained to a rock.

He said to himself—“Damn you, damn your confounded soul! Now—what—in the name of heaven am I to do about this?”

He did that which he always did when he was in trouble, he rushed off to his wife. He found her sitting in the garden, with Babs playing on the grass at her feet.

“I’ve something serious to discuss with you, my dear.”

He looked grey, almost as grey as he felt, and Babs was carried off and handed over to the cook. She was a very sweet-tempered child, and to Mr. Miller an emblem of all that was good and pleasant in his life. Were things to be wrecked, and his children’s future interfered with by a damned fellow who had emerged out of the past just like his infernal submarine of nine years ago? He followed his wife and child into the house.

“I’m going upstairs, Mary. Quieter—there.”

Was it as bad as all that? And what exactly was the problem. She found him sitting on the bed. He told her to close the door.

“I was right, Mary, about my ghost. I ought to have told you years ago, but it seemed so unnecessary.”

“Well, tell me now, Fred.”

He told her the whole story, an almost incredible story of cool audacity and consummate impudence. O, yes, those Germans had bluffed the whole hotel. The cheek of the thing, coming ashore and strolling up and into the hotel and eating an English dinner! It was an amazing yarn, and had Mary Miller not known her husband so well she would not have believed it.

“They held you up in your office, Fred. Why didn’t you hand them over ——?”

“One of them had a pistol, my dear. Besides, it wasn’t the pistol that scared

me. If it was bluff—I couldn’t call it.”

“Why not?”

“They said, ‘If you call people in—we become prisoners, that’s all, officer prisoners. We shall be interned. But we shall swear that you were a paid spy.’ ”

“And you let them go?”

Mr. Miller gave a pathetic shrug of the shoulders.

“Yes. I told them a lot of lies—and they went. You see, it was a ghastly dilemma for me. I had just got the management of the hotel.”

“You told nobody. Not even the police?”

“Nobody.”

“O, Fred—how utterly foolish of you.”

He nodded.

“Don’t rub it in, Mary.”

“My dear—I’m not that sort. And this Mr. Brown——?”

“Is Captain von Braun of that submarine. He wants a thousand pounds to keep his mouth shut. A scandal of that sort would ruin us.”

Mary Miller sat down by the window.

“A common blackmailer! Fred—you must——”

He got up and paced the room.

“Call in the police! Yes, and a nice mess I should be in. I can’t prove the fellow a liar. I should be damned by my own silence. An ex-spy, my dear! Why—I should be kicked out, and the scoundrel knows it. He’s got me in a corner.”

“But a thousand pounds, Fred, the money we have been saving for Tom’s education.”

“I know—I know. Nothing you could say could make it more bitter. I shall have to pay up. I don’t see any alternative.”

His wife put out her hands.

“Tom—I’m so sorry. Don’t be in a hurry. If you gave him this money, he may come again.”

Mr. Miller held his wife’s hands for a moment.

“You’ve always been such a help to me, Mary. There’s no one else in the world like you.”

“Let’s try and think of something, Fred.”

“Think! He has given me till to-night. There does not seem to be any alternative.”

“But would they believe him?”

“My dear, my concealing the whole affair would damn me. How can I prove that I told him a lot of nonsense? I suppose I was weak. I shall have to pay for my weakness.”

She sat holding one of his hands while he stood looking out of the window, humiliated and distraught.

“If only you had told me, Fred, years ago, it would have made a difference.”

“I did not want to worry you, Mary. Besides, who could have foreseen a resurrection like this.”

She smiled up at him and her voice was gentle.

“You’re not a suspicious person, Fred—I’m thinking—and thinking so hard. Yes, if there is nothing in this man to appeal to, if he values nothing but money—then we are in a pretty hopeless position. He will stand for his pound of flesh. Is there nothing in him to appeal to?”

“Have you seen him?”

“Yes—once or twice, one of those men with faces like brass.”

“Exactly, and the god of brass is his god, Mary.”

She was still holding his hand.

“There are few really bad people in the world, Fred. This man may have a soft spot somewhere.”

“I doubt it.”

“He may be desperate. He may have other people to think of.”

“Well—that doesn’t help us much, Mary. It’s the skin game. He just holds a pistol at us and says ‘Pay up.’ ”

The more they discussed the problem the more insoluble it seemed, save on lines of violence that were utterly alien to two such people as the Millers. A bullet through Captain von Braun’s hard head would have been productive of

further complications. The gangster touch! Someone shot and pushed over the Royal Hotel cliff! Even von Braun's cynical and polished little smile suggested that Otto Friedrich was just a succulent little bourgeois who could be safely squeezed, and Otto Friedrich was just as wise as to the sardonic reasonableness of the situation as was von Braun.

Von Braun held the cards. Realism willed it that the man who had been spoofed would have to pay.

Mr. Miller went back to the hotel, a little man who was feeling too foolish and dejected to be angry. He was disgusted with himself. Here was this blood-sucker established in the Royal Hotel, and as his wife had said, what was to prevent von Braun from repeating the process should Mr. Miller compromise by paying him that thousand pounds. If only von Braun and his damned submarine had been sent to the bottom during the war. But Mr. Miller pulled himself together. He had the hotel and its daily routine on his shoulders as well as the incubus of von Braun. He went about his business with a kind of underchant of worry going on inside him. "A thousand pounds. Five years' savings. Shall have to sell out and shell out. Poor Mary. I wish the fellow was at the bottom of the sea."

Mr. Miller was in the vestibule interviewing a gentleman who had arrived in a car and had asked for the manager, when Transon, the man in charge of the bathing huts and the hotel beach, rushed into the hotel. Transon was distinctly stout and distinctly out of breath. He was hatless and perspiring.

"Mr. Miller about——?"

"In the vestibule, Tom. Anything wrong?"

"Wrong! I should say so."

Transon did not wait to explain things to the second porter. He made for the vestibule and most unceremoniously interrupted Mr. Miller's chat with the gentleman who was inquiring about terms and rooms.

"Mr. Miller, sir—there's been an accident, sir."

"Excuse me, sir. What is it, Transon? No one drowned?"

"No, that Mr. Brown, sir. He went out in Mr. Dunning's boat. I warned him to be careful."

Mr. Miller's face looked like a little white frozen mask.

"Well—Transon, well? Be quick."

"I warned him not to let her all out too close in shore. I said that if there

was any driftwood about——”

“Yes, yes—Transon, but——”

“Of course he didn’t listen to me. The *White Cat* was all out when she must have struck a piece of driftwood. I happened to be watching. She seemed to jump in the air and then fly all to pieces.”

Mr. Miller controlled himself.

“And Mr. Brown?”

“No, he ain’t dead, sir, but terribly smashed up. They managed to fish him out. Smith’s boat was cruising close by. They’re carrying him up here, sir, on the door of a hut.”

“Who?”

“The gardeners and a couple of gentlemen.”

Mr. Miller stood there looking bewildered. This German badly injured and laid up in his hotel! The fellow might be here for months. He might live; he might die. And then Mr. Miller saw Corcoran hurrying to open the side door at the entrance. A man in a sweater and one of the hotel gardeners appeared. Something was being carried in, a thing that looked like a white bundle stained with red. Mr. Miller stood and stared. His feeling as an hotelier was that such a procession should not have been allowed to pass through the vestibule.

He hurried forward, and suddenly he was aware of a pair of eyes looking up at him, the eyes of von Braun. The German was conscious, and obviously in great pain. His eyes had lost their blue assurance. They looked up at Miller like the eyes of a wounded dog.

Von Braun’s lips moved.

“Get a doctor. I’m—I’m——”

His broken words died away and something happened to the manager of the Royal Hotel. There stirred in him a strange impulse of pity. He seemed to forget the blackmailer in looking at the agonized face of the man.

Instantly he took charge. He was Mr. Miller the autocrat of the “Royal.”

“Into the lift, Parsons. Corcoran, telephone at once for a doctor. Gently—gently.”

He supervised the placing of the improvised stretcher in the lift. He bent over the German.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Brown. We’ll do everything we can. A doctor will be

here—almost at once.”

The German turned his head on the rolled up coat that had been converted into a pillow. He smiled faintly at Mr. Miller.

“Don’t let me die, Miller. I’ve got a wife and——”

Mr. Miller patted him gently on the shoulder.

“So have I. I understand.”

When Mr. Miller had seen von Braun laid on the bed of room No. 47, he rushed downstairs to make sure that Corcoran had been able to get into touch with a doctor. It had been obvious to Mr. Miller that von Braun’s was a pretty desperate case.

“Any luck, Corcoran?”

“Dr. Standish will be here in ten minutes.”

“Good.”

Mr. Miller realized that he was hot. He perspired easily, and especially so on emotional occasions. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

“Just going across to the house, Corcoran. I shall be back in five minutes.”

But what a morning! He hurried across lawns and past herbaceous borders that were all purple and gold. He found that his wife had returned to her chair on the grass, and that Babs had been rescued from the kitchen. He picked up his small daughter and kissed her. He met his wife’s questioning and troubled eyes. Poor Mary! For her too it had been a morning of shocks.

“There has been an accident, my dear. A most terrible and extraordinary thing. Just as though fate——”

“Not Mr. Brown?”

“Yes, poor devil. He was out alone in Mr. Dunning’s speed-boat and hit something. They’ve just brought him in.”

“Dead?”

Mr. Miller replaced Babs in her mother’s lap.

“No, but terribly smashed up. I’ve had him carried up to his room. The doctor will be up in a minute.”

Mrs. Miller looked intently at her husband.

“Fate—Fred. What are you going to do?”

He wiped his forehead.

“Do? Why—the best I can for the poor devil. He—O, well—he said something to me. He’s human. And when I saw his poor, scared face——”

Mrs. Miller rose with Babs in her arms. She kissed her husband.

“I’m glad you’re my husband, Fred.”

“My dear——”

“I’ll come with you and see if I can help.”

Captain von Braun’s was a desperate case. He had a smashed thigh, and internal injuries, and when Dr. Standish had examined him, he phoned for further advice and help. The two doctors were with the German for an hour. A nurse was phoned for, and arrived. Mr. Miller, pacing up and down the corridor, was given a note to the local hospital. Dressings and appliances were required, and Corcoran went off in the hotel bus.

Dr. Standish came out and spoke to Mr. Miller.

“He’s too bad to move. We’ve had to give him a pretty big dose of morphia. What about his relations?”

Mr. Miller stroked his chin.

“I don’t think he has any relations in England, doctor.”

“I thought he was English.”

“No. As a matter of fact he is a German over on business. Well, we’ll do everything we can, doctor.”

“It’s a bit of a nuisance for you, Miller, but we don’t like taking the risk of moving him.”

“There’s no need, sir. We can manage. It is not the first time we have had a bad case in the hotel.”

The doctors had gone, and Mr. Miller was eating a hurried lunch when one of the porters came across with a message. The nurse had phoned from Mr. Brown’s room. Mr. Brown was very restless, and kept asking for Mr. Miller. Would Mr. Miller come at once.

Mr. Miller went. The nurse, who was an understanding person, slipped out of the room, and the manager sat down beside the German’s bed. Von Braun’s face was almost as white as the pillow. His eyes still had that frightened look. His voice was a mere harsh whisper.

“Miller—what do they say about me?”

“I’m afraid you are pretty badly hurt.”

“You’ll let me stay here? Yes—I know you can’t be feeling very friendly. But if I go under——”

Mr. Miller’s face was all kindness.

“Yes, we are going to keep you here. We’ll do everything we can. You’ll pull through.”

The German’s eyes softened. He put out a feeble hand.

“That’s—that’s—generous. More than I—deserve. But I was——”

Mr. Miller covered the German’s hand with his.

“Desperate. I know. Well—look here, you musn’t talk. Save your strength. Much pain?”

“Not now. They gave me morphia.”

“Well, try to go to sleep.”

Von Braun closed his eyes.

“You’re a good man, Müller, a good man. O, my God—I want to get over this.”

For some days it was very doubtful whether Captain von Braun would survive. The whole hotel was shocked and sympathetic, and Mr. Miller was eternally waylaid by kindly inquirers. “Oh, Mr. Miller, how is Mr. Brown to-day?” Old Lady Cartwright who occupied room No. 46, instead of complaining of the coming and going and the noise, offered to move and give up her room to the night nurse. Young Dunning, whose speed-boat was in pieces, seemed quite unconcerned about the wreck, but then—Mr. Dunning was a very rich young man. He was much more concerned about the human wreckage.

“I say, Miller, I feel awfully responsible. I suppose I oughtn’t to have let him out in her. Tell me if there is anything I can do?”

“It’s very generous of you, sir.”

“But—Miller. Brown’s such a damned good chap.”

At the end of a week von Braun’s balance tipped towards life. He was a mere shadow of a man, strangely chastened and subdued. The nurses spoke of him as a perfect patient, and he was suffering much.

Mr. Miller saw him every day, and wondered at the transfiguration, and in spite of his compassion, he was reminded of the old quotation—“The Devil was sick. The Devil a saint would be. The Devil was well. The Devil a saint was he.” And Mr. Miller wondered. He wondered what von Braun thought about as he lay there trussed and helpless. What did the German think of the flowers that were sent him?—flowers that Mary Miller did not leave to the chambermaid or the nurses.

She went daily into the German’s room, for on such occasions she was the healing spirit in the hotel. She would place the flowers by von Braun’s bed, and stand for a moment beside his bed, a consoling, soothing presence.

“You look better to-day, Mr. Brown.”

He asked her a question.

“You are very kind. Are you the housekeeper?”

“No—I am the manager’s wife.”

“Mr. Miller’s wife?”

“Yes.”

A curious little smile passed over the German’s face.

“Ah—I understand.”

But his smile had ceased to be cynical.

Early in the second week von Braun sent for Mr. Miller. He asked the nurse to leave them alone together.

“Miller—I’m—I’m sorry, but I can’t pay my bill.”

“You mustn’t worry about that—just now.”

“But, my dear fellow——”

“We’ll give you credit.”

“But there are the doctors and the nurses. When I came down here I had twenty pounds or so in my pockets.”

For the moment Mr. Miller was tempted to wonder whether von Braun’s anxiety was genuine, or whether the German was recovering his strength, and was preparing to apply pressure.

“The hotel can settle the bills, and give you credit.”

“But, Miller, my account in Germany is on the wrong side.”

“Haven’t you any friends?”

“Well, yes, but most of them are as hard up as I am. You see, the war, and the revolution, and the industrial crisis——”

Mr. Miller stroked his very well shaved chin.

“I’ll take it on myself to settle these affairs—not because—of that—private affair, but because——”

Von Braun’s face seemed to light up.

“You mean—you’re willing to do this, in spite of—everything?”

“Yes. Just common humanity, von Braun. After all—I’ve been a lucky man. I’ve had my chance. Perhaps yours hasn’t come yet.”

The German lay and looked at him.

“My chance?—Yes,—I was pretty desperate—but that’s—— O, well, if you’ll let me—bury—that memory—I’ll have another shot at life, Miller. I’m not quite worthless.”

He put out a hand, and Mr. Miller grasped it.

“Well, that’s a bargain.”

He was walking towards the door when von Braun called him back.

“O, just one moment. Your wife brings these flowers in. Does she know?”

Mr. Miller hesitated, and then uttered the merciful lie.

“No.”

“I’m glad. You’re a lucky man, Miller. Life’s worth while with a woman like that.”

Captain von Braun recovered. Meanwhile Mr. Miller drew money from his bank, and the doctors and the nurses were paid, and the hotel bills settled ostensibly by Mr. Brown. Mr. Miller was some two hundred pounds out of pocket on the transaction, but as a man of business he was of the opinion that he might be cutting his loss rather cheaply. Von Braun was being wheeled about in an invalid chair, or was taking gentle exercise with a couple of sticks. One leg was two inches shorter than the other.

But he was a restless man.

“I want to get home, Miller. You see—they don’t know over there that I have had this smash.”

“You have never told them?”

“Well—I didn’t want to worry a particular person. She has enough to worry her.”

“Your wife?”

“Yes, my wife.”

The sea had a fascination for von Braun. He liked to limp down to the little garden house on the cliff and sit there. Winter was in the air, and kind persons would help Mr. Brown down the path and wrap him up in rugs. Mr. Miller found him there one winter morning when the sun happened to be shining, and something else seemed to be shining in von Braun’s eyes.

“Oh—Miller, just a moment.”

“Getting some sun?”

“Yes. You English are kind people. You don’t seem to bear malice.”

Mr. Miller laughed.

“You seem to forget——? But perhaps I’m not included.”

Von Braun was feeling in his overcoat pocket.

“You’re as English as the rest of them, Miller. You ought to have let me die, and you didn’t. Read that, will you.”

He passed an envelope to Mr. Miller, who extracted from it a sheet of hotel note-paper. He read:

> “I—Captain Fritz von Braun declare that when I and two other German officers visited the Royal Hotel during the war Mr. Miller, the manager, was a complete stranger to us and was wholly innocent of any espionage.
>
> *Signed*—FRITZ VON BRAUN.”

Mr. Miller slipped the sheet back into the envelope.

“You wish me to keep this?”

“Of course.”

Mr. Miller smiled and put the thing in his pocket.

“Very well, if you wish it, but I have a feeling that it isn’t necessary.”

The German looked at him gratefully.

“You mean that?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.”

Von Braun had produced a second letter. He passed it to Mr. Miller. The envelope bore a German stamp and was addressed to Mr. Brown.

“Read that.”

Mr. Miller read it. It was a woman’s letter. It said:

> “Come quickly, Fritz—such good news. Herr Schmidt thinks he has found a place for you, quite a good position. Oh—I am so happy. You need not stay in England any longer trying to get orders for that wretched firm. Yes, Elsa is much better. She is going to school again. Come at once, Fritz——”

Mr. Miller handed the letter back to von Braun.

“Can you travel?”

“Yes—I must. It’s my chance.”

“But what about—tickets?”

The German’s eyes were hungry.

“I can sell one or two things. Third-class will do.”

“Oh—I’ll lend you the money.”

“I’ll pay you back, Miller.”

“We won’t worry about that—just now.”

Von Braun slipped his wife’s letter into his pocket.

“Wait. I want you to give me all the receipted bills. Yes, all that you have paid for me. A debt of honour, Miller. Absurd, isn’t it? You remember that morning here? Well, once more—I am a man of honour.”

Von Braun travelled to Germany the following week. Mr. Miller actually went to the port with him and saw him on board the boat. They looked into each other’s eyes for the last time, and shook hands.

“God bless you, Miller. Thanks for those bills. It may take me a little time to settle them, but they will be settled.”

Mr. Miller spoke like an Englishman.

“Don’t worry, old chap. I’m doing pretty well.”

“You deserve to. Tell your wife that those flowers helped me to get—healed, yes, body and soul.”

“That’s all to the good, old man. If you ever come to England again——”

“Perhaps I shall.”

Mr. Miller was not a cynic, but as a business man he did not expect to recover the money he had advanced to von Braun. It was just a bad debt, one of his few bad debts, a sop to Cerberus, or a thankoffering to fate; but one day nearly a year later he found a German letter on the breakfast table. He opened it, smiled a little half-incredulous smile, and passed something to his wife—a cheque.

“Von Braun’s debt of honour. Well—that’s rather astonishing.”

His wife’s eyes were faintly moist.

“Poor man. I hope—he can afford it.”

“He says that he is doing very well.”

“Shall you—cash the cheque, Fred?”

“Of course. Between man and man it’s a debt of honour.”

Mr. Miller seemed to reflect for a moment. As a business man he was tempted to wonder whether von Braun was good for the sum written on that piece of paper.

“I’d like to cash it—just to see——”

His wife’s eyes reproved him.

“Oh—Fred!”

“Well, if it’s all right, we’ll send them a little present for Elsa.”

The bank honoured Captain von Braun’s cheque. It was not a stumer, and somehow Mr. Miller’s faith in human nature was both surprised and reassured.

IN A LITTLE BELGIAN TOWN

MAJOR MANNERS walked up the steep street between houses of grey stone. Everything was grey, the *pavé*, the sky, the glass in the windows, the shutters, the little gardens. St. Hubert climbed a cleft between green hills whose summits were dark and serrate with pines, but even the greenness of the December country had a tinge of grey.

Manners paused in front of a house with a mansard roof and a pretentious façade. He looked at the windows with the eyes of a man who had become expert in appraising the appearances of strange houses. He glanced at his notebook.

"One of ours, Barry."

The little orderly-room clerk nodded.

"No. 17, sir."

"Yes, this looks like the colonel."

Manners's field boots were well polished. They seemed to have collected more and more polish since the war had died a month or so ago, yet this lustre was not martial. It suggested something more subtle than professional spit and polish. It was part of a man's consciousness of life returning to a gradual appreciation of things that were both old and new, the bloom upon fruit, half-forgotten decencies, a life that was not all duck-board and latrine. For Manners was a doctor and second in command of a field ambulance. He had known mud, but not too much mud; horror, but not too much horror. The war had hardened and dulled him, but beneath the coarsened surface there remained the illusion that civilization was worth while and that—somehow—life should be decent.

He knocked at the door of No. 17. It was opened by a sallow little Belgian girl in a check apron. To her Manners spoke briefly in bad French.

“Billets for two officers.”

He was admitted—or rather, he walked in with the air of a man who had ceased to regard private property as anything personal. He was in search of beds, especially good clean beds, and a room with a stove in it. The colonel liked space and a stove. Through a doorway he had a glimpse of a fat old woman in black seated on a sofa. He gave her a cursory “*Bon jour, madame*,” and followed the servant up polished stairs. No. 17 proved satisfactory. He chalked two doors.

Barry, waiting on the sidewalk, turned an infantile and wizened face to his returning officer. A certain informality had established itself between the two.

“That settles all the officers, Barry, except myself.”

“There’s the sergeants’ mess, sir.”

“Oh, we’ll do them proud. We can spread ourselves here. I imagine that this is the first occasion on which the unit has occupied an hotel.”

“And the Transport, sir? You remember—last time——”

“They are a grousing crowd. They shan’t grouse here. I’ve got ’em a palace.”

He glanced at the pages of his notebook and handed it to the clerk.

“You might take this along to the sergeant-major. I’ll just go and hunt myself up a corner. Oh, and tell Tombs—the mess-orderly—to spread himself in that house just off the Place. We shall want tea. I’ll be back in the orderly-room in half an hour.”

Manners went on up the steep street of St. Hubert. Always he had been something of a separative soul, and the war had been like a churn consolidating thousands of individual fat-globules into butter. Already he was finding his own personal proclivities re-establishing themselves. He had been sufficiently old to secrete a personal shell, and if it had been mud-coated mud could be removed. He might be an animal, but he was a cultivated animal. Certain sensibilities were reviving, or preparing to put out leaves—though the leaves might not be quite the same as of yore.

He saw the tourelles of the château momentarily and dimly bright against a silvery crevice in the sky. He was conscious of a feeling of pleasure, almost of tenderness. Life had not lost all its pathos.

But he kept an alert eye on the houses. He had lived so much with other men that now his inclination was to remove his essential self into some secret

corner. The times were so prodigious, and somehow so dead. He wanted to think.

The emptiness of the street surprised him. He liked it. It was like some dim street in a deserted, mediæval town. It had a shut-up, secret air. No women, no children. Had these Belgian women and children become shy of thousands upon thousands of strange men? Four German years, and now—the English—the deliverers! Well, it wasn't very likely. Human nature accommodated itself amazingly, and much of the old conventional morality had suffered badly from dry rot. Down in the Place there had been plenty of people, a crowd that could stare at the other brown crowd just as it had stared at the grey one.

And suddenly he paused. A house had attracted his attention. It stood back behind a little garden, a white house with green shutters, and a high roof. The lower shutters were closed, and there was something about the house that intrigued him. He had a certain feeling for houses, and gardens, and for atmosphere. At home he lived and worked in the country, and not merely as a doctor going upon his rounds.

He opened the iron gate, walked up the path and knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again and more insistently. He heard a faint shuffling sound on the tiles of a passage. The door was unlocked and opened six inches.

He saw a face, a woman's face, a thin, pale face that seemed all edge. The eyes looked at him mistrustfully. They were curious eyes, of a kind of dead greyness.

Manners saluted.

"Pardon—I am looking for a billet."

The eyes observed him. They looked frightened. They showed the whites below the iris. They were like the eyes of a creature in a cage.

"You wish for a room, monsieur?"

"Yes."

"But I am all alone here."

Something in Manners smiled. Even if the sex adventure suggested itself to him as normal man, he did not infer that he would find it here. The woman was not much more than forty, but she made him think of a yellow skinned fruit that had been sucked dry.

"I shall cause you no trouble, madame. I need a room to sleep and read in.

My servant looks after me.”

Her pale eyes flickered.

“Monsieur will not need food?”

“No.”

“But monsieur will have to go in and out.”

“You can give me a key. I want quiet. After the war—yes, quiet.”

She nodded her head. She had smooth black hair with streaks of grey in it. She seemed to commune with herself.

“Monsieur belongs to the cavalry?”

“No, I’m a doctor.”

The flickering, thin flame of her indecision steadied itself.

“I will show you a room, monsieur.”

The room pleased Manners. Its windows opened on the garden at the back of the house, and the garden had high stone walls with fruit trees trained to them, and beyond the garden a steep meadow ascended to a pine wood. He arranged to billet himself here, and returned to the Hotel Bertrand where the unit was to be packed into the empty rooms. Five motor-ambulances were parked in the Place, and the main street was full of an infantry battalion and its transport. The same old brown crowd. Would life in the future be anything else but a crowd? Manners disappeared into the Hotel Bertrand, and got busy. He was in charge of the advance party as well as of the billeting, and a brigade hospital had to be fitted up in the lower rooms of the empty hotel.

The unit poured in on him while he was supervising the activities of the advance party. He heard the colonel’s voice, and he knew at once that there had been trouble on the road, bad march-discipline, something a Red Hat could quarrel with. “Where’s Major Manners?” And Manners went in search of the trouble. He found a big man with very blue eyes scolding a sergeant. He stood by sympathetically; he could sympathize both with O.C. and N.C.O. Moving a unit under the eyes of a liverish General could be a touchy business. Bad temper was infectious.

Besides, he was rather fond of the big man with the blue eyes. When the moment came he interposed the soothing word.

“I have fixed up the mess, sir. Tea should be ready. I’ll show you the house. I’ll fix things up here.”

The big man's blue eyes grew mild and humorous. Manners and his colonel went off together.

"Two idiots smoking, Manners, when we were supposed to be at attention."

"Well, there won't be much more attention, sir. Must say I feel like the men—at times. I want to let out a yell and cut a caper right under the august nose."

"My nose, Manners?"

They laughed.

"No, General Fus's, sir. I've got you a good billet. A stove and half an acre of floor."

He sent a tired man in to loosen things and drink tea.

Later, he went down to the mess and found it as usual. Sanger, the debonair and dandified Sanger, who could salute like a guardsman and was never to be relied upon, sat playing a piano. Brown was filling a pipe. The grave Gordon sat scribbling the daily letter to his wife. Tombs produced more tea. Sanger, revolving on a music stool, fired off his usual question:

"Any luck for me, Uncle?"

Manners teased him.

"Not much. An old lady with a fringe."

"Damn it—I haven't had anything young and tasty in my billet for the last three weeks."

"That's not a very long time, my lad."

And Sanger broke into one of the war refrains, vamping it on the piano:

"I'm in love—I'm in love,
You can see by the look in my eyes."

Gordon grew sardonic.

"It's chronic with you. Permanently polygamous. What are you going to do when you get home?"

"Preach free love, old McTavish."

Manners drank his tea, and finding that there was fresh butter on the table, was patient even with the foulness of Brown's unhygienic pipe.

It was dark when he walked up the street to his billet. There seemed to be no light in the house with the green shutters, but when he knocked the woman let him in. She brought him a candle, but he noticed that her eyes remained downcast. The hand holding the candlestick was the colour of wax.

“I am sorry, there is no gas, monsieur, and no electricity.”

He took the candle.

“But there is electric light in other houses.”

“In some, monsieur. I am sorry.”

She was both frightened and propitiatory. No doubt some of these Belgians had had a pretty rough time. Manners had seen the re-occupied French territory, all starved faces and flies.

“My servant has been?”

“Yes, monsieur. Will it be necessary for him to come often?”

“Oh, twice a day. But that won’t inconvenience you, will it?”

“No, monsieur. I keep the door locked.”

Manners had a foot on the first step of the stair. He paused. Had this woman been living in a state of terror for four years, and had fear become a habit? He spoke kindly.

“There is no need for locked doors, madame, now.”

She gave him a queer, upward, startled glance. Almost it accused him of not understanding something. Her mouth hung open. And then she faced about and disappeared down the passage. Manners went on up the stairs to his room, closed the door and stood listening. He felt puzzled and uneasy. It was as though every other door in that silent house had listened to the closing of this other door. He glanced round the room. Smith—his batman—had put out all his things. A pair of slacks hung on the back of a chair. But there was something alien and sinister about the room. No other room made him feel as this one did, that scores of other men had slept in it, Germans, enemies, men who were dead. But what rot! The Germans were just other men, no worse, no better. He put the candle down upon the table beside letters and an English newspaper that were waiting to be read.

At seven o’clock he went downstairs to go to the mess. Below him a door had opened and closed. The woman was waiting for him.

He asked her for a key.

“You must take the one in the door, monsieur. I have no other.”

He took the key and locked the door on the outside, and heard her try it as he went down the path. Why was she so suspicious? He was beginning to think that he had chosen an uncomfortable billet, and in the mess he heard other revelations. The colonel looked pink and refreshed; he had been offered coffee and cake, he had a stove, and an electric light beside his bed. Sanger had discovered other evidences of civilization, a bottle of red wine and a girl. Brown, too, could boast of a stove.

“These people haven’t done so badly. Old Fritz didn’t skin them as he did the French.”

“I saw a dozen of our chaps crowding into a confectioner’s.”

“What about you, Uncle, any luck?”

Manners replied evasively:

“I’m nice and quiet.”

But he was beginning to wonder what ailed the house with the green shutters.

When, full of the warmth of the mess and its whisky, and after four rubbers of bridge, he returned to his billet, and unlocked the door, and changed the key to the inside of the lock, he felt that someone was listening. The house struck cold. He thought he heard a door open as he climbed the stairs, but he was sleepy and less sensitive to impressions. He undressed and got into bed. It was quite a comfortable bed.

He woke to find Smith, his batman, in the room with a jug of hot water. Smith was a conversational soul, and he had become more so since the armistice.

“Rummy house—this, sir.”

“What’s the matter, Smith?”

“No water. She keeps the kitchen door locked. Had to go down to the mess for your shaving water, sir.”

“No tea, Smith?”

“Sorry, sir. I’ll manage it to-morrow. You see—I didn’t expect to strike a surprise-packet like this.”

He possessed himself of Manners’s boots and went downstairs to clean them. Manners, while shaving, could hear the fellow whistling. It was a

cheerful sound in this melancholy house, and he was coming to the conclusion that he would have to find another billet. The mess breakfast was at eight-fifteen, parade at nine. The day looked frosty, and the house struck cold. He put on his British warm, and met the Belgian woman in the passage.

She looked at him anxiously.

“Monsieur has slept well?”

He began to tell her that he might have to change his billet, and his indifferent French seemed to puzzle her, but when he repeated the words her perplexity changed to fear. She appeared strangely agitated.

“Monsieur will not go elsewhere—please. I wish to be hospitable. If monsieur will tell me——”

Manners was surprised, troubled. Why was she so anxious for him to stay, so scared at the idea of his leaving the house?

“I find the room very cold, madame.”

Almost she wrung her hands.

“I have so little coal, monsieur, and it is so difficult to get coal. There is a stove. I will do what I can.”

“And hot water in the morning, madame.”

“Monsieur shall have it.”

Her anxious, hunted eyes worried him, and he relented.

“Thank you, madame, I will stay for a few days.”

She followed him to the door. She had the air of wishing to say more to him, but no words came. She locked the door behind him.

In the little front garden he noticed something that he had not observed before, an oblong patch of soil that looked like a recently filled in grave. He paused to stare at it. Now—what the——? Had she had wine, copper, or valuables buried there, and had disinterred the hoard? But would such things have been hidden in a front garden?

The day proved full of affairs. The brigade hospital was filling with sick; he had a kit inspection to take at ten. In the afternoon he was to help the colonel in overhauling the unit’s transport and harness. Unpleasant things had been said about the unit’s harness. He did not return to his billet till the evening. He found a small fire burning in the stove in his room, and on the table stood a bottle of wine.

He was touched, and just a little shocked. Did that poor, frightened creature think that he had to be propitiated? And why? Had life been rather brutal to her? Oh—perhaps. He left the bottle on the table, sat by the stove and read by the light of two candles. At seven he changed into slacks, and went out on his way to the mess.

She met him in the dim passage.

“Monsieur is more comfortable?”

He thanked her. He mentioned the bottle of wine. He suggested that her generosity was charming but unnecessary.

In the darkness her voice seemed near to tears.

“Monsieur is very kind. I wish to do my best.”

He said something that was half playful, half gentle, and went out wondering whether there had been some tragedy in the house.

Again Manners slept well, but towards morning something disturbed him; he could not say what, a sound or a movement in the house, but he lay awake listening. The curtains at the window were turning grey with the dawn, and above the pine trees on the hill a red flush began to appear. Manners got out of bed and went to the window. Below him he saw the garden shut in by its high grey walls, and the outlines of the paths with their edging of box. In one corner stood a little summer-house with a steep, slated roof, and treillage painted blue.

He was about to get back into bed when he saw a figure emerge from the summer-house, a figure wrapped up in a sort of black cloak with a hood over its head. Madame was out early. But then he realized that the figure was not that of the woman. It was less tall; it moved quite differently; even in that old black cloak it seemed to exhale a youthfulness. It walked round and round the box-edged path like a prisoner in a yard let out for an hour’s exercise.

The daylight strengthened. Manners, standing there in his pyjamas, and forgetting to feel cold, saw a hand go up and put back the hood. It revealed the face of a girl, a pale and rather broad face with dark hair and well-set eyes. It was a type of face that appealed to him, sensitive, sensuous, vaguely sad. She stood and looked at the sky for a moment, and then, turning towards the house, passed out of his field of vision.

Manners got back into bed. Half an hour later, when Smith appeared with his early morning tea, he asked his servant a question:

“Have you seen anyone else in this house, Smith?”

Smith was stooping to collect his officer's boots.

"Anyone else, sir?"

"Yes, besides the woman."

The man's innocent face answered the question.

"Not a living soul, sir. It's a rummy sort of house. She hadn't locked the kitchen door on me this morning."

"You got the hot water all right."

"Yes, sir. She seems a bit short of fuel, sir. I caught her pushing bits of an old chair into the stove."

Manners, sipping his tea, and preparing to enjoy that first cigarette, reflected upon this incident. The woman was burning the furniture. But other people could get coal in St. Hubert. Was it that she had no money? And perhaps—hardly any food!

Later in the day another incident threw a more sinister light upon the situation. Manners happened to return to the house about eleven in the morning, and as he climbed the winding street he became aware of a little crowd of women and children outside the railings of the house with the green shutters. It was a slatternly, unwashed, and unpleasant crowd. The children were throwing stones at the shutters, while the women—frowsy and excited—hurled epithets. Obviously, it was a demonstration—a mob display—by the lower elements of this little Belgian town. And as Manners approached the group, his face hardened. Nasty things mobs, even when made up of a score or two of women and urchins.

Discovering him they grew silent. The children scuttled out of his way, but one of the women, fat and yellow, with a large mouth and flattened nose, stood in front of the gate.

"Bad place for English officer."

Manners motioned her out of the way, and she—seeing the disdain in his eyes—grew insolent.

"Boche women—second-hand. Monsieur likes them so—perhaps. Or perhaps he is a baby."

She seemed to squelch with laughter, in which the rest of the crowd joined. Manners went pale and pinched about the nose.

"If you please, madame. I do not understand."

She gave way, and he opened the gate and walked up the path to the house. The crowd had its joke at his expense. He felt both contemptuous and angry. He supposed that the gutter-people were much of a muchness in all countries. But he had begun to divine a part of the secret of this house, yet hardened worldling that he was he was shocked by it.

He tried the door and found it unlocked. This surprised him. And then he saw a figure seated on the stairs, its face clasped between its hands. He closed the door and locked it. He went half-way up the passage and paused.

The woman spoke, and her voice seemed to make a dry whispering.

“It is not true, monsieur.”

Her hands dropped. Her eyes appealed to him, watched him.

“It is not true.”

Manners made a movement of the head. This figure of tragedy blocked the stairs, and he was conscious of sudden compassion.

“Madame—I prefer to believe you.”

“You must believe me, monsieur. We are reviled, we are threatened; we are allowed no food, no coal, no light. Even—the water——”

She spoke slowly, clearly, as though giving him every chance to follow her. He nodded.

“You are not alone here.”

“No, monsieur—Gabrielle, my daughter.”

“Yes, I must have seen her this morning in the garden.”

The woman’s eyelids flickered momentarily.

“It was not because I did not trust you. Does monsieur understand? I would explain——”

“Tell me.”

She let her thin hands lie upon her knees.

“It happened in this way, monsieur. For two years I had the German commandant billeted in my house. No—he was a good man. He hated the war—as we did. He had a wife and children at home, and he was kind. He liked my daughter to play on the piano; even he used to work in the garden; he was at home with us, and friendly. He made life—the life of prisoners—easy for us. We had food, fuel, as much of everything as could be had. Does monsieur

understand what I am saying?”

Manners nodded.

“I understand.”

She was silent for a moment, looking at her hands.

“But this is the tragedy, monsieur, that my enemies should be—not the Germans—but these people in my own town, people who were jealous, people who could think nothing but evil. I did not understand till the Germans left us—that I and my daughter were to be named among those who had given themselves—— At first—I could not believe it. But then—the persecution began, insults, disgusting threats. We were treated as outcasts. I had to hide my daughter. Does monsieur understand?”

Again Manners nodded.

“But have you not asked for protection?”

“I appealed to the burgomaster, monsieur, but he is a weak man, cowardly and cynical. He shrugged his shoulders. He advised us to go away.”

“But—the police?”

“We have but one gendarme, monsieur, these days, and he is as bad as those others. There is nothing but your presence—in my house—that saves us.”

In the course of the war Manners had had to tackle many problems, and he had found a ruthless self-confidence the most active of solvents. You made your own plan, and compelled or persuaded other men to accept it. He had a reputation in the Division. He said to the woman on the stairs, “I will do something,” and he began by going out and chalking upon the front door the mystic symbols—“Under the protection of the English Army.” The crowd still loitered. He walked to the gate, and pointed with his cane.

“Go, clear out,” and they went.

But an autocratic gesture such as this could be no more than a compromise, and he knew it. He had a heart-to-heart talk with the colonel; he walked up to the chateau, and asked the advice of a brigade major, who was a good fellow.

“We can order a guard to be detailed. We have had to place sentries outside several houses. One woman has had her hair cut off, and her clothes torn to pieces.”

Manners reflected.

“It’s very good of you. But I don’t think a man with a bayonet is going to solve this problem.”

The brigade major made a suggestion.

“Why don’t you doctors do something? Rather a delicate matter, of course, but you could co-opt the local priest, and the Belgian doctor. The priest is a sportsman.”

Manners looked grave.

“Yes, it’s an idea. But that one should have to certify a girl’s decency in order to placate a lot of sluts——!”

He went to see the Catholic priest. He found him to be a stout old person, bald, buxom, and with a jocund eye. He was a humanist. He had a little English, and between his English and Manners’s French they contrived to understand each other and to understand each other as men.

Almost the old man broke the seal of the confessional.

“My assurance is, monsieur, that the accusation is not true. I have known Madame Mercier and her daughter for many years. I knew the German officer who lived in the house. He was a Catholic, and a decent, fatherly fellow. He had arrived at the age when a man is wholly philosopher or wholly beast. I will do all that I can to help these two ladies.”

They smiled upon each other.

“Do you smoke, Father?”

“I do—a pipe.”

“I will send you over some English tobacco.”

The priest bowed in his chair.

“All good Christians smoke pipes. And there are some Christians left, in spite of the war. May I ask you a question, Monsieur le Major?”

“Certainly.”

“Have you seen Madame Mercier’s daughter?”

“Once, and only in the distance, from my window.”

The priest nodded.

“So—your compassion is impersonal, a flower of the open mind. It is well. See her.”

Manners returned to the house with the green shutters. Madame Mercier let him in. He showed her those mystic symbols in chalk upon her door. She looked at them with the faintest of smiles.

“Will it suffice, monsieur?”

He asked her a question:

“Madame, how much food have you in the house?”

She had closed the door, and her long, thin figure drooped.

“Very little, monsieur.”

“I see. We must alter that.”

He walked down the passage towards the kitchen with the air of an officer conducting an inspection. The door stood ajar. He pushed it open. There was an exclamation from the mother.

“Monsieur——!”

A girl was sitting by the stove with a black shawl over her shoulders, her hands extended towards the iron surface. Startled, she turned her head and looked at the Englishman; she hesitated; she stood up.

Manners saluted her.

“Mademoiselle, please sit down.”

He crossed over to the stove, opened its iron door, and saw a miserable little fire in the heart of which a green log sizzled unconsentingly. He reclosed the door. He turned to Madame Mercier.

“Madame—I apologize. I have robbed you of your coal. I will see that it is replaced.”

He was very conscious of the girl sitting there with her hands clasped in her lap, a frightened, gentle, dark thing. She was half starved and cold and afraid, but she sat there with a kind of childish dignity. Her large, soft eyes observed him.

Manners looked at her, smiled, and moved towards the door.

“You will forgive me for having intruded.”

He made a sign to the mother. She followed him into the passage, and opened the door of an icy little salon in which a piano stood with its keyboard closed. There was dust on it. And Manners, with a queer, abstracted air, passed a finger over the dusty surface.

“One cannot play the piano with frozen hands.”

He looked out of the window.

“I have taken advice, madame. Certain things were suggested to me, but now—having seen Mademoiselle Mercier—I do not think they will be necessary. I have visited your priest, and in him you have a friend. Will you permit me to remain in your house?”

She stood very still.

“Monsieur—I thank you. But—as you see—it will be difficult for me to give monsieur that comfort——”

“I think I can arrange these difficulties. There have been other occasions when we have been allowed to provide civilians with food, and medical comforts. It has been necessary. You will allow me, madame, to arrange these matters.”

He was formal, kind, sparing a self-restraint that he divined to be on the edge of breaking. He went out quickly, aware of a pathetic figure sitting rigid on a sofa, with tears beginning to show. He closed the door.

He said to himself in the English way, “Damn it, how do I know that I’m not a fool?” but that he did know it was part of his nature.

That night Gabrielle Mercier played her piano in a room that was warmed. The sound filled the dead house and made it alive, and someone, knocking at the door, was received as a friend.

“Madame—with your permission—I am very fond of music.”

He was given a chair by the stove. The girl played Chopin; Madame’s knitting needles clicked.

On a subsequent Sunday sundry Englishmen in khaki saw an English major walking to church with two Belgian ladies. It appeared to be a family affair. If there were grins, such expressions of human feeling were neither destructive nor wholly cynical. Manners was well liked by the men; they had profited by his humanity; they allowed him its virtues.

The gay Sanger chose to be facetious in the mess.

“Old Uncle seems to have gone in off the deep end.”

He tried teasing Manners, but was so sagely and seriously snubbed that in the future he refrained. Old Uncle was not the man to be fooled with when he was not feeling like it. His folly—if it was folly—was a delicate and personal affair.

The people of St. Hubert saw what these English soldiers saw, and each man and woman saw it with the eyes of his or her secret soul. To some, Manners was a gentleman, to others a complaisant fool. They might say that he had stepped into the shoes of the German, or fallen in love with Mademoiselle Gabrielle Mercier who had the eyes of the Holy Virgin and whose hands made music.

DR. MORROW'S PATIENT

DR. MORROW lit his pipe.

On this November night he was glad of the fire, of his arm-chair and his book. The muffled hootings of the taxis in Welbeck Street hardly penetrated to this quiet room at the back of the house where the light from the amber-shaded pedestal lamp fell upon the pages of the doctor's book. His large, strong body spread itself. The day's work was done; he had dined; the frost and the fog of London could be left to a world that worked less hard than he did.

Someone climbed the flight of stairs to the first floor. There was a knock, and his door opened, and looking over his shoulder he saw the tall, compressed figure of Mrs. Prince, his cook-housekeeper. Her blackness was Victorian in its gravity.

"I am going now, sir."

Mrs. Prince's formalism was a virtue that had to be suffered, for all her other virtues were solid and unprovocative.

"All right, Mrs. Prince. What's the night like?"

"Foggy, sir."

"I thought so. Hope you'll find your mother better. You had better take the tube."

Mrs. Prince had the air of regarding all advice as superfluous.

"If I am late, sir——"

"It won't matter."

"I have let the girl go out."

"I'm not expecting anybody."

“The telephone is switched on here, sir.”

“Thank you. Hope I shan’t want it. Good night, Mrs. Prince.”

“Good night, sir.”

Her thin, black figure was effaced by the edge of the closing door, and Morrow crossed his legs, and letting the book lie, he watched the fire. Excellent woman, Mrs. Prince; she appeared and disappeared as though you pulled a piece of string, and a little door opened and shut. Women could be such an infernal nuisance when the world had labelled you an expert and expected you to be nothing but an expert. Women became jealous of your job. He bit hard at his pipe and remembered things, how three years ago he had had a wife, and that on just such a night as this she had left him. Yes, she had gone off with another fellow, a chap who danced. She had wanted someone to play with. She had been bored in the house of a busy professional man. And he had shrugged his big shoulders and felt savage and cynical until a calmer comprehension of their married life had persuaded him that she had not been wholly to blame. He had not divorced her. He had not bothered. He was too absorbed now in his work to trouble much about women.

Poor Kitty! He sometimes wondered what she had made of the new adventure, and of her little smart man about town. He had not heard of her since that night. She was out of his life for good, and as though to emphasize his realization of it he raised his book and went on reading. It was a dull book and highly technical, and in a little while he began to yawn. His pipe burned itself out and he laid it aside on the table. The book followed it. He switched off the lamp and dozed.

Morrow had been asleep for less than five minutes when the door opened noiselessly and a dim face appeared. It seemed to hang there in the doorway as though its eyes were reconnoitring the interior of the room. Then a figure slipped in, a woman’s figure. She closed the door and stood for a moment with her back to it, observing the man asleep in front of the fire. Her immobility suggested a kind of desperate indecision.

Suddenly she moved to the centre of the room, and picking up a book from the mahogany table, she dropped it on the floor.

Morrow, awake, sat up in his chair.

“Hallo! Who’s there?”

A voice answered him, “A patient.”

He turned and saw her, a mere dark shape in the firelit room, but before he

could rise she spoke. His hand was reaching out towards the lamp.

“Don’t turn up the light.”

“Who are you?”

“Have you forgotten my voice?”

“Kitty!”

For it was the voice of the woman who had been his wife, and yet somehow different and like her reputation a little worn and frayed. He rose slowly from his chair, and stood on the hearthrug. He made no attempt to turn up the light. His surprise had an edge of anger.

“So—it’s you?”

“Yes.”

“What the devil are you doing here?”

She stood very still, looking past him at the light of the fire.

“I came as a patient.”

“At this hour?” and his voice was ironic. “How did you get in?”

“I let myself in.”

“Let yourself in!”

She was carrying a vanity-bag, and she opened it, and taking something out, held it up for him to see.

“I had this key. It was in my bag when I went away. I forgot to leave it behind. And I kept it. I don’t know why I kept it. Does one know why one does certain things? You see—I——”

She seemed to give a little shiver. She dropped the key back into the bag and closed it with a snap.

“Things don’t always stay put like this key.”

And suddenly she began to cough. It was one of those hard, dry coughs, a spasm in throat and chest that was beyond control. She tried to smother it, but without success, and Morrow’s hand went out to the lamp on the pedestal table. He switched on the light, and they ceased to be mere shapes in a firelit room. They became alive to each other, he with his massive head and his ugliness and his rather prominent eyes that had the stillness of eyes accustomed to observe, she one of those fragile, dark-haired women quick in their colour and their impulses, and who retain—even when tashed and world-

worn—a suggestion of something virginal.

Morrow looked at her.

“Yes, some things don’t stay put.”

He crossed the room and turned on the ceiling lights.

“Let’s see, how long is it? About three years?”

She was struggling with her cough.

“It seems much longer.”

“O, time’s relative, you know.”

He stood studying her with the air of a doctor, and she tried to meet his eyes, but her glances were self-conscious and uncertain.

“Must you look at me like that?”

“Just how?”

“As though you had me stripped.”

“I was looking at you as a doctor. How long have you had that cough?”

“Does it matter?”

“Perhaps not, but you may as well answer my question.”

“O, not long. Perhaps a couple of months.”

“You look as though you have had it longer than that.”

“You’re not flattering.”

“We are not paying each other compliments, are we? Smoke much?”

“Not now.”

She stood looking obliquely past him at the fire, as though its warmth drew her. Her mouth was both sullen and appealing. She had ceased to cough. She was very conscious of being studied, and of the shabby smartness of her clothes, and of her cold, underfed body. She could have told him that starved people lack courage.

“I suppose I ought to apologize, but I wanted an opinion, someone who would tell me——”

He put out a hand and grasped her wrist.

“You’re cold.”

“It was rather raw outside.”

He touched her coat.

“In a damned flimsy thing like this. Go and sit down in that chair by the fire and get warm.”

“It’s your chair.”

“Yes, same old chair. People used to get sentimental about chairs. That sort of nonsense is dead, you know. Go on, warm yourself.”

She glanced momentarily at him and almost with a whimsical smile, as though this roughness of his was strangely familiar. He had pushed the chair nearer to the fire, and was bending down and using the poker. She sat down in the chair.

“You still burn coal.”

“You can use a poker on coal. I like using a poker.”

It was her turn to be ironical.

“Yes, you always did.”

“And it used to annoy you.”

Still holding the poker, he straightened himself and stood leaning against the mantelpiece. He was thinking of their marriage and of modern marriage in particular, a thing like an electric heater that can be switched on and off as you please. She was stretching out her hands to the fire, and he saw her as a woman who was thin and ill and shabby, a woman with frightened eyes. Her casual cynicism was very much a mask, an attempt at nonchalance that could not deceive.

He spoke more gently.

“By the way—I like to know a patient’s name.”

Her dark eyes had a vagueness.

“Name?”

“Yes, the man’s name was Carthew—if I remember. Is the same label attached?”

She looked through her spread fingers at the fire.

“I’m known as Mrs. Carthew, if that is what you mean. You wouldn’t divorce me. I can never understand——”

“Because I happened to have views. Or was it because I did not bother? Well, never mind. When a thing smashes these days it is just pushed off the road. But as a doctor, I’m curious. What is in your mind at the moment?”

“I’m not a mind. I’m just a body.”

“Warming itself.”

“Yes.”

“Would it be impertinent to ask you whether you have dined?”

“Nothing is so impertinent as hunger.”

“I’m sorry. I did not quite mean it in that way. As a doctor I have to deal in realities. I have to ask questions, the most intimate of questions. And I am to assume that you have come to see Dr. Morrow?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now we know how we stand.”

He put down the poker. He went to the table in the centre of the room and placed two chairs. He opened a case-book.

“Do you mind sitting here, Mrs. Morrow?”

She rose. She accepted his formalism. She glanced at him nervously and sat down in the chair he had indicated. She watched him writing in his case-book, and suddenly he seemed to become the familiar figure of three years ago, a man with large and deliberate hands and eyes that sometimes made you afraid. She shivered slightly. Her glances wandered round the room.

He looked up at her.

“You have had this cough about two months. You have been short of food, and not properly clothed.”

She flushed.

“Does a doctor criticize a patient’s clothes?”

“Certainly, when you come out in a freezing fog in a coat like that.”

The cough began again, and she tried to fight it back.

“It seems to amuse you.”

He watched her efforts to control the spasm.

“Amuse me? Hardly. I have to go into the history of every case. No facts are without significance.”

“O, yes, history. You want my history?”

He nodded, and suddenly the spasm seemed to pass. She gave a shrug of the shoulders, and began to speak in a casual, toneless voice.

“You want to see me naked? Well, why not? We lost what little money we had in the Hatry smash. For more than a year we have been professional dancers. I suppose you don’t know much about people who have to appear smart and whose underclothing is in holes. No, we haven’t been very successful. Stockings have to be just so, even if your stomach is empty. Back bedrooms, frowsiness. Cadging for meals. Going out at night and being gay when your feet feel broken. Playing up to the silly old fools who pay.”

She broke off breathlessly with a kind of fierce and shallow distress. She clenched her hands. She went on:

“And you can’t stop. You have to go on like the traffic. You don’t know what to-morrow may bring. If you get ill you’re only fit for the dustbin like yesterday’s table decorations. So—now—you know.”

He scribbled something in his case-book.

“Rather different from the life in this stodgy old house. Does Mr. Carthew ——?”

“O, leave him out.”

“Can we?” and his voice grew gentler. “Well, for the moment, yes. I’m not a prig, my dear. I was to blame as well as you. You found life dull here. I was the successful doctor, and you wanted someone to play with. Women do, or some women. I should have understood that. Well, let’s get back to the doctoring.”

She looked at him bleakly.

“O, I forgot. I haven’t any money.”

“I’ll waive the fee. But, by the way, does Mr. Carthew know?”

“What?”

“That you are here?”

She hesitated, nodded.

“Yes. You see—he’s waiting.”

“Where?”

“Outside in the street.”

Morrow put his pen down, sat back, and looked at her.

“So he’s waiting in the street. Did he suggest your coming to me?”

“Does that matter?”

“Perhaps not. And he, too, has no fee on him?”

“We haven’t a penny.”

Morrow rose, and going to a bureau in the corner, opened a drawer and took out a stethoscope. He returned to the table.

“Your hand, please. Feel shivery at all?”

“Now and then.”

He felt her pulse, and in the silence, as he counted her heart-beats, he seemed to hear the flutter of her poor tarnished, flimsy wings. Her pulse was rapid, but that might be due to suspense. He asked her various other questions, but her replies to them were confused and vague.

“I shall have to examine your chest. Wait. I’ll go and get a wrap. Everything off to the waist. Yes, it’s necessary.”

He went out of the room, and Kitty Morrow rose slowly and took off her coat. She seemed to be troubled by sudden self-consciousness, but her hesitation lasted only a few seconds. She had moved to the hearthrug and was slipping off her dress when she heard the door open. A hand tossed a red quilt into the room.

“Put this over you. Call when you’re ready.”

She thanked him, and a few seconds later she was moving quickly across the room. She picked up the quilt and arranged it over her shoulders. She went and sat in his chair by the fire.

“I’m ready.”

He reappeared. He observed her for a moment, as though his compassion paused and became aware of her as a frightened child. He spoke gently.

“Just turn that thing aside. That’s right. Breathe quietly.”

She sat rigid and silent while he examined her, her eyes looking up and beyond him. There was apprehension in her stillness, and once or twice she glanced anxiously at his face. It was grave, inscrutable. His very deliberation and thoroughness tantalized her, and when in listening to the breath sounds his head came near to her, she seemed to shrink.

It was over. He folded up the stethoscope. It seemed to her that his face had an immense and frightening seriousness. He stood with his back to the fire, thinking.

“Cover yourself up.”

She shivered.

“I’m not really ill, am I?”

His eyes seemed fixed upon some distant object.

“Afraid so.”

“But not——?”

“There is something in your chest.”

She sat rigid, and he stared at the floor.

“Look here, I shall have to speak to Carthew. I’m afraid it’s necessary. I’d rather speak to him alone. He’s outside in the street?”

“Yes.”

“Take your things into the bedroom, yes, the one that used to be ours. I’ll call Carthew in.”

She looked at him with a strange, distraught stare, and then, mechanically, she gathered up her clothes and moved towards the door. She paused there.

“Must he know?”

“Surely—he’ll want to know?”

“Yes. But—men—are so—— You see—I——”

“That’s all right. Go and dress. No hurry. I’ll call you when I want you.”

He watched her go out. He gave a little nod of the head, and his shoulders seemed to grow bigger. For the thought had come to him that he would put this other man to the test, try him in the stark light of reality. He walked with large, loose strides to the door.

II

Morrow’s voice could be heard on the landing.

“Come in here. I have sent Mrs. Carthew to dress. I had better see you alone.”

Mr. Jack Carthew followed the doctor into the room, a slightly built, sallow, good-looking young man with the little smudge of a black moustache. He was in evening dress, and he carried an opera hat and an overcoat.

“Sorry to break up your evening, doc.”

Morrow was observing him, the waved hair, the dress trousers cut very full, the padded shoulders and waist. This little cad about town had an air of casual completeness, and mouth and eyes that were both insolent and smeary.

“Rather an unconventional occasion—this, doc.”

His voice trailed, and Morrow closed the door.

“You think so? I believe that this is our first meeting.”

Carthew, ridding himself of hat and coat, gave Morrow a little condescending smile.

“Need I introduce myself? Mr. Jack Carthew—Dr. Morrow, the eminent physician; Dr. Morrow—Mr. Jack Carthew.”

He shook hands with himself. He was very much “it” on all and every occasion, but Morrow cut him short.

“Thanks, that will do. But before we discuss Mrs. Carthew’s case, I should like to ask you a question.”

“No ceremony, doc. By the way, her proper title is still——”

“Exactly. Was it your suggestion that she should come and consult me?”

Carthew walked to the hearthrug and stood with his hands in his pockets. His eyes grew wary.

“Well, partly so. I have been trying to persuade her to see a doctor.”

“And she was shy?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Carthew smirked at him.

“The psychology of women, doc, is——”

But Morrow took him up sharply.

“When a woman is ill one doesn’t dose her with cynicism. I may have my own explanation of her shyness.”

“Well, why ask me?”

He felt in a pocket for his cigarette-case, opened it, and found that it was empty. This doctor fellow was rather an unpleasant person. He stared at you. He was abrupt and disconcerting.

“Mind if I cadge a cigarette, doc?”

“One moment. Did you hear me say that she is ill?”

“Obviously. I’m not deaf.”

“Seriously ill.”

Carthew’s face seemed to grow suddenly and significantly alert.

“Not seriously. Just a cold on the chest.”

“I said—seriously.”

“Gosh, doc, you don’t mean to say——?”

“One lung is affected.”

“Good Lord!”

He turned to the fire like a man hiding emotion from another man, and Morrow watched him. How much of the fellow was real? How would he behave in this crisis, this judgment of Solomon? But Carthew was speaking.

“Poor kid. I didn’t like that damned cough of hers. And she has been getting thin. Poor kid.”

He had noticed a silver cigarette-box on the mantelpiece, and he raised the lid and felt for a cigarette.

“It’s so damned sudden, doc. Bit of a shock, you know. What’s to be done?”

Morrow watched him light the cigarette. There was no trembling of the match flame. Carthew’s compassion was a thing preserved in ice.

“She ought to go into a nursing-home—at once—for a more complete examination.”

Carthew blew smoke.

“A nursing-home. Yes, of course. To-morrow, I suppose?”

“No, to-night.”

And Carthew began to fidget.

“You see, doc, the fact is—— Couldn’t she go into a hospital, a private ward? I’m rather——”

“Embarrassed?”

“Exactly. Finance rotten. And these nursing homes are bally rook-shops, aren’t they? Half a guinea every time you ring a bell.”

“Do you connect me with that sort of institution?”

Carthew’s glance was impudent.

“Well, not exactly. I was referring——”

“Some references are superfluous. Now, what is the position?”

“The position is, doc, that I haven’t a bean.”

He flicked ash into the grate. Morrow’s persistence was beginning to irritate him.

“That’s the position, doc.”

And Morrow’s face seemed to harden.

“In an emergency such as this—even beans can sometimes be unearthed. I suggest that you attempt it. I insist on Mrs. Morrow going into a nursing home to-night. She’s not fit to be out in a freezing fog. I will go round myself and make arrangements. Meanwhile, you two can talk it over.”

Carthew made a movement as of shrugging. “O, well, have it that way, if you must.” He threw the cigarette end into the fire and put his hands into his pockets.

“O, all right. I’m not an obstructionist. Send the kid in, and I’ll break the news to her while you fix things up.”

“I want you to be gentle with her.”

“I’ll do my best, doc.”

“Remember, she’s ill.”

Carthew watched the door close, and then bent down to warm himself at

the fire. The little, hungry animal in him snarled at fate. “Filthy night, and I’m damned cold.” He was not concerned with the strangeness of the occasion. He had not dined, and to a man who lived for his own body that was an offence and a provocation. A woman like Kitty might be all very well when you felt sleek and warm, but when a woman began to bore you and your pockets were empty—— Why couldn’t she——? He straightened. He found himself regarding the silver cigarette-box on the mantelpiece. He filled his own case from it.

“May as well make use of the blighter.”

He lit a cigarette and, strolling restlessly about the room, he picked up a book from the table and read the title, “The Paranoiac as a Social Problem.” Good Lord! Fancy living with a chap who fed on stuff like that! He threw the book down, and glanced at the bracket clock over the bureau. Twenty past nine! Damn it, how much longer was she going to be?

There was a telephone on the bureau. He crossed the room, listened, hesitated. Why not ring up the new adventure, Medea and the Golden Fleece? He had his hand on the receiver when the door opened and Kitty Morrow came in. He turned quickly from the bureau, but she had seen and understood.

She closed the door and stood with her back to it.

“What’s the matter?”

“Matter? Nothing. Have a cigarette.”

“Has he told you?”

“O, well—yes, he told me.”

“You were going to ’phone somebody.”

“When one’s on the rocks one sends out an S O S.”

She was watching his face.

“Are we on the rocks?”

“Pretty thoroughly, aren’t we?”

“Jack, what did he tell you?”

“He wants you to go into a nursing home. He has gone out to make arrangements.”

“But what did he tell you? O, Jack, I’m frightened.”

He looked at her slantwise.

“Poor kid.”

She seemed to shrink against the door, and he went to the fire and stood staring.

“Come and sit down. Warm yourself.”

But she remained by the door as though unable to move.

“Why are you so funny, Jack? Just as if——”

He shrugged. His voice was casually kind. He spoke carefully.

“Fact is—we’re up against it, kid. No use scrapping with fate, is it? I’m damned sorry.”

He did not look at her frightened face.

“Well, there it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“He seems to think there’s something pretty wrong with your chest. Rotten luck. Of course—I had to tell him——”

“What?”

“That we haven’t a bean.”

“You told him that?”

“Well, hang it, I had to.”

She pressed her spread arms against the door, as though her knees were failing her and she was afraid of slipping down.

“I don’t quite understand you.”

He gave an impatient flick of the head.

“Fact is, we’ve got to face the music. Isn’t it obvious that I’m not going to be much use to you in a mix-up like this?”

“You mean—that because I’m ill——?”

“I’m damned sorry, kid. Be reasonable. I haven’t the price of a box of pills. If I had—— But there you are. We’ve got to think of what’s best for you.”

Her face seemed to grow thin and small like a child’s.

“Reasonable! That’s a stunning word—isn’t it? Jack, you can’t——”

“Now, look here, kid, let’s face the realities. Isn’t it obvious that I’m no more use?”

“Realities! No more use! You mean—I am no more use.”

“Now, don’t get excited. You women——”

She seemed to steady herself. She moistened dry lips and spoke.

“Jack, supposing this house were a ship and we were going down, would you make for the boats and leave me?”

He made a movement of impatience.

“O, don’t exaggerate. I’m leaving you in a boat. This isn’t a sentimental world for people who have to cadge for a dinner. Haven’t you found that out? I’m being honest. I’m not giving you any sentimental guff. You’re ill. You’ve got to face the reality. Put on silk and let Morrow——”

“You mean—let him pay?”

He smiled at her.

“Well—for the moment. I may be able to raise some cash.”

She crossed the room as far as the table and paused there with one hand resting on it.

“O, I see. That’s the idea. I’m to be left at the mercy of the man whom we ——”

“Well, legally—he is still your husband. He must be simply rolling these days. I’m not a fool. I want to do what’s best for you, and I’m not being hypersensitive about it.”

“Hypersensitive! Do you think——?”

But she began to cough, and once again the spasm was beyond control. With flushed face and suffused eyes she stood there in distress, looking at him pitifully, and presently between her pantings she managed to get out a few words.

“Jack, don’t be such a beast to me, just when——”

His impatience betrayed itself; he looked at the clock.

“Look here, kid—I can’t stand your coughing.”

And suddenly she blazed.

“No, it kept you awake. It frightened me, but it bored you. Yes, perhaps I am beginning to understand. I didn’t want to come here. It was you who were keen for me to come.”

His shifty eyes met hers.

“Well, of course. I wanted the thing cleared up. I——”

“You wanted to find out something else.”

“O, did I?”

“Whether I was going to be of any more use to you, or only a wretched sick thing, a nuisance, a——”

He flared.

“O, go on, tear it to bits! Wasn’t I worried?”

She stood observing him as though seeing him for the first time as he was. Her scrutiny both embarrassed and irritated him. He glanced at the door. At any moment that other man might come back.

She spoke steadily, deliberately, for the spasm had passed.

“I’m seeing things, Jack, with a terrible sort of clearness. When I came in you were going to telephone. Do you think I don’t know that there is the other woman, the new woman? Yes, I understand. I’m finished. I’m last year’s fox-trot.”

She paused, watching his sullen, good-looking face. He was trying to produce a little whimsical smirk. She went on:

“How was it that I never saw the cad in you before, the rotten little man-about-town, the sponger? Was it that I wouldn’t let myself see?”

But he had his chance to be angry. He took it; he had been waiting for it.

“Well, I’m damned! I’ve kept you for——”

“Be silent. You’re horrible to me—somehow.”

“Many thanks. I wasn’t so horrible when you left this house of virtue.”

She propped herself against the table.

“O, go! We’ve both been grossly selfish, but perhaps you are more logical than I am. Go!”

Again she began to cough, and Carthew, crossing behind her, collected his hat and coat. His face had a thin, complacent malevolence.

“You women always go in off the deep end. I can stand a good deal, but after this——”

She panted.

“Go!”

Without looking at him she moved to the fire and sat down in Morrow’s chair. She bent forward. She heard the door close, and turned and stared at it. A spasm of coughing caught her, and she seemed to struggle with it, her hands gripping the arms of the chair.

“O, my God—I’m drowning!”

The spasm died away. She rose, crossed the room, hesitated, and then switched off the ceiling lights. She returned to the chair by the fire, but the room was not sufficiently dark for her mood. She put out the table lamp and sat cowering before the fire.

III

When Arnold Morrow opened the door and found the room in darkness, save for the flicker of the fire, he for an instant wondered whether those two ghosts out of the past had disappeared again into the night. But then he realized that there was someone sitting in his chair. He saw her dimly silhouetted, leaning forward with outstretched hands. She was alone.

He closed the door gently, but she did not move. There was something final and finished in her stillness, and in that moment of time he was conscious of sudden compassion. It was as though he saw her as a sick and broken thing huddled before the fire, or like a bird blown against the window of life and left stunned and panting. He had not meant to pity her, and an hour ago he might have been angered by the intrusion of pity.

He switched on the ceiling lights, and then turned them off again, for he had a feeling that the darkness was a cloak to her, and that she shrank from too much light.

“What, all alone?”

“Yes.”

The monosyllable was toneless, and he understood.

“I have fixed up everything. It is a comfortable place. I suppose Carthew has gone for your things?”

“You didn’t meet him?”

“No.”

He moved to the centre of the room and stood waiting. He saw her head and hands outlined against the fire.

“He’s not coming back.”

“What!”

“No, I sent him away. He wanted to go away, I’m no more use to him. I’m ____”

“Do you mean to say he is that sort of swine?”

He saw her nod her head.

“I suppose so.”

He did not move. The silence was hers. She went on speaking.

“You see—I’m finished. I’m no more use to him. For him the adventure begins all over again. I’m sorry I came here, Arnold. I apologize. I’ll go now.”

She rose and stood with a hand to her head. She made a movement as though to pass him. She faltered.

He stood in her path and spoke gently.

“That’s all right, Kitty. Sit down again. You’re not fit——”

And suddenly she seemed to sink at his feet. She lay with her face hidden, one hand clasping his ankle.

“O, you can gloat, Arnold; gloat as much as you please. I’m finished. I don’t want to live. I’m not going to be—a problem to you. Yes, I’ll get up and go.”

He was profoundly moved. He bent down and lifted her until she was kneeling.

“Gloat! Am I that sort of beast? My dear, when a man has given years of his life to sick children—— Yes, that’s my job, you know.”

She hung with drooping head.

“O, don’t, don’t! I’m not a sick child. I’m the dregs, slime——”

He lifted her up, and carrying her to the chair, placed her in it, and sitting on the arm, comforted her.

“We’re all sick children, sometimes, Kitty. I’ve often thought that the mistake was more mine than yours. A dull dog, wasn’t I? And you wanted life, adventure.”

She hid her face against his coat.

“Let me go, Arnold. Oh, it hurts, it hurts.”

“What hurts, my dear?”

“This kindness.”

He laid a hand on her head.

“Does it hurt? I’m sorry. But sometimes I have to hurt a kid without wanting to. I have a taxi outside. We’ll go and collect your things, and then I’ll take you to the nursing home.”

She was silent for a moment.

“I have no money, Arnold; I’ve nothing. Won’t you let me just disappear?

Wouldn’t it be—better?”

He put an arm round her and helped her to her feet.

“My job’s to heal people. They’ll be kind where I am taking you. You can call yourself Mrs. Carthew. No one there will know.”

She still resisted faintly.

“But afterwards? If I get well?”

“Let the afterwards take care of itself. My job is to try and get you well.”

IV

At No. 23, Belmont Street, Sister Smith was accustomed to all sorts of cases and all sorts of patients, but she was a large, cheerful and jocund person with a philosophy of her own. She came into a room smiling and went out of it smiling. She had infinite good temper and a large, firm hand. The most petulant of patients could not rouse her to anger.

Even her severities were playful. She would give some grown child a gentle smack.

“Now—you naughty little thing!”

In fact she treated her patients like children, and in the large bosom of her kindness they found consolation and humour and a wisdom that could be silent. Her rarest virtue was that she did not gossip either on landings or in bedrooms, and she had an eye that was as quick as a bird’s.

This Mrs. Carthew was an unusual patient. She had arrived at an unusual hour and with unusual luggage, and Sister Smith had stayed late in order to put her to bed and to unpack for her. Such luggage, a shabby old suit-case, and in it such shabby clothes.

“Wear pyjamas, do you?”

“Yes, Sister.”

“These pink things?”

She held them up, and Mrs. Carthew, with a wincing look, apologized for the pyjamas.

“I’m afraid they are rather—finished. I had to pack in a hurry.”

So it seemed, for things had been jumbled into the suit-case as though a man in a hurry had performed the act of packing.

“O, well, these will do.”

That Mrs. Carthew was something of a mystery was as obvious as the unexpectedness of her luggage. A woman on the rocks? O, perhaps. A woman with a past, but in London nothing could be said to have had a past. Women looked so alike, on the streets, in hat-shops, sitting in the park, or riding in a taxi or a sumptuous car. Even gentlewomen could be enigmatic.

And as a patient Mrs. Carthew was equally enigmatic. She had a cough, a slight temperature, and the appearance of having been starved, but Sister Smith

would not have marked her up as a serious case. P.T.? Oh, possibly. If Dr. Morrow had asserted that he had sent Mrs. Carthew to No. 23 for observation, he might be allowed to be a man of sense. But since Sister Smith was interested in her cases, and expected to be taken into the physician's confidence, she waited and continued to wait for Dr. Morrow's diagnosis.

He did tell her that the bacteriological examination had proved negative, and Sister Smith looked pleased.

"Well, that's splendid. Just a wet patch on the lung, I suppose. She looks as though she wants feeding up."

Morrow was never talkative.

"Yes, that's it. I wanted to make sure. A month's sun somewhere. What about her—moods?"

Sister Smith was turning things over in her mind, for Dr. Morrow had an unusual reputation. She knew that on occasions he had performed acts that a sophisticated world might have regarded as dubious, and that he would be reticent and laconic about these compassionate interventions.

"O, she's very quiet, no trouble, quiet and sad."

Morrow accepted the description.

"Probably. Feed her up, Sister. Don't worry her with questions—but you won't."

Moreover, Mrs. Carthew was the most uncommunicative of patients and to Sister Smith's cheerfulness she opposed an equal but far more sophisticated cheerfulness. Her brightness had a tragic quality. It was as though the surface of her smiled, while within some other consciousness sat gazing hopelessly at life. When she was allowed up Mrs. Carthew would sit for hours at her window, and yet not as though she was interested in watching the life of Belmont Street. She had the air of a woman who had suffered some profound shock, and was still dazed by it.

To Sister Smith's encouragements she listened as though the words were mere empty sounds.

"Now, eat this, my dear."

"Must I?"

"Of course. There is nothing very wrong with your chest, you know. You will be out in the thick of things in a month."

Mrs. Carthew looked at her vaguely.

“Shall I?”

“What you want is a month at Cannes, or a voyage to the Cape.”

And Mrs. Carthew smiled a queer, wincing little smile.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

To Morrow, Sister Smith reported her impressions. She said that she had nursed such cases before, and that they were the most difficult cases to deal with. Some patients lacked the will to get well. You might say that the mainspring was broken and the wheels would not revolve. Not that Mrs. Carthew was either hysterical or neurasthenic. She was just a woman who had ceased to care, or who cared so profoundly and in secret that the mere mechanism was paralysed, inhibited.

“No one comes to see her, doctor.”

“No friends?”

“Not a soul.”

Morrow’s face betrayed nothing to Sister Smith’s blue eyes. He just stood and looked out of the landing window, and was silent for five seconds.

“I’ll have a talk to her about things, yes—alone. I suppose she has not talked to you?”

“She’s not the sort that does. She just sits and thinks. There must be something, of course.”

Morrow nodded.

“O, probably.”

Morrow found his wife sitting by the window. He closed the door, and then opened it to make sure that the passage was empty, though Sister Smith was not a woman who listened at doors. Mrs. Carthew had a book on her knees.

“I want to talk to you.”

Her eyes met his. They had become again the eyes of a woman who had recovered that essential something in herself. They had lost all hardness, and as he took a chair and sat astride it with his arms crossed on the back, he seemed to see in her the Kitty of those earlier days.

She lowered her glance. She said, “I’m supposed to be well, or nearly so. Which means—that it is time that I began to consider the future.”

He watched her, nor was there any hardness in his eyes.

“I want you to have two months abroad.”

She sat very still.

“But that is impossible.”

“You think so?”

“You know my position.”

“Quite. If I choose to give my wife two months’ sunlight——”

She glanced at him suddenly, and her lips quivered.

“No. Please—I can’t accept. You see, I’ve had a month here, Arnold, to feel and to think. It’s as though years had elapsed since to-day and yesterday. If I have to begin again——”

His eyes seemed to narrow.

“You contemplate beginning again?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Her hands were folded over the book.

“O, somehow. Work. I shall try to get a job. I don’t suppose it matters much what it is.”

“I disagree.”

“As to my working?”

“Not at all, but as to the job. But supposing we were to make a bargain. You accept two months in the south, and I agree to try and find you a job.”

For a moment her eyes were whimsical.

“But where is the—bargain? I am the receiver, and you——”

He stood up and went to the window.

“Look here, supposing I feel responsible? Supposing I feel that it was more my fault than yours? I, too, have been doing some feeling and thinking. Now—as to the job. Are you particular?”

“Have I any right to be particular?”

“Yes. You have as much right to refuse as to accept.”

She looked up at him.

“What is the job?”

He told her. He confessed that since their shipwreck he had given his life to sick children. It had seemed to him one of the few things that was worth while, and down in Surrey he had bought up an old farm-house and had it converted into a convalescent home. It was his hobby. The staff consisted of a matron and two nurses, and one of the nurses would be leaving in the spring. The post would be vacant.

Her face had flushed slightly.

“But I know nothing of nursing.”

“You’d soon learn. One of the present nurses was trained down there. She’s not certificated, but she’s—invaluable.”

She sat looking out of the window.

“Should I go as—Mrs. Carthew?”

“Yes.”

“And I should be just a nurse, someone for whom you had found——?”

“Exactly. Plenty of work, my dear, and work that matters.”

She sat very still for a moment.

“Yes—I understand. There’s not much of the prig left in me, Arnold. I’m just——”

“O, well, woman.”

“Perhaps. A woman with a—— No, that’s rather crude and old-fashioned. I think I’ll accept. If I have to begin again I would prefer——”

“Independence?”

“Of a kind.”

“No obligations on either side.”

Her head was lowered.

“O, there always are obligations, aren’t there, if they are only the dead flowers our grandmothers used to press in their books.”

V

Dr. Arnold Morrow had a cottage attached to his Home for Sick Children at Pit Hill in Surrey. In its earlier days the cottage had housed the farm's cowman, and if Morrow had transformed the cottage he had left the garden as it was, a mélange of old fruit trees, roses and cottage flowers. The two ground-floor rooms had been thrown together into one long, pleasant room with its windows looking upon the garden. He spent most of his week-ends at Pit Hill, a visitor whom the staff of the home regarded as very much part of the humanities, a kind of beloved bachelor, a creature of pipes and of old clothes who was both autocrat and master. During the week a certain Dr. Standish came daily from Dorking and gave the children all the doctoring that they needed. Pit Hill was a busy man's hobby, folly, or blessed relaxation. It just depended upon your point of view.

On a certain Saturday in June Mrs. Part entered the parlour of Dr. Morrow's cottage, a florid and cheerful woman of eight and thirty, with a well-developed bust, yellow hair, a snub nose, and jocund blue eyes. She wore a nurse's uniform of lavender and white, and carried in her hands a bunch of roses. Mrs. Part was one of those women who must carry on a conversation even if she has to address herself to a brown jug or a chest of drawers.

"Christ, if I haven't forgotten the water! All right, my pretties, don't get huffy. You'll see his old ugly face in half an hour."

For a year or more she had assumed it to be her privilege to be responsible for the flowers in Dr. Morrow's parlour. Old Ugly had a fondness for flowers, and if Mrs. Part had a fondness for Dr. Morrow, it was a nicely sublimated affection spiced with a sense of humour.

She had put the flowers down on the gate-legged table when some sound attracted her attention. She moved to one side so that she had a view of the gate and the path. Her blue eyes looked amused.

"Gosh, she's caught the infection, too! This is going to be a regular flower-shop, what?"

In the nature of things and as a privileged person Mrs. Part should have been jealous, but that sort of jealousy had gone the way of all flesh. She grimaced. Almost she met the interloper with a jocund wink.

"Come in. The more the merrier."

Kitty looked plumper and in better health. She was dressed in the same

lavender and white, and she, too, carried her bunch of roses, but not with the assurance of Mrs. Part.

“O—I’m sorry; I didn’t know——”

“That’s all right, my dear. Two wise virgins, and one of ’em has forgotten the water.”

“Water?”

“Yes, just water, what in my gay days we used to meet in the morning, and not after. Took the water for granted, did you? That’s not like you as a nurse.”

Kitty placed her flowers on the table.

“I’ll go and get a jug.”

“No need, my dear. There’s a pump in the kitchen. Old Ugly has marked it, ‘Not for Drinking,’ but the flowers won’t mind.”

She disappeared with the vase, leaving Nurse Carthew standing by the table and touching the petals of the flowers with the tips of her fingers. For the moment she appeared unconscious of the passing of time or of the complaining of the pump handle worked by Mrs. Part’s vigorous arm, and Mrs. Part, returning, observed both her attitude and her rapt look.

“Flowers and kids! Couple of tosh-merchants. What price Piccadilly? Well, here we are.”

The abruptness of Mrs. Part’s entry and of her philosophy seemed to startle Nurse Carthew. Her eyes had a wide look.

“You mean—that a woman can’t help being sentimental.”

“Sentimental! Snoopy. Silly sort of word. Flowers aren’t sentimental. They’re just flowers, and if a woman gets babies on the brain——”

She laughed, and began to spread out her flowers on an old copy of *The Times* which she had found on the sofa.

“Or men, for that matter. And give me a man who’s a bit untidy. Old Ugly’s last week’s paper. Look at the creature’s pipes. Well, who’s going to arrange the flowers?”

Nurse Carthew was looking at the array of pipes on the mantelpiece.

“O, you can; you were here first.”

“But I’m not heading the queue for Love’s Young Dream. I like to do things for Old Ugly, just because he’s not in the glad-eye business. I got fed up

on the streets with glad eyes.”

Kitty sat down on Dr. Morrow’s sofa and watched Mrs. Part arranging the flowers.

“Why do you call him Old Ugly?”

“Because he’s not old, and because he’s got a phiz on him that ain’t exactly beautiful, but makes you feel like a kid. Say, I want to put out my tongue at him some times.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Yes, now why don’t I? I’d do it to the Bishop of London, slap out, just like that. But Old Ugly’s different somehow, and I’m a reformed character, my dear, whatever that means.”

She was busy with the roses, and Nurse Carthew, sitting with her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands, looked intently at this other woman.

“Mrs. Part, how long have you been here?”

“A little over three years.”

“Were you a trained nurse when you came?”

“I’ve never had a day’s training but what I’ve had down here. It came easy—somehow. The first time I watched Old Ugly handle a kid with a tuberculous spine it taught me something, and you go on learning after that.”

“What were you before you became a nurse?”

Mrs. Part paused with a rose held poised. Her blue eyes hardened momentarily.

“That might be an awkward question to ask. Do you mean—you don’t know?”

“How should I know?”

Mrs. Part, realizing her innocence, laughed and jabbed a rose into the vase with unusual emphasis.

“I was what they call a tart. Till I got ill. Just as you got ill, my dear. It’s a hell of a life, isn’t it?”

Nurse Carthew dropped her hands.

“Really, I don’t——”

“Well, I’m not showing any false modesty. After all, the Bible handled the

Magdalene business without any guff. I know a thing or two, my dear, and the sort of look a woman gets in her eyes, and about her mouth and nose. You had it—when you came here.”

“I?”

“Sure—you did. I saw you’d been in trouble. Said I, ‘Here’s one of the lady amateurs down and out.’ No offence. I was sorry for you.”

Nurse Carthew sat staring.

“Did I look like that? Yes, I suppose I did. Do I look like that now?”

“You don’t.”

“You were kind to me. Everybody was kind, especially—to begin with—when I was ill. Were you ill when you came here?”

Mrs. Part’s mouth hardened.

“I was. I’m not going to tell you just how Old Ugly picked me up. O, not in that way; don’t look shocked. I hadn’t had a bloody chance when he happened on me. He gave me a chance.”

Kitty’s eyes looked strange.

“You’ve taken it—splendidly.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I was spewing my soul out; I felt foul. But when he shoved me down here among these sick kids I had to stop feeling foul. ’Tisn’t a question of morals. He’s a great man is Old Ugly. And we’re not the fools we look, playing about with flowers for his week-end.”

She gave a flick of the head, and Nurse Carthew sat brooding.

“Yes, I agree. He does seem to love this place.”

“You bet. He’s like a big kid here. He must be making big money. Fancy a man putting three thousand a year into a game like this. It’s his golf and his bridge and his women. Besides, we couldn’t get on without him. Dr. Standish is a good lad, but a bit of a barley-headed boy.”

Nurse Carthew spoke as to herself.

“Yes, it’s better than jazz and cocktails and the sex game.”

“My dear, it’s him, life, it.”

She glanced at the clock and gave a last touch to the flowers.

“About time we cleared. He can’t stand being fussed.”

Kitty rose, and stood by one of the windows.

“He seems to have given up everything for work.”

“Maybe there was a reason. I’ve heard he had a bad knock years ago. His wife left him.”

“Did she?”

“Must have been a silly little fool.”

Mrs. Part, with a last approving glance at her floral arrangements, moved towards the door, but Nurse Carthew remained behind for a moment as though to recover from the shock of the other woman’s unconscious candour, and as she stood there at the window Dr. Morrow’s chauffeur appeared at the garden gate. She saw the man stop to speak to Mrs. Part, and something in her felt flurried. The idea of meeting Morrow frightened her, perhaps because these meetings had a new and poignant significance. Did a woman fall in love with her own husband? But how crude the phrase was! She hurried; she passed Tranter, the chauffeur, carrying Morrow’s suit-case, and being one of those amorous, round-headed men, he would have given her a gaillard glance, but she went past him in the haste of her self-consciousness as though his very solid figure was as unsubstantial as the shadow of a tree. And Tranter grimaced. To him women in uniforms looked so alike. He carried the suit-case into the cottage and removed his cap in order to wipe his forehead.

“Floral tributes, what?”

He grinned at the flowers, produced and lit a cigarette, and then, hearing footsteps, he tried to conceal the cigarette in the hollow of his hand.

“Suitcase in the bedroom, sir?”

The question was as obvious as the trail of smoke from the cigarette, and Morrow ignored it while remarking upon the other.

“Go up to the Home, Tranter, will you, and see if Dr. Standish is there. If so, ask him to come down. Never mind about that cigarette.”

“Sorry, sir. I was a bit too previous.”

“All right. But you’re not quite off duty yet, you know.”

Tranter, with elaborate solemnity, extinguished the cigarette by pressing the glowing end against the heel of a raised foot. He disposed of the suit-case and disappeared, and Morrow, amused, placed his hat and an attaché-case on the gate-legged table. He noticed the flowers. With an air of large and smiling contentment he bent down and put his face to them. He seemed to draw a deep

breath.

“Clean, lovely things.”

VI

Dr. Standish arrived, fair-haired, sanguine, boyish, with curiously innocent blue eyes and a smile that seemed to go all over his face. Though belonging to a generation that does not indulge itself in heroes, his devotion to Morrow was obvious.

“Hallo, sir. You must be glad to get out of town.”

“Well, Arthur, any news?”

“Everything’s O.K., sir. Nobbs has put on three pounds.”

“Splendid. And that kid with the knee-joint?”

“I’ve had her out in the sun. I believe there’s less fluid. She’s such a jolly little kid, too.”

Morrow was taking books and papers and tobacco pouch from the attaché-case. He looked very kindly at young Standish.

“Time to stay and have tea, Arthur? I expect they will bring it across in five minutes.”

“Rather, sir.”

“They try to spoil me down here, you know, even dust the pipes on the mantelpiece.”

“They rather like doing it.”

Morrow pushed the empty attaché-case under the sofa.

“Sit down, Arthur. You know there is a sort of wicked joy in being utterly and gloriously untidy for a day or two. They humour me down here, and only clear up when I have cleared out. By the way, you are not neglecting your private practice?”

“Not a bit, sir.”

“Private patients are apt to be touchy, and when you volunteered to visit here during the week——”

“O, but it’s the real thing. You’ve taught me such a lot.”

A maid from the Home arrived with a tea-tray, the pot covered with a cosy, and Morrow made room on the table for the tray.

“Hallo, cucumber sandwiches, Elsie. Dr. Standish is having tea with me.”

“I’ve set for two, sir.”

“Great! What a telepathic place this is. Arthur, you shall preside at the tea-table.”

“All right, sir.”

Morrow sat down on the sofa, and Elsie, having supplied him with an old oak coffin stool upon which to place his teacup, left Dr. Standish to his duties.

“Two lumps, isn’t it, sir?”

“That’s it. What a blessed thing it is to get off the ant-run. Leatherhead was chock-a-block, and the policeman on point duty had lost his temper. I don’t blame him.”

“The traffic on Sundays is like an endless tin train.”

“Yes, it doesn’t really matter whether you’re in an R.R. or a seven horse-power pram. The modern values get so mixed up. It cost me less than the price of a Rolls to buy up this old place.”

“Good value, sir.”

“O, yes. Our results aren’t so bad, Arthur. I say, these sandwiches are good. What a blessing it is that our modern crowd doesn’t ask itself too many awkward questions. If it did, our civilization might go up like Vesuvius when it wiped out Pompeii. The patience of the crowd!”

“Is it quite as patient as it was, sir?”

“Perhaps not. But the fate of all of us is patience.”

When tea was over, Morrow filled and lit a pipe, and Standish produced his cigarette-case.

“The great thing, Arthur, is always to be piqued by the puzzle. We get results, and sometimes we don’t know quite how.”

“Yes, the unexpected. Take the case of Nurse Carthew. I examined her again this week.”

Morrow blew smoke.

“Find anything?”

“No. I never could find anything, sir. Not even any alteration in the breath sounds.”

“Well, that’s all to the good, Arthur. She was one of those rather puzzling cases.”

“Anyhow she is turning into a first-class nurse, sir. She’s absolutely splendid with the kids.”

Morrow observed him for a moment, for Standish’s enthusiasm seemed a little flushed.

“I’m glad of that. I thought she was shaping well. A woman has to have the right touch.”

“She has that——”

And suddenly he became self-conscious. He looked at the clock.

“I say, sir, I shall have to push off. I have an old lady to see before surgery hours.”

“Never forget old ladies, Arthur. They don’t forgive you for being forgotten.”

Standish got up, walked to the window, stood there for a moment in obvious embarrassment, tried to say something, thought better of it, and hurried for the door.

“Your hat, Arthur.”

“Sorry, sir. Silly ass. I shall be over to-morrow.”

“Good.”

Morrow rose slowly and with the air of a man whose thoughts troubled him. The romantic impulses of youth, yes, even in an age that was so afraid of romance. Arthur was a good lad, but a little too impulsive and impressionable. He went to the table and turned over the books, and selecting one, he returned to the sofa and began to read, but an interruption was imminent. There was a tapping sound on the bricks of the garden path, and a small boy on crutches appeared in the doorway. His right leg was in splints. He stood there smiling apologetically at Morrow.

The doctor put down his book.

“Why—hallo—Nobbs! How’s life and the leg.”

Nobbs looked radiant, and a little confused.

“Bully, sir.”

“So bully’s the word. What’s on?”

“I’ve got a message, sir.”

“Come in.”

And Nobbs stumped in, looking flushed.

“I’m—I’m a deputation, sir.”

“A deputation.”

The boy suddenly became voiceless. He grinned.

“Well, you see, they fixed it on me. I’ve been here longest, and I’m the oldest in’abitant of the ’ome, though as a matter of fact——”

“If you are going to make a speech, Nobbs, you had better sit down.”

“Sitting down’s a bit of a conjuring trick, sir.”

“Yes, with those clothes props and a stiff leg.”

He got up, and supporting the boy, lowered him into a chair, and Nobbs, with an air of relief, laid his crutches on the floor.

“Less formal like that, Nobbs.”

“It was the women who let me in for this, sir.”

“O, the women, was it. They generally do, Nobbs.”

“It’s a serious occasion, sir. Awful cheek of us kids.”

“That’s all right, Nobbs. We’re men together.”

“It’s like this, sir. Elsie’s getting married.”

“I have heard that dreadful rumour.”

“It’s next Saturday, sir, and we think a lot of Elsie in the ’ome, sir. She’s not the sneaky sort.”

“I agree, Nobbs.”

“And she’s a norphan, sir.”

“A norphan. She’s marrying Peters the gardener, isn’t she?”

“Yus. And ’e’s a norphan, too, sir. We think it jolly good luck for Peters.”

“Being a norphan, Nobbs?”

“No, gettin’ Elsie. And there ain’t going to be any ’oneymoon. So, we thought as ’ow it would be nice to give ’em a show ’ere after the weddin’.”

“An excellent idea, Nobbs.”

“In the garden, weather permittin’, and if it’s wet—in the ole barn. We’d do the decca-rations, sir. And would you mind if the tea was a bit high?”

“High? Oh, I take you. We’ll make it as high as St. Paul’s, Nobbs. And was it your idea?”

“Well, ’alf and ’alf, sir. Mr. and Mrs. Part and Cissy Sanders, her with the lump in the neck, sir.”

“O, yes, Cissy. And what about Miss Frederick the matron?”

Nobbs looked sly.

“We thought we’d try you first, sir.”

“I see. And where is the rest of the deputation?”

“Out there in the lane, sir, with Nurse Carthew.”

“So—Nurse Carthew is in it too?”

“Up to the neck, sir.”

Morrow rose.

“Let’s have them all in.”

He went to the door and called.

“Nurse Carthew, please introduce the rest of the deputation.”

Five girls, their ages ranging from six to thirteen—were shepherded up the path and into the parlour, and stood grouped in front of Nurse Carthew. Cissy Sanders, the eldest, a thin, dark, intense child, had enlarged glands in her neck. Betty’s arm was in a sling, and Doris was on crutches like Nobbs. All of them seemed to hesitate between giggles and an immense seriousness. The girl Cissy stared intently at Morrow.

He stood holding his pipe.

“I’m very pleased to see you all. Nobbs has explained——”

There was a sudden interruption from Cissy.

“I bet he forgot something.”

Nobbs protested.

“Now, ain’t that like a woman!”

“Illoominations. We want to illoominate the barn.”

Morrow looked smilingly at his wife.

“What’s the idea, Nurse?”

“A dance, I think, sir.”

More protests from Nobbs—“I call it perfect rot, me with a leg like this.”

Cissy snubbed him. “You ain’t everybody. And didn’t we settle that you could play the mouth organ?”

“What sort of illuminations, Nurse?”

“O, Chinese lanterns I think, sir. They had them last Christmas.”

“Provided proper precautions are taken—yes.”

Cissy jumped up and down, looked at Nobbs as though about to put her tongue out, but refrained, and Nurse Carthew, having helped Nobbs on to his feet and given him his crutches, prepared to lead out the deputation.

The small things went first. The tapping of crutches could be heard on the brick path, and the voices of Nobbs and Cissy in argument.

“Nurse Carthew.”

She turned, almost with a look of fear.

“Yes, sir.”

“One moment.”

She stood before him in the part of nurse, hands clasped, eyes half lowered. His voice sounded formal.

“Anything to report, Nurse?”

“No, sir.”

“Sleeping and eating well?”

“O, yes.”

He willed her to look at him, and she did so.

“Finding the life possible?”

She hesitated.

“Am I speaking to——?”

“Yes, your doctor.”

Almost she was meek.

“I am very happy here.”

“Wish to stay?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her intently.

“I believe you do. I’m glad.”

He nodded, smiled, and she turned and walked out of the room and into the garden where the children were waiting for her.

VII

About half-past three on the afternoon of the following Saturday Nurse Carthew went to put fresh flowers in Dr. Morrow's parlour. Elsie's marriage festa was in full swing, with Mrs. Part in charge of the operations. The nasal bleat of a loud-speaker could be heard in the garden of the Home, and as Kitty spread her newspaper and laid out the flowers she seemed to herself to be sorting out her own secret memories. The vases needed fresh water, and she disappeared for a moment into the cottage kitchen, and filled a jug at the pump. Meanwhile, another person had arrived in the parlour, Dr. Arthur Standish, the barley-headed boy.

"You! O—you startled me."

His shy ardour excused itself.

"Sorry. I came down to cadge a cigarette. I've had a rather hectic time out there."

She appeared very calm. She filled the vases and began to arrange the flowers, and he stood by one of the windows and smoked.

"Yes, they are enjoying themselves, kids do. And, of course, Cissy and Nobbs are quarrelling——"

He laughed self-consciously.

"Just like man and wife."

"How cynical of you!"

"I'm not at all cynical—really. I say, I wish they'd turn off that wretched loud-speaker."

"Rather beastly things, aren't they."

"Like the voice of a barman blurred with beer. Kids don't mind noise."

"Some do."

He flicked ash from his cigarette, and the gesture was nervous and self-conscious.

"Did you?"

"I can remember a man who used to come and play the cornet in our street. It filled me with a most frightful melancholy."

"How old were you then?"

“O, about six, I suppose.”

Deliberately she went on with the arranging of the flowers, and he watched her as though her calmness embarrassed him and held him at bay.

“Yes, you are sensitive. I know all about that. You must have been an awfully——”

Her voice was casual and gently discouraging.

“I was a temperamental little beast, if that is what you mean.”

He looked confused.

“No, I didn’t mean that at all. You couldn’t have been. You’re too good with the kids here.”

“Perhaps that’s why. I’m not sentimental about children. I was a thoroughly greedy and healthy child.”

He attempted a boyish swagger.

“Well, so was I.”

Her smile was whimsical.

“I’m sure you were a little angel.”

He flushed up. He was piqued.

“I assure you I wasn’t. I was an absolute little devil, an absolute plague-spot of a kid.”

“How did you become transfigured?”

He threw the end of the cigarette through the open window.

“Look here, you’re laughing at me. It’s rather hard luck to be stuck in a sort of silver frame.”

“On the drawing-room mantelpiece.”

“I say, that’s rather rough, it is—really.”

She had finished arranging the flowers, and she looked at the clock. His ardour was becoming embarrassing.

“Dr. Morrow will be here at four. He hates being fussed.”

“Yes, I know. He never fusses other people. But I wanted to tell you——”

“We’re deserters, aren’t we? Poor Nurse Part is getting all the work. Don’t you think Elsie looked charming as a bride?”

“O, quite surprising. Women have levelled up, haven’t they? But I was going to say——”

Confused and eager he had put himself between her and the door, and she realized that she was confronted with a crisis.

“Nurse Carthew, I’m not just an easy sort of ass. I’m not really. I’ve been meaning——”

“Please, you are not going to——”

“Yes, I’m most awfully touched.”

“Dr. Standish, please. It’s quite impossible.”

He blocked the doorway.

“But you haven’t heard. Do give me a chance. I know I am doing the thing like an ass, but I’m most awfully——”

She stood rigid, yet distressed, listening.

“If you knew, Dr. Standish, you wouldn’t hurt me like this.”

“Hurt you! Good God, why——”

“It’s all quite impossible. You see, I’m married.”

“Married!” and his confusion became extreme—“I heard you were—— O, I say, I’m most awfully sorry. It’s all my silly fault.”

His obvious sincerity touched her.

“O, no, no. Only—you didn’t know. And you don’t know what sort of life I’ve lived.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference. I’ll swear you——”

She looked at him appealingly.

“Please don’t let us hurt each other any more. All that part of me is finished. But I do thank you for the way you’ve spoken.”

He drew back and out of her way.

“Well, how else could I have spoken? It’s real——”

“Please.”

“O, I won’t worry you any more. Forget it.”

He escaped, closing the door after him, and Nurse Carthew sat down on the sofa and stared at the flowers. A man in love with her, but not the man she

——! She sat very still for half a minute, and then rose, and going to the table, put her face to the flowers, and Mrs. Part, looking very hot and carrying a tea-tray, surprised her in this attitude.

“Hallo! I’m deputizing for Elsie. That new girl’s an utter fool. Phew, I’m hot and sticky.”

Nurse Carthew seemed glad of the relaxation, and of the vigorous reality of Mrs. Part.

“Yes, we shall miss Elsie. I’ll go and look after the children.”

Mrs. Part sat down.

“Yes, give me five minutes. I’m perspiring with kids. And Old Ugly will be here in two ticks.”

Nurse Carthew gave a little laugh.

“Well, he shall catch you and not me.”

“O, wait a moment, we’ve got to rig up that contraption in the barn, Elsie’s tableau. Yes, you know all about it, frightful waste of flowers and cotton wool, but the kids are mad on it. They must have their joke with Elsie, the little devils. We’ve decided to dress up Betty.”

“We shall have to be careful with the lanterns.”

“O, that’ll be all right. I’m waiting to see Frederick’s face. Never knew a woman so easily shocked. You’ll have to dance with Old Ugly. Yes, and the barley-headed boy.”

“I don’t think Dr. Standish will be there.”

“O, won’t he, my dear!”

Nurse Carthew walked to the door.

“No, I think not. I’ll go on duty now.”

And she left Nurse Part perspiring and puzzled on the sofa.

VIII

Dusk. Morrow, as he walked through the garden to the cottage, saw the last of the sunset making the old fruit trees and the holly hedge look very black. An amateur orchestra was dispensing strange discords in the distance, and as Morrow entered the cottage he heard the voices of children cheering.

“I think that’s about our record, Tranter, six hours from Welbeck Street to Pit Hill.”

He switched on the lights, and Tranter followed him in with a couple of suit-cases, a sobered and rather sulky Tranter with a dab of black grease on his chin.

“I’ve said I’m sorry, sir. I’ve never had that sort of thing happen before.”

“Our day of destiny, Tranter.”

Tranter carried the suit-cases to the door closing the cottage stairs, and to open the door he had to relieve himself of a suit-case.

“I don’t know nothing about destiny, sir, but I do know that I had the darned thing down yesterday, and that it was O.K.”

“The darned thing being the autovac. Curiosity, Tranter, probably, on your part. In the future let well alone.”

Tranter could be heard grumbling at the foot of the dark stairs.

“The damned thing had a leak in it. I’ve had autovacs to pieces before. O—Christ——!”

From the thud and the exclamation it was obvious that Tranter had hit his head against a certain treacherous beam. These cottage stairs were as complex as the interior of an autovac.

“Hit your head, Tranter?”

“Not ’alf. The chap who built this sanguinary——”

“Wait a bit. I’ll switch a light on. How’s that?”

The suit-cases and Tranter’s legs toiled upwards. Morrow could hear him deposit the baggage with emphasis upon the bedroom floor. He came clumbering down the stairs, and as he ducked to elude the beam, he addressed it.

“Sucks. Not this time.”

He looked hot and dishevelled.

“Do you want me to tell ’em you’re ’ere, sir?”

“Don’t bother. I expect the show is nearly over. I’ll have a wash and go up to the Home.”

“Anything I can do, sir.”

“No, go and get some supper, Tranter.”

The tea tray had been left on the table, and Morrow poured the milk into a cup and drank it, and cleared the dish of bread and butter. He had not dined, for the car had broken down in the open country, and all through his fiddlings Tranter had remained obstinately optimistic. “I’ll have her going in a minute, sir.” Morrow picked up a pipe from the mantelpiece, and rubbing the bowl with the palm of a hand, supposed that he had missed all Elsie’s celebrations. He was filling the pipe when he heard someone hurrying up the path.

Without leave or ceremony Mrs. Part burst in upon him.

“O, you’re here, sir! Please come. We’ve had an accident.”

“What’s happened?”

“In the barn. Something got alight, and one of the children—— Nurse Carthew put it out. She’s burnt.”

“Good God! Badly?”

“Face and hands.”

Morrow had pushed past the breathless nurse, and was at the door.

“Mrs. Part, go to the dispensary and bring all that is necessary down here, oil, lint, bandages.”

“Down here, sir?”

“Yes, I shall bring Nurse Carthew here. Yes, I said here. Hurry.”

He rushed out, and Mrs. Part, astonished, but moved by the urgency of the occasion, hurried out after him.

Morrow ran. He remembered noticing how sharply the roof of the old barn stood out against the afterglow. He was aware of a smell of burning, of children grouped by the door, of the Matron and another woman kneeling. They made way for him. Nurse Carthew’s apron was turned over her head, and her hands wrapped in another apron, and Morrow bent down and lifted her up.

“Matron, Nurse Part has gone for the dressings. Please see that she finds

everything——”

He walked past them and out, conscious of the mute and shocked faces of the children. He did not speak to his wife until he was alone with her in the lane.

“Kitty, it must be hurting you pretty damnable. No, just keep still.”

He carried her through the garden and into the cottage, and laid her on the sofa with a cushion under her head. He drew the curtains and closed the door. She was aware of him bending over her.

“Let me look—now.”

She shuddered.

“Must you?”

“Yes.”

“I expect I’m—I’m horrible.”

“Dear, I must look.”

He turned back the apron and examined her face, and she lay with eyes closed, and without a sound. That he should have to see her like this—just when she had begun to care so terribly——! And then she heard his voice.

“Thank heaven——! They are superficial.”

“Does that mean I shan’t be——?”

“Hair and eyelashes singed, skin just scorched. Your eyes? Let me see them.”

She opened her eyes, and they met his. She was aware of his compassion and concern, and perhaps of something else.

“Yes, all right, thank the Lord.”

“Do I look very—horrible, Arnold?”

He understood.

“Hardly that. What were you doing? Rescuing a child?”

“A lantern fell, and Betty’s dress got alight, and I managed to smother it. She was more frightened than hurt.”

She closed her eyes again.

“Why did you bring me here? I shall have to pretend——”

He was looking at her intently, and with peculiar tenderness.

“Pretend? Perhaps—not. That’s my affair. Now—I must look at your hands.”

He unwrapped them, and she flinched slightly.

“Sorry, sorry, that hurts?”

“They burn so—Arnold.”

“We’ll soon soothe that. Yes, a little worse than your face, I’m afraid, but not too serious. I’m—rather proud of your hands.”

She opened her eyes for a moment.

“Something useful—for once—Arnold.”

“My dear.”

There were voices, the opening of a door. The Matron carried a dressing tray, Nurse Part a japanned box. The Matron, self-contained and much upon her dignity, placed the tray on the table, and went to the sofa. She looked at Kitty, but spoke to Morrow.

“It should never have happened. I feel that I was responsible. How are you feeling, nurse?”

But it was Morrow who answered her.

“The burns are superficial. The tray, Matron, please.”

His abruptness surprised her. He was taking off his coat, and he held out his hands to Nurse Part.

“Roll up my sleeves, nurse, will you.”

Nurse Part became vocal.

“All my silly fault, doctor. It was my idea, you know. I shall never forgive myself.”

Miss Frederick, icy and slightly offended by Morrow’s abruptness, exerted her authority.

“Don’t chatter, nurse——”

Mrs. Part’s blue eyes opened wide.

“Well, if I can’t show my feelings—— You can sack me if you like.”

Kitty’s voice was heard.

“It wasn’t your fault, nurse, any more than mine.”

Then, for some minutes there was silence while Morrow dressed his wife’s face and hands. He cut a lint mask for her face. The Matron and Nurse Part, ice and fire, stood to serve him.

“How’s that?”

“O, so soothing.”

“Splendid.”

He rolled bandages lightly round her dressed hands, and while he was thus engaged he began to speak.

“Matron, you will have a bed put up here, please.”

Miss Frederick looked astonished.

“Here?”

There was a little smile on Morrow’s face.

“Well, you see, the patient happens to be—my wife.”

Silence from Miss Frederick, a kind of gulp from Nurse Part. He went on speaking.

“I think we owe you an explanation. It was my wife’s idea to come down and work as a probationer at the Home, and since she wished to play the part thoroughly, and not as my wife——”

He accepted a safety-pin from the Matron’s stiff fingers.

“Nothing like doing a thing thoroughly. Thanks, Matron. Now, about the bed——”

There was a movement from Nurse Part, whose face was the colour of fire.

“Well—I always had a big foot——”

She went suddenly to the sofa and bent over Kitty.

“You wicked little thing. My dear, you’ll have to——”

Kitty’s voice was a little unsteady.

“All my fault, nurse. But I’m so glad you’re here.”

IX

It was very early in the morning, and the curtains with their softly glowing colours told that the sun was shining, when Morrow opened the door of the room in which his wife was sleeping. He drew back the edge of a curtain and stood for a moment looking at the garden with its early sunlight and its dew. Letting the curtain fall he crossed to Kitty's bed, and watched her tranquil breathing.

He smiled, and nodded his head. The grandfather clock struck six, and the clangour woke Morrow's wife. Her bandaged hands made a movement, and suddenly she seemed to divine his presence there.

"Arnold."

"All right, I'm here."

She turned her head and her eyes looked up at him through the slits in the white mask.

"Arnold, is it true, or have I dreamt it? You've been so great to me."

He bent over her.

"It's true, not a dream."

"O, my dear, give me my chance. Can you? I'll try and be great to you."

He sat down in an arm-chair by the bed, his hand resting lightly on her arm.

"The sun's shining. It's a most perfect morning; all dew, the kind of morning when one might begin life over again. Yes, and I have a confession to make. You will have to forgive me."

"What have I to forgive you?"

"For a selfish dullness, dear, the taking of certain things for granted. The last person a man should take for granted—is his wife. Am I forgiven?"

She lay very still.

"O, how rotten and cheap you make me feel."

"My dear, no. Perhaps you have found out what life is, and so have I. Compassion. You rushed to save that child, you know. That was a bit of life. Are we both forgiven?"

She moved her swathed hands.

“Draw back the curtains, Arnold.”

“More light.”

“Yes.”

He rose and drew back the curtains.

“And give me those flowers to smell. The freshness, the loveliness! It’s as though everything had been made all over again. You weren’t pretending last night?”

“Pretending?”

“I shan’t be disfigured, shall I?”

“I told you the truth, Kitty. You’ll be no more scarred than these flowers.”

X

The Morrows did not set out to explain to the world the whys and the wherefores of this second comradeship. The impertinence of the older social scheme was apt to exercise an hypocrisy that neither forgave nor forgot, perhaps because that particular generation had so many secrets of its own to hide. When there are skeletons in every cupboard society may conspire to assert that such things as skeletons do not and shall not exist. But those people who came to the house of the Morrows in Welbeck Street found no dry bones concealed in cupboards and corners.

The first floor was the same, save that Kitty had had a window-box placed on the sill of the big window which overlooked the backs of other houses. The Morrows had a particular affection for this room, for it was both light and spacious, and away from the noises of the street. They used it both as dining-room and sitting-room; it was lived in and worked in. Whatever memories it possessed had been woven into the tapestry of their mutual comprehension.

On this June day, the product of another June, lunch was just over, and Morrow was lighting a cigarette. Kitty had taken the water-jug from the table and was watering the plants in the window-box.

“That’s a thing Ann never can remember. She would leave the poor dears nothing but the smuts.”

Morrow looked whimsically at his wife.

“You don’t want her to remember it—really. You like to feel responsible.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

“Old tease!”

“O, yes, you do.”

He sat down with *The Times*, and Kitty, having watered her plants, went to her bureau and began to turn over some papers. The bureau was kept in perfect order, and in one drawer lived a file of index-cards. She extracted a ledger from a recess, and proceeded to enter figures in it.

There was silence, a slight rustling as Morrow turned over the pages of the paper. He lay back in the arm-chair, a man very much at ease, but presently he lowered the paper and contemplated the figure of his wife. She appeared to be happily absorbed in some financial business.

He spoke.

“Butcher and baker and candlestick-maker.”

She turned her head.

“I’m adding.”

“Sorry. Someone has said that it is the male’s privilege to interrupt.”

“So it seems,” and she smiled. “I have been tackling the question of soap.”

“Are we so extravagantly clean?”

“Soap at the Home. I’ve managed to bring it down by three shillings and sevenpence a week. Buying in bulk, you know.”

“You are a born organizer.”

“Not quite—born.”

“Well, shall we say—inspired?”

“Thank you, Noll. But it’s quite a fascinating job.”

“Seems so. Before you took over the quartermastering the Home was rather—feckless. I hadn’t the time, and Miss Frederick may be an excellent matron, but she’s a little too dignified for household details.”

“She doesn’t love it as I do.”

“I believe you do. And those week-ends in the cottage.”

“Yes, Noll. Even the winter and the firelight and the wind in the chimney, and your old plaid slippers! I feel—somehow—so secure.”

He put down the paper, and his face was both mischievous and grave.

“I suppose you know that I realize why you go and sit at that bureau directly after lunch?”

“To digest my lunch and my accounts.”

“Not a bit of it. You play mouse so that the old black cat can blink in a chair for half an hour.”

“Think so?”

“I don’t think, I know. Thirty precious minutes in the rush of a doctor’s day. A cigarette, the paper or a little meditation, and a woman who understands.”

“Do I understand, Noll?”

“Even the lunch has to be left to repose.”

“Yes, I told Ann.”

“I often wonder why women are so kind to us.”

“Some of them. But why wonder?”

“Yes, and if you didn’t sit there, if you weren’t in the room, it wouldn’t be the same.”

“I think that’s the most precious thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Well, it’s true. My God, if people would only learn not to fuss and to fidget, and grab telephones and chatter.”

“I don’t think one fidgets if one is happy, Noll.”

“Well, we must be happy. That’s all I can say. Time for me to move.”

He rose and folded up the paper.

“Hospital. I shall be back for tea.”

“Good. I’m going to look up Nobbs, and see if he is keeping fit.”

“Splendid idea. One of our successes, Nobbs.”

He went and stood behind her chair, and taking her chin between thumb and finger, he looked at her quizzically and then kissed her.

“Couple of sentimental idiots, aren’t we? I’m most horribly un-highbrow.”

“Except as a doctor.”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that husbands shouldn’t be highbrow.”

“And wives?”

“That depends on the coiffure that happens to be in fashion. I’m glad you don’t pluck your eyebrows. Women might as well wear rings in their noses.”

When he had gone Kitty rose and rang the bell, and went back to her work at the bureau. The maid came in to clear away the lunch, and as she was going out with the tray Mrs. Morrow turned her head.

“Tea as usual, Ann, please.”

“Yes, madam.”

“If you or Bertha like to go out for an hour, arrange it between you.”

“Thank you, madam.”

She paused in the doorway.

“I think that’s the front door bell. If it is a patient shall I make an appointment?”

Kitty consulted a diary.

“Dr. Morrow has no time free to-day or to-morrow. It would have to be the morning after to-morrow.”

“Very well, madam.”

She went out with the tray and closed the door, and Kitty extracted another small ledger from a pigeonhole and turned over its leaves. Finding what she wanted she scribbled a note on a pad, and whistled a few notes from the waltz in “Bitter-Sweet.”

The door opened suddenly, and the voice of Ann was heard, ruffled and apologetic.

“Madam, this gentleman——”

As Kitty turned her head Jack Carthew pushed his way past the maid into the room, a shabby Carthew carrying a greasy felt hat. His face had a curious pallor, an unwholesome flaccidity, and the eyes looked sunken and strangely bright. Somehow his smeary shabbiness assumed an impudent swagger.

“How do, Mrs. Morrow? I told the girl I’d come straight up.”

“He pushed past me, madam.”

Kitty sat very still, looking at this resurrected fragment of her past. Her face had a sudden, bleak rigidity. She seemed to restrain herself, to realize that she was in danger, and that the invasion would have to be met and repulsed, but not in the presence of the servant. She rose from her chair with an assumption of ease.

“Why, Mr. Carthew! Have you had lunch?”

His grin was ironic.

“Yes, at Claridge’s.”

“I’m afraid we could not have competed with Claridge’s. All right, Ann.”

The maid, with a disdainful and offended glance at Carthew, closed the door, and Kitty Morrow, strolling to the fire-place, opened the silver cigarette-box on the mantelpiece. The shock had shaken her for the moment. She lit a cigarette, seemed to pause for three seconds, and then turned suddenly on Carthew.

“How dare you come here?”

He threw his hat on the table.

“Aren’t you pleased to see me? I suppose that girl isn’t listening?”

She looked at him with aversion and scorn, and going to the door, opened it.

“No one there. My maids haven’t your mentality. Now, what do you want here?”

As she closed the door he crossed the room and helped himself to a cigarette.

“You haven’t asked after my health.”

“It doesn’t interest me.”

“No? Don’t you think I look rather cheap?”

She returned to the bureau, and turning the chair, sat facing him.

“Dissipated—perhaps. Have you come to see my husband?”

“No. Look here, supposing we cut out the personalities. You may as well be polite to me.”

“Indeed. Supposing I ring up the police and have you removed?”

He perched himself on the back of the sofa. He swung a foot, and looked at her obliquely, with a smirk of menace.

“Shouldn’t do that. I may as well tell you that I have been watching this house for a week. It’s a most respectable house. I know that your good husband goes off punctually at two.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, don’t you see a little light?”

She spoke bitingly.

“I see a little cad, and I sit here and think with amazement of a woman who was so blind——”

He sneered.

“Don’t you see a back bedroom, and——”

But she interrupted him with sudden and astonishing fierceness.

“You will not speak of those beastly, shameful days. Possibly I am beginning to realize why you are here. You can go.”

He retorted with almost equal fierceness.

“Look here, this is not a sentimental show. None of your prevarications. I’m not one of the sleek people. I’m down and out. I don’t care a damn about the conventions. Look at this.”

He got off the sofa and crossed the room. He pulled up his left sleeve and showed her a forearm covered with little puncture marks.

“See those?”

“I do.”

“Know what they mean?”

She sat rigid.

“So, you have come to that? Perhaps it was inevitable.”

His voice seemed to snarl.

“Inevitable! Is that all you’ve got to say to the man who gave you all you wanted at the sex game?”

She shrank a little, but not with fear.

“You beast.”

He drew back and smirked at her.

“Thanks. How nice of you. But I think I might suggest that the dope costs money, and when a man has the crave he doesn’t care a despicable damn how the money comes. All he wants is the stuff. He’s mad without it. D’you see?”

She looked at his flaccid, faded face.

“Indeed. So you want——?”

“Cash or supplies.”

“Supplies?”

“I suppose you know where to get ’em. A doctor must have a nice little cabinet.”

She rose suddenly from her chair.

“You suggest that I should supply you——?”

“It may be worth your while, my dear. I’m dynamite. If I explode——”

He gave a kind of truculent giggle, and sitting down in a chair by the window, he sat watching her.

“I’m rather jumpy these days, so be careful. I suggest that you regard this as a mere matter of business. I could do with some of the cash I spent on you, or I would take part in cash and part in goods.”

She leaned against the bureau.

“How nice! But don’t you know that a doctor has to account for every grain of such a drug?”

“No flies here. There’s nothing about the dope game I don’t know. It’s to be had when you pay spot cash, but when you’re dry there’s nothing doing.”

“So you came here as a common blackmailer.”

He gave her a malicious look.

“Not quite common, my dear. I suggest it is worth your while——”

“And supposing——?”

“I might make things rather awkward. When you have fooled a man once, he’s apt to be suspicious, especially when he’s played the noble fellow. And Cæsar’s wife, my dear, and this respectable street! I don’t care a damn what sort of scene I make. Your reputation’s a bit delicate. And there’s your husband’s reputation, the eminent and fashionable physician. I hear he is going to be knighted. It might interest society to know that his wife had been——”

She stood up straight and still.

“So—there’s no decent thing left in you.”

He sniggered.

“Fetch me one of old Morrow’s books on medicine and I’ll read you quotations from it on dope fiends. It will tell you that they lose all moral sense. And, after all, what is moral sense, the refuge of the respectable? I’m just a savage, an appetite, a blazing furious crave.”

She considered him, and her eyes seemed to narrow.

“I see. A sort of mad dog. And you want me to feed the mad dog in you, without my husband knowing?”

“Question of policy, isn’t it? Keep cool, my dear. I’ve got to have the stuff, got to, do you understand?”

She nodded. She was considering how best this creature out of the past could be captured and shut up in a cage. If he was desperate, and she did not doubt but that he was desperate, half-measures would be useless. She remembered the telephone standing on her bureau. She gave a cynical shrug.

“Some problem, isn’t it. So it’s a cheque book affair. I happen to have a private account.”

“That’s better.”

“Have another cigarette.”

She turned to the bureau, and while his back was turned she took down the receiver.

“1073 Gerrard, please.”

He swung round with a snarl.

“Here, put that damned thing down.”

“I’ve got the bell behind me. If you move I’ll ring and the maid will come.”

“You little idiot, you’ll be sorry.”

“Shall I? Yes, is that St. Martin’s Hospital? Yes. Mrs. Morrow speaking. Morrow. Is that the porter? Yes. Will you please find Dr. Morrow at once and tell him something terrible has happened here at his house. Tell him to come at once. Yes—that’s all.”

She hung up the receiver, and keeping her place near the bell, she looked at the hesitant and malevolent Carthew.

“How’s that?”

He was rolling a cigarette between finger and thumb, and his hands betrayed a fine tremor.

“You’ve torn it. You’ll be sorry, my lady.”

“We shall see.”

She moved quickly to the door, locked it, and removed the key.

“You are going to stay here and see my husband. If you are a mad dog, he may know how to handle mad dogs.”

He showed the chattering rage of a coward.

“Here, hand over that key.”

“If you move I’ll ring the bell and tell them to bring in the police.”

He hesitated. He had come half-way across the room, and he stood there looking mean and furtive. The tremor of his hands was more evident. He dropped the cigarette, stooped for it, and with a leer at her, returned to his

perch on the sofa.

“Regular melodrama, what! You’ll be sorry.”

He found a box of matches on the small table, and lit the cigarette, and sat silently, smoking and observing her out of furtive and threatening eyes.

“Yes, you’ll be sorry. Remember that little place in Soho where I first took you upstairs? The sofa, and one of your shoes fell off. And that flat in Summers Street, and that fellow Mason who was squiffy——? Yes, nice details. I’ll retail them all to your dear husband. I don’t suppose you went into all the details with him.”

She was stark but steadfast.

“Is that your idea of humour?”

“It’s my idea of realism. I can paint a nice picture, my dear. Don’t you think you had better hand over that key?”

“So you want to sneak out—now.”

“Your husband is a lumbering sort of brute. We might hurt each other.”

“Yes, you may——”

There was sudden silence between them, and a sound of footsteps on the stairs. A hand tried the door. They heard the voice of Dr. Morrow.

“Kitty—hallo!”

She went quickly to the door, unlocked it, and flung it open.

“Arnold—this—has reappeared.”

Morrow, big hands hanging clenched, stood looking at Carthew.

“Our parasitic past—I think. What brought it here?”

She went and stood by the window.

“He came to try and blackmail me. He has taken to drugs. He wanted me to give him drugs. He threatened. He warned me that he is a mad dog. So I locked the door and sent for you.”

Morrow closed the door.

“O, a mad dog, is he! Charming fellow. About as septic—I suppose—as anything one could meet west of Port Said.”

He crossed towards Carthew who remained poised on the sofa.

“So you have taken to drugs and blackmail. I think this is an occasion when men talk in private.”

He turned to his wife, and taking her arm, led her to the door.

“Leave me the problem.”

There was sudden fear in her eyes.

“Arnold, he threatened me—that he would blacken everything——. I have never seen him since that night.”

Morrow bent and kissed her.

“So—that’s his idea. I’ll deal with it. Don’t worry.”

XI

When he had closed the door on his wife Morrow turned and faced Carthew, who, perched on the sofa seemed trying to enlarge his pallid, sodden self. Cornered, he showed his teeth. To defend oneself it might be necessary to threaten, to appear casual and insolent.

“Nice domestic touch, that. She’s become the lily, has she? I might get out my little paint box and tint the lily.”

“I think not.”

Carthew pulled up his sleeve.

“As a doctor—look at that.”

“Yes, you’ve punctured yourself pretty freely. Who are the scoundrels who sold you the stuff?”

“Never you mind. Some of the black sheep of your own profession, perhaps.”

“Not very likely.”

Carthew pulled down his sleeve.

“But that’s neither here nor there. I haven’t had a dose for twenty-four hours. As a doctor you should know what that means in a case like mine. It means I’m mad, that I don’t care a blasted bean for anything or anybody but the drug. I’ve got to have it. I’ve no decencies left. If you don’t give it me I’ll be as indecent about your wife——”

Morrow went near to him.

“Be careful.”

“Now, keep off and talk business.”

“I am much more likely to kill you.”

“O, bluff. Well, here goes. When your wife——”

But Morrow was upon him, and for a moment they struggled together. Carthew, taken by the throat and rolled back on the sofa, was held pinned there, squirming. Morrow’s big hands were merciless, and Carthew choked.

“Let—go—I—can’t breathe.”

“I’m going to kill you.”

“O, my God—let go.”

“How does it feel—being strangled? You were trying to strangle the soul of a woman. I’m only choking a mad dog.”

Carthew, struggled feebly, his eyes agonized and staring.

“I’ll give in—I’ll——”

And suddenly Morrow’s grip relaxed. He lifted him bodily and threw him along the floor. He stood over him.

“You infinitely foul thing, what am I to do with you?”

Carthew lay panting and twitching, and suddenly he began to whimper. He squirmed towards Morrow.

“You’ve had your fun. You’ve knocked me about. Now, give me a dose.”

“You foul thing.”

“Give me a dose, just a little of the stuff, and I’ll go away.”

“You’re not a man, you’re a crave.”

Morrow sat down on the sofa, and Carthew, crawling towards him, showed his bare arm.

“You see, I can’t help it, can I? It’s like drink, only ten times worse.”

Morrow observed him as though the man at his feet was some pathological specimen.

“You’re about the biggest problem I’ve tackled.”

“Yes, I am a bit of a problem, doc.”

“What am I to do with you? As mere man I felt like killing you. Even in cold blood and as a sociologist I should say that death would be the best solution. But I can’t solve it that way. My business is to save life. Yes, you’re a problem.”

Carthew fawned on him.

“Give me some of the stuff and I’ll cease to be a problem.”

“Ah, would you!”

“I’ve got you puzzled, doc.”

“Yes and no. I’m considering the alternatives. Shall I hand you over to the police and have you charged with blackmail. Probably they would give you

seven years.”

“You daren’t do it.”

“O, yes—I could. In these blackmailing charges it is becoming the custom to shield the victim. Why should a foul thing like you be allowed to spew dirt about in public? And in prison there would be no dope.”

Carthew whimpered.

“O, cut it out. Just give me a dose.”

Morrow rose and stood over him.

“Get up. You will never get another dose. You are not going to leave this room as a free agent.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I’ve got the mad dog by the collar. I’m not going to let it loose again on society.”

Carthew’s flaccid face became distorted. He began to mouth like an hysterical woman. He tried to clasp Morrow’s knees.

“You can’t do it. I’ll raise hell. I’ll jump out of the window. Give me a dose, just one dose.”

Morrow repulsed him.

“Get up. Listen.”

Carthew, squatting, watched Morrow’s face.

“This is the other alternative. I’m regarding you from the doctor’s point of view. I might try to cure you. But to what ends? You are a social pest.”

Carthew’s face grew sullen.

“I don’t want to be cured. I want a dose.”

“The decision is with me. I might put you in a home under rigid supervision. We should have a devil of a time with you. And to what ends?”

“O, I’m sick of all this jabbering.”

“If one could make you sick of your self!”

“O, cut it out. I’m done. The floor’s going round. Things are black. Damn you, why don’t you make up your mind? Fetch in the police.”

Morrow stood looking at him for some seconds, and then went to the door.

He opened it, and called his wife. She had been sitting on the stairs. She glanced at Morrow who smiled at her reassuringly, and then her eyes rested on Carthew crouching on the floor, supporting himself on one arm. His face was ghastly.

“He looks very ill, Arnold.”

Morrow stood over Carthew.

“I have been trying to make up my mind about him, whether to hand him over to the police or to treat him as a sick man and give him a chance.”

Her eyes met her husband’s.

“Shall we give him a chance?”

There was a moment’s silence between them, and then Carthew raised his face.

“I’m thirsty. Could I have a little water?”

Morrow bent down.

“By the way, when did you last have a meal?”

“Meal? I’ve almost forgotten. My stomach won’t stand much.”

“No. I suppose not. Hallo, he’s going to faint.”

And suddenly he bent low, and picking up Carthew like a child, he laid him on the sofa. He felt his pulse, and looked meaningly at Kitty.

“Dope and no food.”

“Poor wretch!”

“Yes, poor—white trash.”

Morrow crossed to the window and threw up the lower sash. He turned to his wife.

“He wants something inside him. Is there any milk in the house?”

“Of course.”

“Milk with a raw egg beaten up in it, and half an ounce of brandy.”

“I’ll go and get it.”

She hurried out, while Carthew lay with his eyes closed, and his face strangely tranquil, and some of the smirch and the shadow of life gone from it. Morrow, taking an ear between thumb and finger, pinched it, and saw that the

pressure made little difference in the pallor of the skin. And as he stood looking at Carthew it occurred to him that thirty years or so ago this rotten thing had been a child lying in a cot exulted over by some woman.

Carthew stirred.

“It’s not so black as it was. I can feel something thumping.”

“Your patient heart. Stay where you are.”

Morrow walked to the window, and as he looked up at the backs of other houses his eyes seemed to fix themselves on a particular window. It was like an eye meeting his understandingly, significantly, and his glance fell suddenly to the flowers in the window-box. He put out a hand and touched them just as his wife reappeared.

He turned and took the glass from her, and crossed to the sofa.

“Now, Carthew, drink some of this.”

“I can’t swallow.”

“O yes, you can.”

He put an arm round Carthew, raised him and held the glass to his lips.

“Now then, just a little to begin with.”

“What is it?”

“Egg and milk and a little brandy.”

Carthew whimpered like a child.

“Must I drink it? What’s the use?”

“Yes, come along.”

Carthew sipped slowly, and then raised his eyes to Morrow’s with a look of whimsical surprise.

“Rum world, isn’t it? Why are you troubling about me?”

“Force of habit, perhaps.”

“Yes habit gets one, doesn’t it. I don’t think I can manage any more.”

“Yes, you can. It’s what you want.”

In a little while Carthew had emptied the glass, and Morrow let him lie back on the cushion. He passed the glass to his wife, who stood holding it with an air of surprised compassion. There was a moment’s silence, and then one of

Carthew's hands that was resting on the back of the sofa made a little fluttering movement. He spoke.

"Well, better send for the police now. I'm so sleepy."

He seemed to doze, and Morrow, watching him, spoke softly to his wife.

"What are we to do with him? Give him a last chance?"

She nodded.

"Yes. We've got to, Noll, somehow. And yet, an hour or two ago I was feeling so—secure."

He touched her hand.

"Don't worry. You won't be hurt. I'll see to that."

He laid a hand on Carthew's shoulder and shook him gently, and Carthew opened his eyes.

"Hallo—I'd dropped off. What d'you want?"

"Carthew, I'm going to send you into a nursing-home for a day or two while I make arrangements for a course of treatment. If you will help you can be cured. You'll have a devil of a fight in front of you. Will you fight?"

Carthew's eyes closed.

"What's the use? I'm finished."

"Nonsense. Make a fight for it, man. Life's good."

"But I haven't a bean."

"I'll arrange that."

"Why the devil should you? I tell you I'm finished."

"No, you're not, if you fight."

Carthew seemed to give a shrug of dull consent.

"O, all right. But what's the use? Send me along to the dogs' home."

"That's something to begin with."

He patted Carthew's shoulder, and going to the telephone rang up a nursing-home. He spoke to the matron, explained the case, asked for a special nurse to be engaged, warned her that the patient would arrive at once. He added that in a few days he would have Mr. Carthew transferred to an institution that dealt with such cases. He hung up the receiver, and crossed

over to the sofa.

“They’ll take you. You won’t be a hundred yards from this house.”

Carthew’s voice was toneless.

“O, all right.”

“They are good people. They will try to help you. Now, come along, sit up.”

Carthew struggled up, and looked wildly about him.

“Good people! Damned funny, isn’t it? I’m in a sort of cage, and can’t get out.”

“There’s a door to every cage, man. Come and sit by the window and get some air.”

Carthew fingered his throat. “Air!” Supported by Morrow he walked to the window, and Kitty placed a chair for him. He looked strangely into her face.

“Well—let’s call it quits.”

He sat heavily in the chair, and Morrow, standing beside him, pointed upwards.

“There’s a door to any cage. You’ll have a good window, high up. Perhaps that one with the rose-coloured curtains.”

Carthew mumbled:

“Rose-coloured curtains! Fancy rose-coloured curtains! How very boring! I want to sleep.”

XII

About eight o’clock on that same June day Morrow and his wife were at dinner. It was their custom to have the table close to the big window, and on this evening a clear, summer sky showed above the tops of the houses. The roses on the table had come from the cottage garden at Pit Hill.

Kitty spoke to the maid who was standing beside the butler’s tray.

“You need not wait, Ann.”

“Very well, madam.”

Kitty turned her head to watch the door close as though the closing of the door reminded her of Carthew’s expulsion and of the sudden resurrecting of the past. She sat with her elbows on the table, gazing at the flowers, and the stillness of the room seemed to wait upon her silence. She had been made to fear, to suffer humiliation. She was aware of her husband’s big hands, and of his eyes, eyes that avoided looking at her too intently as though he knew that she was feeling sensitive and raw.

“I can’t bear her standing behind me to-night, Noll.”

He understood.

“A very old complex, one’s back to the cave wall.”

His voice, deep, gentle and deliberate, soothed her. A sudden impulse made her reach out a hand to him.

“I shall never forget—— That I should have been so blind, so mad. You do understand, Noll?”

He nodded.

“I think so. You and I stand together against the wall. Your cave is my cave. I’m ready for my enemies with club and torch.”

With head carried rather proudly she looked at him.

“Have you any enemies? I should not have thought so.” He smiled at her.

“O, plenty. There are poisoned knives even in my profession. I’m too successful.”

“Are men as jealous as women?”

“Perhaps more so—in the big scramble. Venom, attempts at social assassination. Take any profession, the stage, literature. When a man seems

obscure and harmless he is lauded, but let him get his head well up above the crowd and there will be a dozen cultured gentlemen ready to club him.”

“It’s rather horrible, Noll. It makes me afraid.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

His smile was a little grim.

“No need to worry about me. I have a pretty thick head. There are times when I have given the gentlemen with clubs more than they bargained for.”

“And yet—you teach compassion?”

“My job does. It tries to give life a chance.”

She brooded for a moment, and her eyes were dark.

“I’ve something horrible to confess, Noll.”

“Have you?”

“To-day there was something in me that wanted the old age back. It cried out in me to you: ‘Kill—kill!’ ”

He nodded.

“Thousands of women must have felt like that in the darkness of a cave with some wild beast snuffling at the entrance. Security.”

She drew a deep breath.

“Yes, security, faith in something.”

“Don’t worry. A man fights better with a woman at his back.”

She reached for a dish of fruit that was on the table.

“I think a woman asks for security. At least—I do, and to-day I have been frightened. Tell me, don’t try to shield me, will he try to spoil—all this?”

“I think not. Though when a man becomes a crave—he may be nothing but the crave. I can get him cured. It’s the afterwards that will count.”

She was sitting half turned towards the window and looking up at those other windows, and suddenly she seemed to grow rigid. Her lips moved, but at first no sound came.

“Arnold, look, that window!”

He pushed back his chair.

“What?”

“He’s at that window. He’s struggling with someone. O, horrible——!”

She closed her eyes. Morrow was leaning out, his hands on the edge of the window-box. He shouted:

“Carthew, Carthew, are you mad?”

And suddenly there was silence, and then a sound as of some object falling and striking a hard surface. Morrow turned sharply, and saw his wife’s face covered with her hands. She was trembling, and with a deliberate hand he drew the curtains.

“It’s all over, Kitty.”

She shuddered.

“O, Noll, how horrible! And I—— I wished it. I——”

He stood by her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Perhaps he wished it too, my dear.”

Suddenly the telephone bell rang with a suggestion of agitation, and Morrow went to the bureau and took down the receiver.

“Yes. What! He’s—dead. Good God! The nurse tried to stop him. Yes, I’ll come round at once. No, you mustn’t blame yourself, matron. I’ll take any responsibility. Yes, I’ll come at once.”

He hung up the receiver and stood looking at his wife. Then he went and stood by her, and she turned to him like a frightened child.

“O, Noll, it’s horrible of me, horrible, but the shadow’s gone.”

He bent and kissed her.

“He had his chance.”

COCKTAILS FOR TWO

REDMAYNE was bored.

He was not bored because it was raining, and the sea the colour of lead. The inwardness of his ennui was more subtle and delicate; it transcended a mere mood; it shaded towards the twilight of lost illusions.

For five years he had been farming in Rhodesia, and a lonely sort of life such as this is apt to breed illusions. Out there he would turn on the gramophone at night and grow quite sentimental, even as in the war he had sometimes grown sentimental about women and dogs and children.

“O, to be in England now that April’s here!”

He had landed in England in April, a dolorous, gusty April, with the spring in cold storage and the Nymph’s nose looking blue. Ye gods, and that London hotel, an hotel that considered itself so exclusive that it even scorned gas-stoves in the bedrooms, and made the discovering of a bathroom a sort of adventure in no man’s land! A week in that hotel feeling liverish! He had escaped into the country to visit a girl who had assisted in the preservation of an illusion. He could afford to marry now, but when he had seen Norah Cairns he had lost all appetite for marriage. He had found her shrill and energetic; blue-eyed and pragmatical, and somehow suggesting those formidable women who have made England great and virtuous. He had sojourned for three days at a country pub, living on much cold meat and boiled potatoes, and fruit salad, and finding Norah as indigestible as the food. He had had to make some sort of mumbling apology.

“Good to see old friends.”

And suddenly he had packed his suit-case and fled. The situation was like an English April, the product of poetic license. There was no license about Norah. But if she had expected him to ask her to marry him——! O, well, you had to allow that five years might make a devil of a difference.

Redmayne had spent three weeks with his people, and then experimented for a second time with London theatres, cinemas, an occasional night-club, lonely loafings about old familiar streets. A flashy gentleman had tried to work the confidence trick on him and been balked. He had been accosted by pretty ladies. Then suddenly May had produced a week of sunshine and a suggestion of lilac-time. Someone or something had spoken to him of Sussex, and the downlands and the sea.

He had remembered a little place that had delighted him as a lad. Pannage. Queer name, Pannage! It had reminded him of a shingle bank, a strip of sandy turf, an old cliff, a row of white coastguards' cottages. He had taken the train to St. Martin's and put up at the Queen's Hotel. He had made inquiries about Pannage at a local house-agent's.

They had offered to let him a furnished bungalow at Pannage, and in one of those moments of hope and resignation he had accepted the suggestion.

"All right, I'll take it."

He was not afraid of picnicking at Pannage. He could cook. He would prefer to be alone in the Sussex of a memory. He could loaf and walk and bathe. The plunge off the steep shingle bank at Pannage had been epic. Just the gulls, the sea, the sky, and the wind in the grasses.

But when a motor-bus had deposited Redmayne and his luggage at the new and transfigured Pannage he had regretted his impetuosity. He should have distrusted that motor-bus. It had unloaded him outside a flaring, tin tea-house, that was also a grocer's shop and a post office, and which led the procession of shacks and bungalows and old army huts that mottled the spit of land between the old cliff and the sea. The first human beings whom Redmayne had met in the new Pannage had been two young things parading in brilliant pyjamas, and a fat man wearing dirty grey flannel shorts and a shirt that was rather too small for him.

He had accosted the fat man.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where 'Eglantine' is? It's a bungalow."

The fat man had been matey.

"Straight ahead, old chap. Right at the end of the village. Stands a bit by itself."

Redmayne had thanked him and fled from the friendliness of those naked and nobbly knees.

The name of "Eglantine" chapleted the owner's inverted sense of humour.

The bungalow belonged to a rather celebrated person, Mr. Stephen Branker, the novelist. Mr. Branker had left Pannage less than a month ago and had put “Eglantine” in the hands of all the local agents. Nor was there any honeysuckle growing over the little white box of a bungalow with its roof like a red lid. Mr. Branker had purchased “Eglantine” for the purpose of “copy”; he had been engaged upon a novel in which a little world of the “Pannage” type was portrayed, and a week or so before the publication of the novel Mr. Branker had abandoned Pannage. It was as well.

Redmayne knew nothing of these affairs. This wet day was his fifth day in Ramshackle-by-the-Sea. He had tramped five miles up the long ridge to Westling, and tramped back again. He was wet and depressed. This untidy conglomeration of hutments that was the new Pannage made the very name seem apposite. It reminded him of that curious old phrase in Domesday Book —“Pannage for Hogs.”

He arrived at Mr. Branker’s bungalow. Like a damned fool he had rented the place for two months. He unbuttoned his sodden mackintosh and felt in his trouser pocket for the key. A fire would have been acceptable, and “Eglantine,” being a summer residence, provided you with nothing but a rather smelly oil-stove.

Redmayne opened the door and saw something lying on the cheap mat, a grey envelope. Obviously it had been pushed through the letter flap. He bent down and picked it up. There was no name and no address.

He opened the envelope and extracted a sheet of paper, and when he unfolded the sheet he found just two words in a hand that looked like a woman’s:

“You beast!”

There was such an element of acid unexpectedness in those two words that he found them stimulating. Yes, like a good honest slap when you were feeling temperamental and self-centred. “You beast!” But could he take the credit to himself? Surely the accusation had been flung at some predecessor? He had been guilty of no flagrances to which Pannage could take exception. In fact, so far as his own observation served him, Pannage would take a deal of shocking.

Well, who was the beast? His eminent landlord Mr. Stephen Branker? And who had penned those words? He stuffed the sheet of paper into his pocket, and being a man whom life had taught to use both his wits and his senses, he went out and examined the sandy track that was Pannage’s main thoroughfare. It disappeared eastwards in a wilderness of grass and gorse, but in front of “Eglantine” it was still a road, and Redmayne did discover something of

interest, the marks of motor tyres in the wet sand. The tyres were fitted with a particular non-skid tread that had left a criss-cross impression. It appeared to him that a car had stopped outside the bungalow and then had been driven on. He traced the wheel marks to the grass, and there they disappeared. It was a one-way track, and he stood and wondered.

For if the car had travelled eastwards it would arrive at nothing but the cliff end. “Eglantine” was the last bungalow along the beach; nor could he see any sign of a car among the knolls of gorse.

Well, it was as mysterious as that very candid communication:

“You beast!”

He returned to the bungalow and began to think about supper.

He was hungry, and with a hunger that scorned boiled eggs and lettuce and Dutch cheese. He wanted something hot and savoury, and at a butcher’s in Westling he had bought a pound of sausages and carried them home in his mackintosh pocket. Yes, hot sausages and a Welsh rarebit, and a bottle of beer; gross provender, but comforting, with the grey dusk merging into the grey of the sea. He hung up his mackintosh and pulped hat, and betaking himself to the small kitchen at the back of the bungalow, he lit the lamp, and removing his coat, got busy on that evening meal. He was rather proud of himself as a chef, and he had lit the oil-stove, greased his frying-pan, and placed the sausages in it, when he heard a car stop outside the bungalow. He stood listening, the frying-pan poised over the oil-stove.

Someone knocked. He was more interested in the frying of those sausages than in the unknown visitor at his front door. He decided to ignore the summons.

The knock was repeated and with more emphasis, and resigning himself to the interruption, he put the frying-pan down on the kitchen table and walked into the narrow passage. It was almost dark here, and as he reached for the handle of the door it occurred to him that there might be some relation between that mysterious message and the person on his doorstep.

There was. For when he opened the door he saw the dim figure of a girl there, and before he had even begun to ask her what she wanted, the attack was launched.

“So—you are here, you beast? I waited and came back to make sure.”

Obviously there was some misunderstanding, and obviously she was the person who had pushed that grey envelope through the letter-box. Redmayne

wanted to laugh. To find your innocent self hectored so truculently by a strange young woman was highly inspiriting.

He said, “I’m sorry. I’m afraid you have made a mistake.”

She had realized it, too, before he had finished speaking, for though it was dark in the passage and she had been unable to see his face distinctly, his voice betrayed him.

“I say, I’m most awfully sorry.”

He got the impression of her as being suddenly deflated. Her fierceness had subsided into a feeling of humiliating foolishness, and suddenly he was sorry for her.

“I thought you were Mr. Branker.”

“No, my name’s Redmayne. I have rented the place from him for two months.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course not. It’s quite all right.”

She had retreated to the gate. The rain had stopped, and he saw the dark outline of a small car with its hood up beyond the white fence. It was lighting-up time, but she had not turned on the lamps. He came out and stood on the doorstep in his shirt-sleeves. He felt that he would like to see her face, but it was too dark, and her mood was for escape.

“I’m so sorry. Did you find that—that letter?”

“Yes.”

“Please tear it up.”

She got herself out of the gate, and he walked down to it.

“Anything I can do?”

“O, no, nothing, thank you.”

She scrambled into the car, switched on the lights, pressed the self-starter, and without another word to him, drove away. He was able to read the registration plate at the back of the car, and he made a mental note of the letters and the numbers. He went inside and wrote them down.

The frying-pan and its sausages awaited him, and holding the frying-pan over the stove, he wondered how Mr. Branker had contrived to enrage that strange young woman. Had he behaved like a beast, or was the accusation

mere picturesque language, the latest thing in topical philology? But hardly so. She had said beast, and she had meant beast, and Redmayne, having never set eyes on Mr. Stephen Branker, could indulge only in conjecture. He had never read any of Mr. Branker's novels. He knew nothing about the fellow, save that the bungalow was a somewhat messy habitation.

But he was tempted to trace that car. He had liked the girl's voice, and her passion, and the dark intensity of her attack. Pannage possessed a garage, and he strolled along to it next morning, and having looked as a possible purchaser at a second-hand Chummy Cambridge car, he asked the proprietor a question.

"O, by the way, do you happen to know the name of the owner of a car with a number-plate XX703?"

The proprietor eyed him with slight suspicion.

"Blue two-seater with black hood?"

"I believe so."

The man hesitated, and Redmayne smiled at him.

"No, nothing secret. It stopped outside my bungalow the other day, and someone left a letter that was not meant for me."

The proprietor knew the car and its owner. She had bought petrol and sundries from him on several occasions.

"Want to return the letter?"

"Yes."

"The name's Miss Langdale. Lives up at Windmill Hill."

"And where—exactly is Windmill Hill?"

"About five miles or so. Turn off the Westling road at High Oak corner."

"Is there a windmill?"

"No. Used to be. Little old farm-house close to a clump of pines. It's a chicken farm."

"A chicken farm? Thanks. Let's see, how much did you say you wanted for that car?"

"Fifty-five, three months' tax and insurance thrown in."

"I'll think it over."

The weather continued to be described by the meteorological experts as

unsettled, and Pannage's sun-bathing was fitful, and a matter of opportunism. Redmayne bussed into St. Martin's that same afternoon. He was in need of tobacco and some literature, and at the circulating library a young lady who liked his looks because he expressed in the flesh her concept of a cave-man came to his aid. She kept a few special volumes for special patrons on a shelf under her desk.

"I've got Stephen Branker's latest. Only just out."

Redmayne smiled at her and at the coincidence.

"By George, have you? I'll take it."

She thought him a lamb, a lamb with such beautiful teeth and a splendid sun-tan.

"Yes, it's just a little—fresh."

"Sea breezes and salt spray and all that?"

The girl simpered.

"Well, not quite. Please don't think it's quite—my style of a book, but it's a Branker."

It was. Redmayne sat down with the book after supper, and he remained with it until he had turned the last page, not because he was enthralled by Mr. Branker's exposition of life, but because the book explained certain happenings. Its title was "Cocktails for Two." Mr. Branker indulged in that sort of text. The novel described the life of a place such as Pannage, and it did not describe it too kindly. It portrayed an artist who lived in a bungalow and a girl who kept a chicken farm, and the intimate experiences of the artist and the girl. It was witty and wanton and whimsical, and its portraiture of Pannage and its people was palpably realistic. Redmayne could recognize the fat fellow in shorts who had directed him on his arrival. And, of course, the girl of the chicken farm!

Redmayne's neutral comment was, "What a damned cad!"

He did not know his Branker, nor had he any conception of Mr. Branker's infinite complacency. He was an excessively clever man, with a thick neck, a hot colour, and the integument of a pachyderm. On several occasions he had transmuted his personal and private adventures into copy. He had both kissed and told, and sometimes he had told when he had failed to consummate the kissing. His conceit was such that he believed that the world was rather flattered when it found itself painted by Branker, but he made a habit of disappearing discreetly before the portrait was hung, just as he had disappeared

from Pannage.

When he had finished it, Redmayne heaved the book into a corner. He quite understood why that angry young woman had addressed Mr. Branker as “You beast.”

Yes, it was a filthy trick to play on a girl, whether she had surrendered or whether she had not. It was the pose of proud flesh or of pique, and Redmayne found himself prejudiced in favour of pique.

Next day he walked. He was big and long in the leg, and his long legs carried him up the Westling road to High Oak corner. The day was hot and sultry, with a thunderstorm threatening, but he had brought no mackintosh with him. He turned off at High Oak. He went down a hill and up a hill, and on the brow of the hill he sighted a clump of Scotch firs. A little farther on he saw a little old red-brick Sussex farm-house set back from the lane. A rather muddy track led up to the house. It had a wind-blown orchard and a number of brown chicken-houses dotted about a field. A gate closed the track, and on it hung a black board with Windmill Hill painted on it rather amateurishly in white letters. Moreover, just outside the gate a two-seater car stood waiting, and its number-plate bore those mystic symbols XX703.

Redmayne hesitated. A black cloud canopy was spreading ominously above the hill. There might be some significance in that cloud. By the right-hand hedge a young oak had been felled and the trunk left lying there. He sat down on that tree.

He waited, and in a little while he saw the girl emerge from the white door of the house and come down towards the gate. She was slim and dark and sunburnt. Her movements had a pleasant freedom. She carried her head as though she and the world were not on speaking terms.

She did not see Redmayne until she had reached the gate. She came to a sudden pause. Her very black eyebrows seemed to draw together. Her right hand rested on the top rail of the gate.

Redmayne stood up. Her obvious displeasure at seeing him there embarrassed him, but he had no intention of being ignored.

He was wearing no hat, so he raised his hand in a salute.

“I hope you don’t mind my sitting here?”

She recognized his voice. She flung the gate open and walked through it to the car.

“O, Mr. Branker’s tenant—I think.”

“Yes.”

She gave him a devastating glance over her shoulder.

“And do you write books?”

His reply was a creature of impulse.

“God forbid! I just do things.”

She had opened the door of the car, but the candour and the emphasis of his retort made her pause.

“O, well—that’s a mercy. Friend of Mr. Branker’s?”

“Never seen the chap.”

“Is that so? But I suppose——”

“Well, you see, I don’t know much about literature. I’m home on a holiday. I farm in Rhodesia.”

“Rhodesia?”

“Yes.”

And then three or four heavy raindrops pattered upon the hood of the car, and she looked up at the black sky.

“It’s going to rain like——”

“Yes, apparently so.”

She glanced at his unprotected figure.

“You are an ass. Why didn’t you bring——?”

He smiled at her.

“O, I don’t mind a soak. But I’m keeping you.”

She looked at him for a moment intently.

“Yes, you are. I was going down to St. Martin’s to shop. I could drop you at the top of Pannage hill. I won’t come into the loathsome place.”

He said, “I shouldn’t. It’s awfully decent of you. I’ll say yes and thank you.”

The thunderstorm broke over them before she had driven half a mile, and when they came to the hill above Pannage the rain was behaving like stage rain. She pulled up, and they looked at each other, and he reached for the door handle. They had exchanged about six words during the drive.

“Thanks—most awfully.”

He was preparing to get out into that deluge, but she reprieved him.

“Wait a moment. It can’t last.”

“But I’m wasting your time.”

Her face had a sudden fierceness.

“O, that’s not worth worrying about. I’m selling up the farm before the autumn.”

It seemed to him that her fierceness concealed a wound. He wanted to ask her—— But how could he ask her? He remained at her side in the car.

“That’s rather a pity, isn’t it?”

She gave a little shrug. She looked through the wet windscreen at the conglomeration of architectural improvisations that was Pannage.

“Hideous, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

“I knew it when there was nothing but shingle and the coastguard cottages.”

“How lovely.”

“It was. You just tumbled off the shingle. Another chap and I had a tent just where that prawn in aspic bungalow stands.”

She smiled faintly.

She said, “Have you noticed any shortage of eggs in Pannage? No. I used to supply the place with eggs. I supplied your predecessor. You ought to read that last book of his.”

He glanced at her, hesitated, and was bold.

“I have read it.”

He was aware of her as a kind of young and rigid presence.

“Like it?”

“I thought it—an utterly rotten egg.”

For some seconds there was silence. She appeared to be willing herself to say something.

“Supposed to be topical, you know. Local colour, and all that. As a matter

of fact, when you allow a man to be a bit of a pal you don't expect——"

She faltered, and he prompted her.

"Rotten eggs."

"Exactly."

The rain was slackening, and again his movements suggested that he was about to get out of her car.

"Rather a foul sort of fellow. I have a feeling that the bungalow I occupy ought to be fumigated. Yes, it's holding up now. You ought to be moving on."

He got out, and she made no attempt to detain him. She supposed that he might believe some of Mr. Branker's story, and most certainly she was not going to explain or deny anything. But he stood looking at her, with one hand on the door.

"I say, don't think it awful cheek, but would you mind if I came up once or twice to—to buy eggs?"

For a moment she looked as though she was tempted to slap his face, but something in his eyes appeased her.

"Rather a long way, isn't it?"

"O, just a stroll. I'm long in the leg. I'd be most awfully grateful."

"For the eggs?"

"Yes, of course, for the eggs."

She laughed, but her laughter had an edge of bitterness.

"Well—I suppose you're not after copy. But I'm pretty hard, you know, now. All right, but you had better bring a mackintosh."

He put out a hand.

"That's perfectly splendid of you."

She accepted his hand and said rather breathlessly, "You're getting beastly wet. You had better buzz off. Cheerio."

He stepped back, smiled and saluted her.

"Cheerio."

Before he had known her a week he had heard the whole of the story, nor was it necessary for her to explain that Mr. Branker and his book had made life at Windmill Hill seem rather impossible. Of course she knew all about the new

candour and the new nakedness or naturalness and all that, but a man like Branker seemed to possess the mind of an unlicked lout. Yes, of course he was clever; he could give his loutishness a polish, make it appear witty and furiously modern, but the essential lout in Mr. Branker was limited by its very loutishness. He appeared to think that all women were raw meat from the same shop. The meat varied a little in quality, that was all. Woman and her sex were just a universal burnt offering and bloody sacrifice to the crude realist in Mr. Branker.

She said, “Of course, if you like, you can believe that I behaved like the girl in the book——”

“I don’t believe it.”

She looked him straight in the eyes.

“Sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, as a matter of fact I didn’t. As a matter of fact, when he began to get greasily sentimental, I couldn’t stand him at any price. In fact—— Oh, well, he had his revenge. He has made me look a nauseating fool before all the people I know. Nothing sticks like sex suggestion. He knew I couldn’t go for him and show him up. He knew that much about me.”

They were sitting on the grass in her garden, and Redmayne, who was smoking a pipe, laid it aside on the grass.

“You know, there is one thing that I am going to do before I go back to Rhodesia. I’m going to kick that man.”

She gave a little laugh.

“Is it worth it?”

“Every time.”

He disappeared, and Pannage realized that Mr. Branker’s bungalow had lost its tenant. He had been given a description of Mr. Branker. He put up at a London hotel, and the first book he consulted was a copy of “Who’s Who.” He found that Mr. Branker’s home address was Hampstead—“No. 3, Regency Terrace.” He went to Hampstead, and, calling at No. 3, inquired for the novelist. Mr. Branker was served by a married couple and the man interviewed Redmayne. He said that Mr. Branker was out, but he was expected home for dinner.

“What name, sir?”

“Never mind. I’ll call again.”

He hung about Regency Terrace for two days before his opportunity arrived. He had become sure of Mr. Branker’s person, and he had seen in Mr. Branker a type that it would be extremely pleasurable to kick. Mr. Branker was rather large and fat, with complacent blue eyes, and swelling chin and forehead. He was the sort of man whose walk was a waddle, a man who perspired easily.

Redmayne discovered that every evening about nine Mr. Branker took a little walk. He exercised himself upon the Heath, and upon that predestined evening Redmayne followed him. He was hoping that Mr. Branker’s constitutional would carry him into some more or less secluded spot where his penance could be performed in private. It did so. In the spreading twilight Redmayne found himself in a kind of little glade with the prey before him.

He overtook the novelist.

“Excuse me, Mr. Branker, I think?”

Mr. Branker swung round, and his blue eyes stared. When accosted by strangers he expected to be asked for an autograph or a sympathetic loan.

“Yes. What can I do for you?”

Redmayne’s very white teeth showed.

“O—I’d like you to join me in cocktails for two.”

The assault was so unexpected that the sacred act was performed upon Mr. Branker without his putting up any sort of serious and fleshly protest. He was a big man, but obviously he had no stomach for such barbarism. Hit hard and truly between the eyes he blinked and staggered. His hat fell off. He did manage to exclaim, “What the devil? Are you mad? Disgraceful!”

He was caught by the collar, twirled and given a push, and Redmayne, measuring his distance nicely, performed that pleasant act. He repeated it twice.

“Tails for two, you cad!”

He left Mr. Branker sitting on the grass and looking shocked and pensive. He collected Mr. Branker’s hat and walked off with it as a trophy. Mr. Branker did not follow him. Obviously there was no copy to be collected from so humiliating and disgusting an incident.

Redmayne took a morning train to St. Martin’s and a motor-bus to Pannage, and about tea-time he appeared at Windmill Hill. He found Joan

Langdale collecting eggs from her chicken houses. He had brought a brown paper parcel with him, and he unwrapped it and showed her a grey felt hat.

“Here’s the scalp. Would you like it?”

She glanced darkly at the grey object. She knew that particular hat.

“No, burn it. But—Dick——”

“Yes, I performed the sacred act. I enjoyed it.”

“O, my dear, but supposing——”

He laughed.

“Not much kudos to be got out of being kicked. Do you think he will advertise it, pass it on to his publicity agent? Not likely.”

She did not object to the arm that enfolded her.

“Look here, Jo, do you really mean to give up the farm?”

“Yes. I simply couldn’t——”

“Oh, well, there’s an alternative. Care to consider it?”

“I might.”

“Come out to Rhodesia and farm with me. It’s not a bad life, and there are no literary gents in Rhodesia. At least, I haven’t struck one.”

She said, “I’ll come.”

THE UNEXPECTED HEIR

THE clerk opened the door of Mr. Merriman's room and announced a visitor —"Sir John Jewell."

Mr. Merriman pushed back his chair and stood up. He was a little, dark, alert man with more humour in his eyes and mouth than the conventions might allow to the law. He had not expected this particular visitor. He held out a hand.

"I thought you were still in Canada."

The young man smiled at Mr. Merriman, and somehow that pleasant smile of his was both unexpected and necessary, for in repose his face had too lean a fierceness. The smile seemed to break up its brown hardness, the blue ice of the eyes.

"I got things cleared up, sir, sooner than I thought. Besides——"

Mr. Merriman withdrew his hand from that very powerful brown grip. So this was young Jewell, old Harry Jewell's unexpected heir, a man who had the face and the figure of a frontiersman.

"So, you were in a hurry. Sit down. Keen to take on the new adventure?"

"Well, yes. I did not lose much time."

"Most certainly you did not. Sit down."

Mr. Merriman had much to explain, and Sir John Jewell sat with his elbows on his knees, his body leaning towards the lawyer, and his very blue eyes fixed on Mr. Merriman's face. They were rather disconcerting eyes, so steady, so unafraid, so relentless, and it occurred to Mr. Merriman that this young man from Canada would be an unpleasant person to quarrel with, but a good comrade to have with you in a tight corner. Also, it occurred to Mr. Merriman that Midworth Court and Midworth village might be inheriting the unexpected in the person of this young man who looked like a hard-bitten

trooper of the Canadian Mounted Police.

Mr. Merriman had a clear head and no little skill in putting a case into words. Moreover he had known Midworth and old Sir Richard Jewell for twenty-five years. Sir Richard had passed the last ten years of his life as a recluse and a dreamer, a star-gazer in more senses than one. Midworth Court had had its own small observatory and telescope, and young Jewell was inheriting a curious tradition.

Very conscious of the young man's vivid face he began to speak of certain matters that had long been in his mind.

"I suppose you are keen on taking over an English estate? Yes, I see you are."

Young Jewell smiled and nodded.

"I'm absolutely all out in it. I feel like a kid."

Mr. Merriman liked the man. He seemed to be the sort of person that Midworth needed.

"May I say that England isn't Canada?"

"Yes, it's an old country."

"It's a good country, but some of it is rather like the curate's egg. Now, a few words about Midworth. I don't want to damp your enthusiasm—but——"

John Jewell's blue eyes gleamed.

"Yes, let's have all the buts, sir. I may seem a bit raw to an old place like Midworth Court. I've lived a pretty tough life."

"Yes—I think I can appreciate that."

Mr. Merriman had dealt with the financial aspects of the Jewell estate, death duty, rents, dilapidations, the income that the new baronet might expect to possess. That income would be adequate in spite of social changes. But the estate had been allowed to run wild. Yes, Sir Richard had had his head in the stars. He had left things to other people, and the other people——

The Canadian was quick to understand him.

"Too much rope! Is that it? I'd like you to be perfectly frank."

Mr. Merriman was frank, and as he watched John Jewell's face he saw a kind of amused grimness express itself in jaw and mouth and eyes.

"So—that's the position."

“I’m afraid it is. A good deal to clear up. I was not in a position to interfere. Sir Richard was a dreamer.”

“Which meant—that these other people were very wide-awake.”

“Exactly.”

Young Jewell sat with his hands clasped, staring at the top of Mr. Merriman’s desk. There was a kind of secret smile on his face. He appeared to be thinking.

“Mr. Merriman, I’ve got an idea.”

The lawyer waited for the idea.

“I’d like it to be assumed that I’m still in Canada, clearing up my property there. That could be arranged, I suppose?”

“Easily.”

“Good. Well, we will assume that I am, say, Mr. Brown, and that I am in search of a little place in England. Let us suppose that I want to farm. I go exploring. I rather fancy the Midworth country. I go and look round.”

Mr. Merriman’s eyes became humorous.

“I rather like your idea. Spying out Canaan.”

Young Jewell nodded.

“I should probably find out more as Mr. Brown than as Sir John Jewell. There’d be humour in it. The unknown warrior, sir.”

And Mr. Merriman laughed.

“I don’t know whether it is worth it. They may be rather mean little people. Of course—you could sack the lot. But—still—old servants.”

“Well—I should just go and find things out.”

The three villages, Eastworth, Midworth and Westworth, lay on the Surrey and Sussex borders in high country that was well wooded, and still refrained from being suburban. Eastworth had been made famous by a school of painters. Westworth had been the home of one of the English poets. Midworth, neither west nor east, and certainly not a Christ between two thieves, had known neither art nor poetry. Midworth had always been somewhat formless and even slightly sinister in its aspects. It lay in a kind of deep green cleft between the hills, and the old people of those parts had a saying that Midworth pulled a hood over its head at half-past four. The steep uplands of Midworth Court and its high beeches shut off the evening sunlight.

Midworth had its inn—the Chequers, kept by a Mr. Golightly who was far more a person of importance than the Midworth parson, and it was to Mr. Golightly that a certain young man addressed himself on an afternoon late in May.

“Can I put up here?”

Mr. Golightly looked at the young man and at the young man’s car. It was a cheap and shabby two-seater. The landlord of the Chequers did not encourage casual guests.

“How long for?”

His unfriendliness had not the slightest effect upon the stranger.

“Oh, two or three days. It depends. I’m looking round the country for a small place to settle in.”

Mr. Golightly’s oblique and rather unpleasant eyes re-examined both the stranger and the occasion. He supposed that this young fellow was just like dozens of other young fools, amateur gentlemen farmers who thought there might be a living to be made on the land. Mr. Golightly was one of those persons who saw to it that if there was any money to be lost by such young fools, a part of the cash remained in various Midworth pockets.

“You’ll have to take us as you find us. We don’t run a jazz band.”

That was Mr. Golightly’s joke and the young man smiled at it.

“That’s quite O.K. My name’s Brown.”

Mr. Golightly shouted over a surly shoulder:

“Milly, show the gentleman No. 3.”

Mr. Brown carried his suit-case upstairs at the heels of a fluffy-haired young woman who was as casual as her father.

Midworth possessed a telephone system. The Chequers telephone lived in a kind of stuffy cupboard off the private bar, and Mr. Golightly rang up someone on the telephone.

“That you, George. Bob speaking. Got a young fellow here who says he’s looking for a little place. Yes—thought you might be on the biz. That bungalow you bought from young Ferris. Yes—another Ferris—probably. Thought I’d put you wise. Quite. Nothing like being on the job. Cheerio, old lad.”

John Jewell went out and explored. England was in a May mood and the

high beechwoods of Midworth Court were in young leaf, green clouds against a perfect sky. The east lodge of the Court stood just beyond the church. The white gate hung open as though inviting all the world to enter. It needed painting, and it needed it badly. The Canadian paused at the lodge, but no one came out to challenge him, and he walked on.

The park was surrounded by woods of beech and oak and an oak fence, and the oak fence was falling to pieces. Moreover, Jewell soon noticed that many trees had been felled during the last two or three years, and some of the butts were quite fresh. Bracken was springing up everywhere. The park itself contained groups of magnificent old trees—Scotch firs, oaks, beeches, a sequoia or two, sweet chestnuts. Its rolling, grassy spaces flowed above a deep valley into which the sunlight poured. Its beauty was the beauty of an England that was passing.

Jewell stood on a high bluff where Scotch firs grew, and looked out across the landscape. He thought, “All this is mine,” and he was conscious of pride and exultation. He had fallen in love with the place at first sight. He could see Midworth Court away beyond the trees, a long, low house of very old red brick with high chimneys and gables set upon a terrace. Its many windows glimmered at him.

That evening he happened to catch fragments of conversation from the private bar of the Chequers. He had been out again exploring and had come back and sat down on a seat under a pollarded elm in front of the inn. Dusk was falling, and he had filled his pipe.

“What’s the fellow’s name, Bob?”

“Brown.”

“It ought to be Green, old lad.”

There was laughter, and then a voice said—“What price Canada? That’s what interests us, Mr. Sugden, what? If the old man was as green as god, we’ll put up the parson to pray that the young one—may be green as grass.”

Someone suggested rather gruffly that the speaker had better shut up, and an argument developed.

“Well, what I says is, that the squires pinched the land from us in the old days. We’ve got a right to pickings.”

“That’s true. Half the park was common land. The old man’s grandfather jumped it. The Labour Party’s going to turn the land back to the people.”

Again the gruff voice interposed.

“Don’t you be so sure of that. Don’t you be so sure that you’d be better off. Not so much coming your way, my lad.”

Another voice broke in.

“Has anybody heard when the new chap’s coming? You ought to know, Mr. Sugden.”

The gruff voice replied:

“He’s still out in Canada.”

“Pity he doesn’t stay there. We don’t want a blinking Colonial bossing it round here.”

Jewell got up from the seat, and with his pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets strolled into the private bar. There was a moment’s silence and eyes appraised him. He smiled at the gathering, and his smile was pleasant and easy.

“I’m not intruding, gentlemen?”

His voice was not quite English, but it did not suggest to these Midworthites that he came from the other side of the Atlantic. Mr. Golightly was standing in a corner. He introduced the stranger.

“Come right in, Mr. Brown. Just a little family party.”

Jewell sat down by the window and ordered a drink. There were five other men in the rather dim room that smelt of sawdust and tobacco and beer. Jewell found himself next to the man with the gruff voice. He was a heavy, saturnine person with sly eyes and a rather brutal mouth that could be suave enough when it chose. Mr. Jewell behaved like a bright, ingenuous, barley-headed boy. He was ready to tell the whole Midworth world his business, and to listen to Midworth’s advice.

“Want a little place, do you?”

“Yes, that’s the idea. Someone’s left me a little money. I’m fed up with stuffing in an office. I want to live on the land.”

Mr. Golightly nudged a neighbour with his knee, a fat, bald man who wore spectacles and an air of bland rectitude.

“Here’s the very gentleman for you, sir. Mr. Barter. Does all our building and decorating. What Mr. Barter doesn’t know about Midworth isn’t worth knowing.”

Jewell smiled upon Mr. Barter.

“I’d like to have a talk to you, sir.”

“Glad to be of any use, Mr. Brown.”

In the course of the next week Jewell began to penetrate the various personalities of Midworth. The man with the harsh voice and the brutal mouth was Sugden, the Midworth Court bailiff. Every evening the Chequers collected the same coterie, a kind of secret village council. It included one Soames, the Midworth Court head-gardener, and less frequently so a Mr. Bliss who had been Sir Richard’s valet. Jewell was welcomed to the circle. He stood these gentlemen drinks. He more than guessed that he was expected to be plucked by them.

Old Barter, bland and bespectacled, was proposing to sell him the late Mr. Ferris’s bungalow “White Gates” and five acres of land for the sum of seventeen hundred pounds. Mr. Barter had bought the property from a bankrupt and suicidal Ferris for seven hundred and fifty pounds, but that was business. Jewell understood business as well as any man.

He offered old Barter twelve hundred pounds for the property, and Mr. Barter looked pained, but after some argument he accepted the offer. Probably, within a year or two he would be able to repurchase “White Gates” at a bankrupt figure and resell it once more at a profit.

Jewell moved into “White Gates.” It was a poor, sad, flimsy little place, and it seemed to possess the ghost of a man who had been broken. Its five acres of rough grass and young orchard joined one of the meadows of Burnt Farm that was rented by one Jesse Latimer. Burnt Farm was one of the Midworth Court farms, and Latimer was a Jewell tenant.

The Canadian met Latimer in the lane that served both Burnt Farm and the bungalow. Latimer was one of those lean, silent, aloof men, in age about fifty, round-shouldered and somehow austere. As potential neighbours they exchanged a few words; Jewell was aware of the farmer’s faded blue eyes looking at him with a shrewdness that contained pity.

“Going to run chickens?”

Yes, that was the idea. Jewell appeared to be very full of his potential chicken farm.

Mr. Latimer looked at him kindly.

“Barter sold you the place?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose he didn’t tell you the ground was sick.”

“No, he did not tell me that.”

Latimer gave a little shrug of his gaunt, round shoulders. The movement was expressive and final.

Jewell moved into “White Gates” with a little cheap furniture and secret amusement. So the land was fowl-sick, and the whole village knew it, and he was the sweet fool. He kept his mouth shut, and his eyes and ears open. He smiled upon all Midworth when he met it.

He began to receive visits from all sorts of people. Mr. Barter came to suggest that he should redecorate the bungalow for him, and Jewell smiled upon Mr. Barter.

“You might send me in an estimate.”

Sugden, the Midworth Court bailiff, arrived one morning, and found Jewell painting his own front door.

“Morning, sir. I hear you may be wanting some chicken-houses.”

“Yes, possibly.”

“I have some good second houses up at my place. I could let you have ’em pretty reasonably.”

Mr. Sugden’s place! And was Mr. Sugden going to remain secretive about the sick soil.

“I might come and look at them.”

“Any time that suits you, sir.”

Jewell went up to the Court that very evening, but not before he had consulted Mr. Latimer. Mr. Latimer could tell him all about the chicken-houses. They had belonged to the unfortunate Ferris, and Mr. Sugden had bought them at the sale of Ferris’s effects. They had gone for next to nothing.

Jewell was amused. The various Midworth loafers, and there were quite half a dozen of them, had tried to attach themselves to him as hired men. Midworth was teaching him many things, and as he walked through his own park to buy chicken-houses from his own bailiff he saw the humour of the situation. He was beginning to follow the workings of the little mean minds of these people. But what had made them mean?

He found Sugden smoking a pipe and looking over a pigsty fence at a litter of young pigs.

“You ought to keep pigs, sir.”

“Yes—I might. Got any to sell?”

“I could let you have a couple of gilts later.”

It occurred to Jewell to wonder whether he would be buying his own pigs or Mr. Sugden’s pigs. But about those chicken-houses? The bailiff showed him the houses, and named a figure that flattered this nice fool.

“I’ll let—you—have ’em cheap, sir.”

Jewell did not query the figure, though it was just treble what Sugden had paid for the stuff.

“Send them along.”

“I’m afraid I shall have to charge you for carting, sir.”

“Oh—that’s O.K.”

And then Mr. Jewell asked the man an innocent question.

“You have a lovely place here. Would you mind if I strolled through the park now and again?”

“Go where you like, sir.”

“May I have a look at the gardens?”

“See Mr. Soames, the head-gardener, and say you’ve seen me.”

There was nothing that Midworth did not know, and it soon discovered that young Jewell—after camping in the bungalow for a week—had gone to lodge at Burnt Farm. The Latimers were not popular in the village, for Latimer had refused to join Midworth’s secret syndicate. A farmer’s life may be a desperate struggle, but Latimer had old Puritan blood in him, and a kind of saturnine pride. But Midworth did not assign puritanical motives to young Jewell. Latimer had a daughter, and Ruth Latimer had looks.

“He’s after the old man’s girl, hee-hee.”

“When a chap takes a lodger——!”

Midworth had no illusions upon sex. It began to create an imaginary situation that was provocative and interesting. It was only too ready to apply some stains to the too clean Latimer linen.

Perhaps, Ruth Latimer knew the village almost as well as her father did. She was a tall, straight, dark young woman, with a clean streak of red for a mouth, and eyes that looked frankly at life. She was given to silence. She had

to work very hard. She was made of the same stuff as her father, and to Jewell she suggested something that grew straight and comely and clean.

He took his meals with the Latimers. He had a feeling that they had accepted him as a lodger with secret protests, but when he considered Jesse Latimer's threadbare coat and clean but worn collar he understood that times were hard. Moreover, the Latimers had a dignity of their own, a proud reticence. They had made no attempt to sell him anything at an outrageous profit. They charged him only two guineas a week for his board and lodging.

Jewell came in to supper one evening with a little quiet smile on his face.

"Someone has been trying to sell me manure."

"Sugden?"

"Yes, Mr. Sugden. Best cow manure. What would you charge me a load?"

Mr. Latimer was cutting the bread.

"Ten and six delivered."

"How much do you think Sugden asked me?"

"Fifteen shillings."

"A pound."

He noticed that the father and daughter exchanged glances, and that the girl nodded at her father as though bidding him do some particular thing. Jesse Latimer was spreading butter on his bread. He seemed to reflect for a moment, and then he said:

"It is no business of mine, Mr. Jewell, but are you thinking of making a profit on that place?"

"Well, that's the idea."

"You'll never make a living in Midworth. They'll never let you make a living."

Jewell met the girl's eyes, and he seemed to see compassion in them.

"Oh—it's like that, is it? This is a funny sort of village, Mr. Latimer."

"Haven't you noticed that it's got a crooked street?"

"Well—yes."

"There's a superstition in these parts that a village with a crooked street ____"

“Is full of crooked people?”

“Yes.”

Jewell was silent for a moment, and then—with a secret smile—he asked Mr. Latimer certain questions.

“What about the other villages, Westworth and Eastworth?”

“They’re good villages.”

“Tell me, when Sir Richard Jewell was alive were things different?”

“Years back—they were, before he became strange.”

“He kept the village straight?”

“As straight as it could be kept.”

“And when he grew old—the village became rather too cunning for him? Or perhaps—he saw through these people and let them stew?”

“It may be so.”

Jewell got up and produced a pipe. He looked at Ruth.

“May I smoke?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going out for a ramble. It’s a perfect evening. I have permission to explore the park.”

He was exploring many things. He discovered that Mr. Sugden kept a dozen cows at the Court and five score or so of pigs, and that ostensibly they were Jewell property. Mr. Sugden was supposed to submit monthly accounts to Mr. Merriman in London, and when Jewell had those accounts passed to him he found many omissions and discrepancies. The milk recorded as sold would have been supplied by four cows. No pigs were accounted for. The manure supplied to Jewell himself was never credited to the estate. Obviously, much timber had been cut, and it had disappeared into the unknown.

It was the same in the gardens. Jewell had explored the Midworth Court gardens. There were grape-houses, tomato-houses, masses of fruit and vegetables, and he realized very soon that Mr. Soames was running a market garden of his own.

Apparently the whole village was exploiting Midworth Court. Everybody was in the syndicate and had to be assigned some share. The park swarmed with rabbits, and on more than one occasion Jewell caught a man setting

snares. He questioned one of the fellows.

“Hallo, getting a free supper?”

The man grinned at him. It was no business of Jewell’s.

“Have to keep vermin down.”

“Yes—I suppose so.”

In two or three months the Canadian had made an exhaustive study of Midworth’s activities. He would have described the inhabitants as a community of tame thieves, and yet he gathered that they had their justifications. They were getting back that which a cheap philosophy proposes to prove had been filched from them. But what a method, what a manufacturing of mean little minds, of universal, sly, silly parasitism.

He both scorned these people and pitied them.

The Latimers were different. But why? He gathered that there had been Latimers in Midworth for the last two hundred years, and that before the agricultural crisis of the eighteen-eighties the Latimers had been prosperous people. Was it a question of breed, of a pride that—in spite of bitter struggles—would not stoop to the little swindling cynicism of the village? He supposed so. He could picture Jesse Latimer growing a little more crooked and bent in body each year, but keeping his soul straight.

There came a time when Jewell could speak of these things to the daughter. Midworth declared that Ruth Latimer was a young shrew, but John Jewell found nothing shrewish in her. He divined in her silent compassion.

“Life can be pretty bitter on the land, Ruth.”

“Are you finding that out—so soon?”

He prevaricated.

“Oh—I’m young. I was thinking——”

Her head went up.

“Of us?”

“Yes and no. You’re proud people. O, don’t get me wrong, my dear, pride’s my own besetting sin. I’m with you—utterly. But I was thinking of all these little scroungers who seem to live by trying to swindle each other. Is it that life can be so mean and hard in some English villages——?”

They were standing at a field gate and she let her arms rest on the gate.

“Perhaps. My feeling about it is, Jack, that a village like Midworth has always had a master. No, I’m no Socialist; I’ve no use for all that sentimental humbug. Some men and places need masters, a man to lead. Otherwise, greedy rogues like Sugden, and old Barter, and the fellow at the pub, get the whole place in their clutches and run it.”

“What about the parson?”

She gave a toss of the head.

“He’s very old and very poor. A place like this needs a man with a pretty tough temper.”

He glanced at her clear, clean profile.

“What about the new heir, the man from Canada? Perhaps he may be the sort of fellow——”

“Oh, they’ll try and fool him.”

He laughed.

“I should rather like to be that fellow.”

Ostensibly, the new owner of “White Gates” was serious in his preparations for living on the land. The village thought him very innocent, a fellow who bought pullets that were supposed to be March birds, and had been hatched out late in May. The village gathered that Mr. Brown had some money to lose, and when that money had gone Midworth would cease to be interested in him. Moreover, rumour had it that the young fool was to marry that shrew of a Latimer girl.

It was true, but over the problem of “White Gates” John and Ruth had had much serious talk.

“Do you want me to live there, Jack? It can’t be done, my dear.”

“You mean the little place is all wrong?”

“Most of such places are all wrong. Just poor little cardboard boxes, all right for the people who have finished with life and have retired on their savings or a pension.”

“We couldn’t make a living?”

“My dear, you’ve seen my father at work. It’s a bitter life these days, and he is the real thing. If he can’t wring more than a pittance from a farm, how do you expect——?”

“But it’s all wrong, Ruth. England has got astray—somehow. A man ought

to be able to live on the land. I wonder whether it is because the county's all hedges, and peoples minds get hedged in."

"You should talk to father. He has ideas—and if he had had a chance—and the capital——"

"I'll have a talk to your father. I should like to be that Canadian, and try to shove some new life and pride into the place. Yes, and make it pay. Meanwhile, what are we to do, run a garage, or something?"

She said, "There seems to be more money spent on the roads than on the land."

Early in September Jewell found an excuse for spending a few days in town. He said he had business to attend to, and that same week Midworth was warned officially that Sir Richard's heir had arrived in England. Midworth prepared to put on its best smirk, and to have its sly-boots well polished. The village was intensely curious as to the future. Would the new fellow at the Court be nice and easy, a gentleman—that is to say, a person who could be exploited?

Jewell sat and smiled at Mr. Merriman.

"Yes, I know now where I am, or where I shall be. Both Sugden and Soames have been doing much business behind our backs, and the village has to be allowed its plunder."

He laughed.

"When they see my face!"

Mr. Merriman was curious as to the future. Had Mr. Jewell any plans, any proposals for resurrecting the self-regard of such a community? And was it possible? The Canadian's blue eyes had a gleam in them.

"Oh, yes—I have my plans. I am going to try and teach that village something. We'll get down to hard tacks. Neither servility nor silly swindling. What that village wants is a boss and hard work."

"Isn't that the problem, work?"

"Exactly, sir. It's my idea to try and get a new spirit into that place. After all, it's as beautiful a spot——"

Mr. Merriman smiled. "And only man is vile."

Midworth Court was warned that Sir John Jewell would arrive by car on the Saturday. Actually, some attempt was made to create a good impression and to give the new baronet a mild public greeting. Mr. Soames suggested the

lodge gates might be decorated, and that all the estate hands should be collected in their Sunday clothes to receive the man from Canada. A part of the village joined in the reception. Mr. Barter and Mr. Golightly were both present, polished and sleek.

Sir John Jewell arrived in Midworth about four o'clock. A look-out had been posted on the London road, but when Jewell's shabby old two-seater drove into the village the scout waved no signal, for there was nothing singular or suggestive in the appearance of Mr. Brown. None the less Mr. Brown drove his car to the lodge gates, and saw that some public occasion was in the air. About fifty people were hanging round the gates. Decorations had been prepared.

Jewell pulled up. He looked grimly innocent. It was Mr. Sugden who came forward and spoke to him.

"Do you mind moving your car? We're expecting Sir John any moment. If you want to see the show you can park on the grass."

Jewell looked into Mr. Sugden's sly eyes. He spoke distinctly so that everybody should hear.

"Oh, that's quite all right, Sugden. You see, I am Sir John Jewell. Very kind of you all to give me this welcome."

He raised his hat to the small and dumbfounded crowd, and drove on through the gates.

Said Mr. Barter to Mr. Golightly as they walked with serious and fallen faces to the Chequers—"Well, of all the dirty tricks! Coming down to spy on us like that!"

Messrs. Sugden, Soames and Bliss received their marching orders that very evening, and not one of them had the assurance to question the ultimatum. They went out from the Jewell presence sick and sullen men.

Just before sunset Jewell walked down to Burnt Farm. The sensational news had not reached the Latimers.

"Hallo, Jack, seen anything of the new squire?"

Jewell laughed.

"Well, yes, I met him up at the Court. As a matter of fact, kid—I met myself. I'd like to introduce you to myself. Miss Latimer—meet Sir John Jewell."

For an instant she looked flushed and angry.

“Do you mean to say you are——?”

“Sorry, but I am.”

“You’ve been playing a game all these months?”

“Not quite a game, Ruth. I’ve found out the real people. I’m going to bring a bit of Canada—and you—into this silly village. You’ll help me to teach it a few things? Say—yes.”

She stood apart from him, brooding.

“I’m to live up there and be Lady Jewell and feel—that they all hate me?”

“We’ll soon change all that.”

“But father?”

“I want your father to be my manager. He’s got ideas, and so have I. We’ll put some pride into this darned place. We’ll make a real good show of it. I’m new country, kid. Come on, be a pard.”

She put out her hands to him.

“You won’t ask me to be a useless, silly sort of thing?”

“You! Not likely. Come on, let’s go and tell your father. We’ll make a new flag for Midworth, the oak and the maple pinned together, and hoist it in the tower of the village church. Come on, say yes.”

She kissed him with a curious air of solemnity.

“That’s my pledge. Yes, let’s go and tell father. You’re our landlord, you know, Jack.”

He took her by the arm, and pausing half-way up the garden path, pointed to the flimsy bungalow.

“What shall we do with that? Put a match to it?”

Her eyes grew mischievous.

“No, sell it back to Mr. Barter.”

REPRIEVE

GLEDHILL had always been an unlucky man, possibly because too sensitive a conscience had made him fastidious in the matter of exploiting opportunities.

His little world in the city knew him as a rather shy man in the early forties, a thin, brownish and somewhat silent person, going grey at the temples and suggesting youth that had lost itself and was still looking for its lost legions. He had been badly mauled in the war. He was always a little too old, or slow or sensitive. He had lost the one great thing in life through being too sensitive. He had stood and looked at love, and had said to himself, “I can’t afford to ask her to marry me. I’m a bit too old—and I have been too much knocked about. It wouldn’t be fair. Besides—she’s such a kid. I don’t believe she realizes——”

So, he had stood aside, and watched life with those hungry and shy eyes of his, until a more adventurous and impressive male had sailed in and left him—alone on the shore—gazing. It had hurt him very horribly at the time. He had never felt about any other woman as he had felt about Marie Foster. Being the sort of man he was he had effaced himself, drifted into other surroundings, and become submerged in a little, solitary service-flat and business.

That was nearly nine years ago. If he thought about Marie at all, which he did on occasions, he thought of her as Marie Greatorex, and the mother of little Greatorexes. Swaggering, good-looking, breezy fellow—Greatorex, scratch at golf, and a partner in big business. He had had no chance with Greatorex.

Meanwhile, the Gledhill business pushed slowly and sensitively uphill, had reached a little plateau and paused there breathlessly. Gledhill had been making fifteen hundred a year, out of which he had had to help a widowed sister with a family, who was trying to run a tea-shop in a south coast town.

Then, like thousands of his fellows, Jack Gledhill had found himself involved in the world’s chaos. Eloquent publicists might describe it as a

Financial Cyclone, but all that Gledhill knew was that his business began to blow to bits like a haycock. Nothing that he did or tried to do seemed to make any difference. And suddenly, after two years of inarticulate, mute enduring, something seemed to break in him. He had a bill out against him for a thousand pounds. His life insurance would cover it, under the contract he had signed. There would be a little over for Eileen and her tea-shop.

So, one day in August he packed two suit-cases, with an automatic pistol he happened to own in one of them, and went down into the country. He was a lover of quiet places. He had spent many week-ends wandering along the Downs.

He thought, “I will have a last look at England before I die.”

He chose Newlands Corner. He had phoned the hotel, that most charming rest-house where he had stayed so often. The hotel car met him at Clandon station. He was driven up through that green and secret village with its slanting sunlight and its shadows, up to the great grey hills. A serene sky covered all that lambent landscape, valleys and hills and woods, and beyond the dim grey South Downs he divined the sea.

The hotel was human. It remembered his name, and the room he preferred. It met him in the gay and gold dining-room with its green curtains and grey loggia in the person of Munday the head-waiter. Munday was young; Munday had a pleasant smile and kind eyes. Like the hotel he was a little unusual.

“Glad to see you again, sir.”

“Glad to be here, Munday.”

But was he? And what sort of gladness was this, the whimsical, gay anguish of a man who was beaten, and about to die? The dinner was excellent, so rightly so that in his dream state he did not notice its excellence. How many more hours had he to live? And the bill? As he sat in the lounge, smoking a cigarette and drinking his coffee he told himself that he would leave some cash in an envelope for the hotel. A party of young things had drifted in and were laughing and chattering over their little drinks. Yes, youth! The swagger and the colour of it tantalized him. The windows were filling with the dusk, and that soft, indeterminate greyness was his colour.

He had changed for dinner, but what did that matter? He went up to his room, slipped the pistol into the right-hand pocket of his dinner-jacket, filled and lit a pipe, and going down he passed out into the garden by the library window. His urge was towards the downs, and as he turned into the hotel drive he saw the moon as a blur of tawny light among the trees. Strange, that the

moon should be over there, a half-moon shaped like a silver kettledrum. He took the path up to the car-park, and crossing the high road, found himself looking at the landscape and the moon.

Beautiful? Ye gods, yes! Never had this England looked more mysterious and strange and beautiful. The silence was complete. There were wisps and streaks of white mist in the valley. Wooded hills had their blackness edged with silver. Turning west he strolled slowly along the Drove Road, that broad sweep of turf between the thorns and yews, a road that was old as man. He met no one. And then, a most strange feeling came over him. It was as though time and space had passed. He felt himself part of some ultimate and vast reality. This world of woods and hills and valleys, sky and moon, was but a pattern, and he a little point of throbbing light in it. The night seemed to tremble. The earth under his feet was vapour, and he—a slave of the senses—was about to escape from them and behold this ghost world reveal itself.

The stillness was utter. A little wind came suddenly and touched his cheek, and with it—drifted voices. They startled him most strangely. It was as though he—already a disembodied spirit—had been brought back to earth. A little shiver went through him. Women's voices, and they were coming his way! He stood quite still. He would let these shadows of the old world pass.

Set like a black post in the sweep of the moonlit turf he waited, willing himself to listen to what the voices said. The world of women had nothing more to say to him. He heard one of the girls laugh.

"No, it's not a post, Jean, it's a man."

And suddenly he was sure that he had heard that voice before.

"Ask him."

"I'd better."

They had come into his field of vision, two bare-headed, short-skirted figures between him and that deep valley, and again the night overwhelmed him with a sense of strangeness. Was it possible that the past was to reveal itself as a wound in the obscure body of his tragedy?

The same voice was speaking to him.

"Excuse me—but can you tell us how to find the hotel?"

"Newlands Corner?"

"Yes."

He stood mute, and then as though moved by some inevitable impulse he

walked towards them and spoke.

“I am staying there. If you follow this grass track until you reach the road ——”

The girls had their backs to the moon, but he was facing it, and to the taller of the two he ceased to be a mere stranger in evening dress. Her eyes were staring at him.

“Well—of all the extraordinary things——!”

And then he knew.

“Marie!”

“It’s like two ghosts meeting on the top of a mountain.”

He was conscious of mental confusion. She was introducing him to her friend. “Jean has an aunt at the hotel. Yes, we have walked up from Guildford. We just felt like it.” He was strolling with them along the downs; he had offered to show them the way. But what a climax to his crisis! He had come out to shoot himself, and met the ghost of his own poignant past.

His gross and confused silence seemed to drift along between them. He put a hand in his pocket and felt that pistol. If they could suspect——? He stole a glance at the face of the girl who had married Greatorex. It was vague to him at the moment in the shadow of a thorn tree.

“Are you living at Guildford?”

“My people have taken a house there. I’m with them for a few days.”

“So—it is all new to you—this?”

“Utterly, and so—more wonderful.”

“Yes, it is rather wonderful.”

He saw her face in the moonlight, the shapely, dark, shingled head, the frank forehead and sweet mouth. He could suppose that she was more mature, and yet—she was disturbingly the same. What could he say to her? He felt that he could have said everything and nothing. The lights of the hotel showed, and Miss Jean Merrivale was carrying the conversation. She, too, was new to this part of Surrey. Wasn’t it marvellous? And what a place for an hotel! Her aunt was always raving about it. And didn’t the hotel give a weekly dance? Gledhill answered that it did. And then, in the midst of a quag of silence he asked Marie that absurd and conventional question:

“How’s your husband, Mrs. Greatorex?”

It was Jean Merrivale who laughed, and the lights of the hotel seemed to twinkle with her.

“How priceless! That was rather a bad one, Mr. Gledhill.”

Her laughter was like the breaking of glass. Had he—like a clumsy idiot—smashed some——? And obviously Miss Merrivale was completely modern, and the child of candour. He found himself gripping a hard object, the pistol in his pocket.

“Have I—offended?”

“Marie isn’t married. Or—are you, Marie?”

“No.”

Her voice was almost soundless, but to Gledhill it was like some strange clash in the stillness of the night. He was conscious of more confusion, of a feeling of being involved in some new and bitter emotion.

“Sorry. It’s so long ago.”

He dared not look at her. He was aware of Miss Merrivale, explaining that both she and Marie were working women—“City celibates, you know,” and children of their generation. Did that surprise him? Would anything surprise him on this incredible night?

“I’m sorry, Marie.”

She gave a little breathless laugh.

“And you?”

“O—I’m just an old bachelor crock.”

Miss Merrivale left them in the oak-panelled lounge. It would appear that Jean’s aunt was a semi-invalid and spent half her life in bed, and Miss Merrivale was directed to Room No. 11. A lounge sofa was vacant, and Gledhill pointed to it.

“Let’s sit here. Would you like anything, Marie?”

“No.”

“Not even a soft drink?”

“No—Jack.”

He stood for a moment looking down at her, acutely conscious of her as the one woman who had mattered in his life. She was the same Marie, yet different, more mature, more the woman of the world. Her dark hair was as

beautiful as ever; she had the same sweet mouth and clear frank forehead. The exquisite reality of her made him tremble.

She looked up at him.

“Aren’t you going to sit down?”

He sat down beside her, rigid, shy, strangely afraid.

“Sorry—I asked that question. Stupid of me. You see, I——”

“Does it matter?”

“One just blurts out anything—when—— I’ve always thought of you as ——”

“You always took too much for granted, Jack.”

He gave her a quick, brittle glance.

“I don’t think so. I’m an inarticulate sort of ass. But why——”

She smiled faintly at the opposite wall.

“Why—didn’t I marry?”

“My dear—I haven’t any right to ask——”

“I didn’t marry, Jack, because I changed my mind, and because I have never made it up again—since—then.”

He sat staring at the carpet. If he had known! But would things have been different? They could not be different now. He was a broken man, a failure, a fellow sitting beside the ghost of his old love, with a pistol in his pocket. And suddenly he knew that he wanted to live, and the desire was hunger and anguish in him. But how impossible!

He looked at the strong and shapely hands lying in her lap. He was aware of her beautiful solidity. There was nothing flimsy or meretricious about Marie.

“Earning your own living?”

She smiled at him.

“Yes. I am buyer for a big concern.”

“Success. And how is business?”

“A little better. I attend rather strictly to business, Jack. And you haven’t married?”

He sat staring.

“No. Missed my chance.”

She observed him, and her eyes were gentle. This was the same old Jack, shy, self-effacing, rather too sensitive. What had life given him? She could suppose that since he was staying here he was moderately successful.

She said, “I like the feel of this place. It’s friendly.”

He came out of his stare.

“Yes, it’s a good place. Staying long in Guildford?”

“Just over the week-end.”

“You wouldn’t come and dine and dance with me?”

“I’d love to.”

He looked at her poignantly.

“Mean it?”

“Of course. Why so—sceptical?”

“O—I’m just a dull, middle-aged fellow. But will you really come?”

She nodded, and his eyes surprised her.

“My dear—it’s awfully good of you—— I’ll send a car to fetch you up and to take you home.”

And then he said a strange thing.

“Why shouldn’t I be—happy—just for one night? My dancing is nothing very great, Marie.” And then he laughed. “You’ll have to be kind.”

He did not sleep much that night, for he felt like a man who was to drink of a magic cup before dying. He got up and watched the sun rise. It was to be a perfect day. But would she really come? Would not something prevent her? Such a wonderful thing could not happen to him, and yet he assumed that it would happen. At breakfast he called up Munday and asked for a particular table, ordered special flowers and a bottle of 1921 champagne. All the morning he hung about the hotel expecting a telephone message and to hear her voice saying, “I’m most awfully sorry, Jack——” He sat in the garden trying to read. He was a perfect nuisance to Miss Kent in the office. He kept appearing at the window.

“Quite sure no one has telephoned me?”

He arranged for the hotel car to call for Marie, and there was something final about the ordering of that car.

“She’s coming,” he said to himself—“she’s coming. I shall be with her for four whole hours before—that happens.”

At half-past six he went up to change. Not for years had he taken so much trouble over hair, chin and tie. His trousers might have had a cleaner crease. And then, looking at himself self-consciously in the mirror, he felt how pathetic and absurd it all was. Would this wonderful night have any meaning for Marie? Probably he would be self-conscious and stilted and formal—the eternal, fumbling failure.

He waited in the lounge. Munday had told him that it was to be a quiet night—not many people. So much the better. He kept looking at his watch and getting up and going to the hotel door to see if the car was coming up the drive. A voice within him said, “For God’s sake sit still, man; don’t be an ass.” He sat down on one of the sofas just inside the lounge. Opposite him a picture hanging on the wall reflected the hotel entrance. He saw the bonnet and radiator of a car, and then—the figure of a woman.

Marie! He hurried to meet her. She was standing in the doorway with the evening sky and the sunlit trees behind her, a stately creature, and looking taller in her long frock. He was aware of her as a very beautiful and serene thing on the edge of the sunset, her dark hair contrasting with her shell-pink dress, white throat and shoulders. Almost, her beauty frightened him.

“So—you’ve come!”

Her brown eyes were faintly whimsical.

“Wasn’t my yes—sufficient?”

He said—stammeringly—“It seems too good to be true.”

To begin with he felt confused by her nearness and her beauty. Was she really dining and dancing with him? He ordered cocktails, and they sat on a sofa in the lounge. Would she smoke? He looked at her sweet, clean mouth and was somehow glad when she refused the cigarette. He put his case away.

“Ever danced here before? No, of course, you said you hadn’t. We dance in Strachey’s library, rather a lovely room. This was his house, you know.”

He found his shyness passing, but the wonder in him increased. He could talk to her. She was a young woman of the world, and yet so much more than that. She had dignity, and consoling, quiet eyes.

“Let’s go and dine.”

He felt immensely proud of her as he led the way down the stairs into that gay and pleasant room. Munday’s smiling face was like a benediction.

“Your table is in the window, sir.”

“And flowers, Munday?”

“Yes, flowers, sir.”

Courses came and went, but to Gledhill they were of no importance. He forgot to eat his asparagus, and the waitress took it away. Was Marie happy, was Marie enjoying herself, was the wine to her liking? He was so afraid of this last sacrificial feast being a frost. And presently he ceased to worry. It was after the second dance, when he had begun to forget his fumbling feet. The music and Marie seemed to flow. And she was smiling; she had the serene, sweet look of a woman who was happy with her partner, with the music, with herself.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Ever so much.”

They seemed to move in perfect sympathy. He would have said that she was like light in his arms. Once her hair touched his forehead, and he was conscious of a little spasm of exquisite pain. What a last night upon earth! Something cried out in him. He thought: “She has given me back my lost youth, and when she goes—my youth will go with her.” The lights were out for a moment, and they were in a world of shadows.

“I’m most terribly grateful to you, Marie—for giving me this.”

She looked in his eyes. She was beginning to wonder about him. There was something strange in the sweet savour of the night. She too was moved.

“It is not very much, Jack, is it?”

“Everything,” he said, and was silent.

Then, it was over. They had stood side by side listening to the red-shirted orchestra playing “God save the King.” A sudden, terrible sadness seized him. He was calling for her car. He was standing by the window looking in at her. He managed to smile.

“You look like a queen, Marie.”

“I feel—a queen.”

And she was gone.

He had told her nothing. What could he have told her? He was conscious of inward anguish and of a kind of dim despair. Yes, this was the end, life flaring wonderfully for an instant before the darkness came. He went to his room, and took the pistol out of a drawer. He found himself in the garden, and everything seemed still and fresh and sweet. No, it could not be done here. It would not be fair to this pleasant, friendly place. He would go out on to the downs, and under some shadowy tree——

He walked down the drive to the white gate-posts and the main road. He stood there a moment. He had only to cross that black road and he would be in a wilderness, country that was as primitive as when the wild men haunted it. And then he heard a sound, a most prosaic and unmusical sound, the detonations of a motor-bicycle coming up the steep hill from Clandon Way. The machine's head-light cut the darkness.

He stood to let the thing pass. But it did not pass; it slowed up, and swung towards the entrance. Its light shone upon Gledhill. The rider, legs straddling, feet on the ground, pulled up.

"There's been a smash down there."

"An accident?"

"Yes, car with a lady from the hotel. Some drunken fools crashed into it at the cross-roads. They want a doctor and an ambulance. I said I'd rush up and get the hotel to phone."

Gledhill stood staring.

"Not—a girl—in a rose-coloured dress?"

"Yes——"

"She's not——?"

"I left her lying on the grass. The chauffeur was able to speak to me."

Gledhill was out on the road.

"Go up and telephone. You'll find the night porter. It's—it's the girl who has been dancing with me."

He ran. He had a feeling of floating down that great hill. The darkness met him like water, and bore him as he ran. Good God, what a tragedy, that he—a miserable failure who had come down here to die—should have dragged this other creature to disaster! Less than half an hour ago she had been dancing with him, and now—— What would he find? He had expected lights, perhaps a crowd, but as he came along the level stretch to the cross-roads the place

seemed strangely silent. He had a glimpse of a twisted, dark shape lying tilted against a hedge. Someone was groaning. A solitary figure in the middle of the road appeared to be acting as traffic control, with a bloody handkerchief in one hand.

A car, coming from Epsom way, lit up the cross-roads as Gledhill appeared. The man with the handkerchief spread his arms. Another car, overturned, was blocking half the road. The headlights showed Gledhill a figure lying on the grass, and the colour of her dress was like a red wound in the darkness.

He was down on his knees.

“Marie——”

He saw her pale face and closed eyes. He could see no blood on her face. Yes, but on her dress! She seemed to be unconscious. Was she dead? My God, were they both to die on this terribly sweet night?

“Marie—my darling——”

Her eyes opened. For a moment he hardly dared to believe that she was looking at him.

“Jack——”

“O, my dear—I thought you were—dead. Are you—in pain?”

He felt for one of her hands, and she flinched, and then managed to smile.

“Not that one, Jack. I’m afraid that arm’s broken.”

“O, my dear. I’ve brought you this. Just damned selfishness. I wanted ——”

He was holding her other hand, and her eyes looked up at him.

“I’m all right, dear. We were so happy.”

“Happy! I’ve never brought anybody any happiness. They have sent for a doctor, Marie.”

There was silence between them for a moment, and then he bent down and put his lips to her hand.

“You’ll have to try and forgive me, dear. I seem to have made of you a sort of sacrifice.”

He felt the pressure of her fingers.

“Well—perhaps it was—meant.”

Doctor and ambulance arrived within three minutes of each other, and Gledhill stood back to watch and wait. What would the verdict be? He found himself helping to place Marie on a stretcher and carry her to the ambulance.

“Don’t leave me, Jack.”

“I’m coming with you.”

He caught the doctor by the arm.

“Is she—going—to live?”

The doctor had other wreckage to attend to.

“Don’t fuss, sir——” and then he said gently and consolingly, “I think she will be all right. Some ribs and an arm broken. Relation of hers?”

“No,” said Gledhill, “no; just—a friend.”

But they would not let him go with her in the ambulance. There was the other human wreckage to be rescued, and he was left at the cross-roads with a little shadowy group of strangers. He was aware of a voice saying, “Nobody seems to have thought of the A.A. box.” Another voice answered, “Perhaps nobody had a key. I’d give those blighters in the sports model a year each.” “One of ’em is dead, my son,” said the other voice. Gledhill turned away. He went slowly along the road and up the hill to Newlands Corner. He was half-way up it when his right hand happened to touch the metal thing in his pocket. He drew it out, hesitated a moment, and then sent the pistol flying into a bush.

“No more cowardice.”

At Newlands he found the hotel dark and silent. Sleep? No—he was in no mood to go to bed. In fact he spent the night in a deck-chair under a plum tree on the lawn, a man in a dinner-jacket with his thoughts among the stars. He found himself uttering a kind of prayer: “Stars, if she lives—I’ll fight, fight—like—the devil.”

They let him see her next day in hospital. He sat for a little while by her bed. It had a screen round it and he was glad of the screen. Her hair looked so black, and her face so pale, but her eyes had no death in them.

“I’ve got to go back to work to-morrow, Marie. But may I come down next week-end?”

She lay and looked at him.

“Yes. I wish you would see my people, Jack, and reassure them.”

“They must be hating me, Marie.”

“Poor dears.”

“You are going to be all right now?”

“Of course.”

As he climbed the office stairs on that Monday morning he felt that years might have passed. A strange new world, and the same rather shabby door. What would he find? Only the old problems, the old worries, defeat, and the glum and impersonal face of his secretary. She was there before him, putting a mirror back into her bag. It had never occurred to him that Miss Smale could be interested in her face.

“Any letters, Miss Smale?”

“Yes. I haven’t opened them.”

Letters on a Monday morning! That was rather surprising. He sat down at his desk, and opened the first. It was a bill. Something in him seemed to laugh, whimsically, grimly. He opened another, read it, and sat staring. Well, of all the astounding coincidences! Someone was going to pay him money, quite a considerable sum which he had written off as a bad debt. He opened a third letter. Good God, was the world coming to life again—as well—as he? Someone was wanting to do business, good business. He got up and walked to the window and stood looking down into the narrow street.

He thought “And I should have been lying somewhere—on those hills—with a bullet through my head. Ye gods—— I’m alive—alive—— Shall I ever tell her? I think not.”

His reticence was relative. He rang up the hospital twice a day to inquire for Marie; he sent down flowers, by post. Life was giving him his second chance, and this time he was not going to play the diffident fool and lose it. Marie was out of danger. She had been transferred to her people’s house, and on the Saturday Gledhill went down to Newlands Corner, and walked along the downs into Guildford.

As a lover he was both shy and ardent. He might be a romanticist, but he was remembering that Marie was a young woman of the world with a job of her own. Would she cast her modern independence and consent to run in double harness with a middle-aged fellow who was just a business man? He allowed four week-ends to pass before he had his inspiration.

“What about your job, Marie?”

“My job and I have lost each other.”

“You don’t mean to say that the mean beasts have——?”

“Is anyone indispensable, Jack? Someone slipped into my shoes.”

It was dastardly of him, but he felt secretly grateful to those mean beasts, and he was ready to prove to her that she was indispensable.

“I have an idea, Marie. Do you think we could dare to risk it again?”

“Just what?”

“Another evening at Newlands Corner. I’ll hire the largest car in Guildford, or a motor-coach, and tell the man not to do more than fifteen miles an hour.”

She laughed.

“Am I so very fragile, Jack?”

“You are very precious,” he said.

It is one of the world’s platitudes that one should not attempt to repeat a particular and exquisite experience, but in this case the provocation was different. They sat at the same table and danced to the same music, and the September night was soft and kind. Neither the wine nor the music was needed for the production of those simple words. He told her that she was the most adorable thing in the world, and looking in his eyes she did not contradict him.

MANNERS AND MEN

HIS name was Eustace Montgomery.

For a number of years he had lived to the high sounding level of that name, walking down from the small villa in Rudyard Road to the shop of Messrs. Pendlebury in High Street. He was the senior assistant and fifty-three years old, with a wife and two children at home. Messrs. Pendlebury, chemists, had been established in St. Helen's-on-Sea for nearly half a century. It was a business with a bouquet, mellow, sympathetic, almost pontifical.

Mr. Montgomery might be a nobody on five pounds ten a week, but behind the Pendlebury counter he had always felt himself to be a somebody. He walked down the High Street each morning, a sleek, black and white, suavely solid citizen, head well up, shoulders squared. He had carried with him through all the years a happy illusion of singularity.

He knew half St. Helen's, the more prosperous half of St. Helen's. He was so tactful and sympathetic. Shy customers preferred to be served by Mr. Montgomery. Occasionally there were half whispered colloquies across the counter. Mr. Montgomery could produce the airs of a father confessor.

"Yes, madam, I—quite understand. Yes—I think if you allow just fifteen minutes before meals. Yes, and the tablets—— May I suggest one in half a tumbler of hot water."

No one could sell soap or bath-salts or a tooth brush as Mr. Montgomery sold them. He was so suave, so kind, without ever appearing familiar.

There had been occasions when Montgomery had overheard remarks about himself. He was "Such a gentleman." He had "Such a fine head." He had. He was rather proud of his forehead, and of his meticulously clean pink hands. Mr. Pendlebury regarded him as a valuable man. He knew everybody's whims and peculiarities and their pet ailments. He was *persona grata* to the doctors. Each Christmas Mr. Montgomery received a pleasant little bonus from the

firm.

At home in the villa in Rudyard Road, Mr. Montgomery was very much the paternal person. His two children—Ralph and Irene—aged fifteen and twelve—adored him. He was so much the good companion, so much the authority upon life, without being too pompous. His wife, a gentle little woman, knew him to be a good fellow. As a young man he had been a little too impressionable, but that phase had passed.

Ralph was at the local grammar-school. Since the boy lived at home, his parents managed to pay his fees, and to send Irene to a private school for girls. The Christmas bonus was a great help in meeting the cost of the children's education. Mr. Montgomery met all his financial responsibilities with chest well out.

"It has always been my ambition—to give my children a good start in life."

Eustace had inherited a family tradition and nothing else. His father, Fitzroy Montgomery, stationer and librarian, who had posed as the highbrow of St. Helen's, had left his son a collection of books, some old clothes, two or three worthless manuscripts, and a few bad debts. Fitzroy had always assumed that Eustace would become a partner with the Pendleburys. There were other people who traded innocently on the same assumption.

Irene had to compete with schoolfellows whose parents owned grocery businesses and butchers' shops.

"Yes, my father is a partner, you know."

Ralph was equally careful of the family honour.

"If you ask me—I can tell you we—are—Pendlebury. My pater's the brains of the business."

So, at the age of fifty-three Mr. Montgomery still confronted the world with some confidence. He owned his villa, and his life was insured for £250. He was healthy and keen and something of a person. His children were growing up, and at the end of another five or six years his responsibilities would slacken. He still hoped in secret that Mr. John Pendlebury would give him an interest in the business. He rather thought that he had earned it.

Then fate cracked a whip.

Mr. Pendlebury had an apoplectic seizure, and though he recovered to a point, the doctors insisted upon retirement. The shop, stock, and goodwill were on the market. Certainly, Mr. Montgomery could have purchased Pendleburys had he been able to command the necessary capital. He approached his bank,

but he had no securities to lodge with them save his insurance policy and a possible mortgage on his villa, seven or eight hundred pounds at the outside. The bank could not accommodate him.

So, Pendleburys was bought by a Mr. Robert Cragg, who owned half a dozen shops on the south coast. He was what was called a cash chemist, and as for cash he had it in abundance.

Mr. Montgomery was seriously disturbed by his first interview with Mr. Cragg. There was no suavity about this new broom. A large, red man who bulged in all directions, with chops and a double chin and aggressive blue eyes, he invaded the shop and spoke to Mr. Montgomery as though the elderly assistant was already his servant.

“You’re in charge here, what?”

Mr. Montgomery tried his very best manners upon Mr. Cragg, but without any obvious effect.

“All right, wash out the soft soap. I’m here to look into things before I sign any contract.”

“Quite so, sir.”

“I’ve been through the books. I want to go through the stock.”

It was the morning of Wednesday, St. Helen’s early closing day, and always a busy morning.

“We are always rather rushed on Wednesdays, sir.”

“Nothing wrong with the afternoon, is there? You meet me here at two o’clock, Mr. Montgomery.”

He emphasized every syllable of the name as though he thought it stilted and ridiculous. Montgomery indeed! Smith was good enough for any assistant, and it had the virtue of brevity. And the fellow appeared to be a little above himself, throaty and superior.

“Two o’clock, sharp.”

“Very well, sir.”

Mr. Montgomery saw that the shutters were closed at one, and hurried home to lunch. The family had planned a picnic on the Gorse Hills for the afternoon, and Mr. Montgomery explained that they would have to picnic without him. He appeared a little flurried and preoccupied.

“Yes, business. Mr. Cragg is looking into things.”

Mary Montgomery observed her husband. He was very far from being his cheerful, suave self. She went to the front door with him when he was preparing to hurry back.

“What sort of man—is he, Eustace?”

“No gentleman, my dear—certainly, no gentleman. Very rough and ready.”

His wife looked worried.

“I’m sorry. Perhaps——”

Mr. Montgomery tried to reassure both her and himself.

“Just on the surface, probably, just on the surface. You go and enjoy your afternoon, Mary,” and he kissed her and hurried off.

To put it bluntly, as a business man Mr. Cragg was a bully. He was a creature with a large frame and large appetites, and that sort of truculent shrewdness which bludgeons its way through life. Success had encouraged him to assume that his ideas upon discipline and efficiency were the attributes of a dictator. He was the strong man who stood no nonsense, and who believed that God had created all the Craggs in the world for the chastening of the incompetent, and the unfit. Not that the man had no genial side to him. On the contrary he liked to shine, and his shrewdness was incontestable.

But the Pendlebury days had passed, and possibly the business was on the edge of growing *passé*. Mr. Cragg set about infusing into it fresh hæmoglobin. He had bought a house in Gore Park on the hill behind St. Helen’s, for whenever he took over a new business he established himself in the neighbourhood to supervise its progress. He was driven down daily in his private car, and took up his post as observer at nine-thirty.

On the very first day he informed Mr. Montgomery that he—Montgomery—appeared to know nothing whatsoever of window dressing.

“What have you got to show ’em? Three big bottles of coloured water. A camera. A couple of douche cans. Some adverts., and a few bottles of scent!”

Mr. Montgomery tactfully attempted to explain the Pendlebury tradition.

“We have never found it necessary, sir, to rely on our window.”

Mr. Cragg caught him up.

“What’s this, a shop?”

“We have always regarded it more from the pharmaceutical point of view.”

“Oh, have you! Well, may I suggest, Montgomery, that a shop’s business is

to sell things, and to sell as many things as it jolly well can. You go and have a look at Timothy Taylor's window."

"I've seen it, sir. We never set out to compete——"

"Well, you will now. We don't budget for old ladies in bath-chairs, but for the million, my man. I'm sending in a professional window-dresser to show you how to do things. You've got to get colour and glitter into a window."

"I quite understand, sir."

"All right. Keep the flower shop, or the toy shop in your mind's eye. Grown-ups are just like kids. I suppose you'd put a hot water bottle in the window—naked?"

"The quality of our rubber, sir——"

Mr. Cragg laughed. He had to have his joke.

"Some—things—are nice—naked, Montgomery. Ha—ha! But not—hot water bottles. Brighten 'em up. Make 'em look like honeymoon affairs, rosy raptures, what! Imagination, man, imagination."

Mr. Montgomery found a smile. He was eager to propitiate Mr. Cragg and hating himself for this eagerness.

"I see, sir, say it with flowers and bath-salts."

"Exactly. You can't catch the public with douche cans and tooth brushes."

The suave gravity of the establishment shortened its skirts and attended to its complexion. Mr. Cragg imported a cash-desk and a girl-cashier. He was proposing to enlarge the shop, and to add a circulating library. Mr. Montgomery began to be very much worried, for at the age of fifty-three it was not comforting to feel that you were upon trial. Mr. Cragg loomed in the background, observing and criticizing, and always Mr. Montgomery was conscious of the glare of those blue eyes. There were occasions when Mr. Cragg would come forward and make himself polite to some customer and flatter her by causing a slight commotion.

"Mr. Montgomery, attend to this lady, please. Take a chair, madam."

Poor Eustace was always conscious of Mr. Cragg's blue eyes fixed on him. Why did the fellow stare so? Mr. Montgomery found it very irritating and confusing to be watched as though he was some raw young assistant. And then—one day—he realized that Mr. Cragg was looking not at his face but at the crown of his head.

Mr. Montgomery seized an opportunity of examining himself in a mirror.

Had he failed to brush his hair properly? But no. Certainly, he was going rather grey. Was that it? Did Mr. Cragg suspect that he was growing too old for his job? A new fear arrived in Mr. Montgomery's consciousness. He was afraid of his own grey head.

That evening he slipped a bottle of hair dye into his pocket, and after supper he shut himself in the bathroom. The procedure was so unusual that his wife came up, and trying the door, found it locked.

"Anything the matter, Eustace?"

"No, my dear."

His voice was apologetic, and then, realizing perhaps that certain things cannot be concealed from a wife, he unlocked the door.

"Just doing a little titivating, Mary."

She looked shocked. Her husband was dyeing his hair! And what was the significance of such an act?

Mr. Montgomery tried to make a joke of it.

"So much renovating going on, my dear, that I thought I ought to be in the fashion."

"Eustace, you don't mean——?"

He nodded and smiled.

"Nothing to worry about, Mary, but the fellow seems to fix his eyes on my head. I don't think he likes grey heads. He doesn't like anything—that's a bit old-fashioned. So, I thought I'd put the clock back. Nothing to be ashamed of."

She was touched. She kissed him.

"Let me finish it for you. You can't do it properly yourself."

Next morning at the breakfast table young Ralph's eyes appeared to enlarge themselves. His father's hair was jet black.

"I say, dad, what have you been doing——?"

His mother reproved him.

"Personal remarks, Ralph, are stupid. Finish your breakfast. You'll be late for school."

It so happened that the day turned out badly for a rejuvenated employee. Poor Montgomery was too conscious of his jet black head. He had discovered Mr. Cragg staring at him in a way that suggested that he was very much aware

of the transfiguration. Apparently, Mr. Cragg did not approve of it, for he was abrupt to the senior assistant. Mr. Montgomery was very worried. Had he done the wrong thing in attempting to put on an air of gloss and uncorrupted gaiety? Also, one or two of his old and familiar patronesses came into the shop, and they too stared at him in polite and momentary surprise. Mr. Montgomery lost his suave poise and became agitated.

A woman entered bearing a parcel. She was one of those formidable women who enjoy making a scene. She confronted Mr. Montgomery.

“You sold me this yesterday. It leaks.”

Mr. Montgomery should have remembered both her and her purchase, but he did not.

“I’m very sorry, madam. What is it?”

“A hot water bottle. The stopper doesn’t fit. It leaked all over my brother-in-law’s bed.”

Why—brother-in-law? Why this detail? But Mr. Montgomery took the parcel from her and unwrapped it.

“I’m very sorry, madam. All our bottles are tested.”

“That one wasn’t.”

“I assure you, madam—that it was.”

She was offended. Did he suggest that she was lying?

“Well, you try it yourself. I’m not accustomed to having my word doubted.”

“I assure you, madam, I——”

“You try the stopper of that bottle, and don’t argue.”

Mr. Montgomery, a little flurried, took the bottle to the dispensing counter, and filled it at the tap. When he had screwed in the stopper and held the thing upside down he could detect no leak. He returned to the lady and with perfect politeness showed her that the article was innocent.

“Perhaps you did not screw the stopper in sufficiently?”

“Yes, I did.”

“But you see——?”

She was not going to be made a fool of.

“How do I know that’s the same bottle?”

“Madam—surely you don’t suggest——?”

“What I want is a bottle that doesn’t play tricks. Do you think I can’t screw in a stopper?”

Screened by a case of manicure sets and toilet sundries Mr. Cragg had been listening to this argument. He now appeared.

“Of course, madam. Most annoying. Mr. Montgomery, bring out a new bottle and test it. I want to see it and be sure that the lady is satisfied.”

It was done, and the lady, having her dignity saluted by Mr. Cragg, and feeling that Mr. Montgomery had been ticked off, departed triumphantly with the substituted article.

Mr. Cragg spoke rudely to his assistant.

“Look here, haven’t you learnt how to meet a complaint?”

“But I assure you, sir——”

“Fudge. When a woman comes in and complains—don’t argue.”

“But I didn’t argue, sir. The bottle——”

“You’re not arguing now, I suppose?”

“No, sir. I’m only——”

“Look here, Montgomery, you don’t seem to know how to deal with a customer like that. Accept what she says, in reason. Don’t go and blow off and make her feel——”

“But, sir, the bottle——”

Mr. Cragg glared at him.

“Oh, very well, very well. You talk too much——” and his eyes added —“You damned ass.”

Mr. Montgomery felt bitterly humiliated. Never before had he been spoken to with such rudeness, and in the hearing of the lady cashier and two other assistants. His urge was to retaliate, to tell Mr. Cragg just what he thought of him, and then to put on his hat and walk out of the shop. But how could a man of fifty-three with a family dependent upon him allow his outraged dignity such free expression? Mr. Montgomery swallowed his shame. He was frightened. He might and did say to himself that this Cragg was no gentleman, but then Mr. Cragg held the whip and could crack it.

From that day Mr. Montgomery's self-regard appeared to shed its protective illusions. For many years he had felt himself to be a person of some importance, a gentlemanly fellow with an impressive forehead to whom people came for advice. Almost, he had conceived himself to be Pendlebury, and now he saw Eustace Montgomery as an ageing and obscure assistant in a chemist's shop, a fellow who could be pushed out into the street and who was at the mercy of another man's whims. It was horrible.

His sense of humiliation was partnered by fear. He did not dare to think of unemployment. He found himself treating his employer with repulsive humility. He trembled at the flicker of a Cragg eyelash, and was stricken dumb by a frown. He loathed himself for this servility. It made him feel so grossly inferior.

He tried to conceal his secret sufferings from the family. He was full of quips and of false cheerfulness. He could not bear to think of himself being exposed before his children as a mean fellow who was a failure and who truckled and lied to his tyrant. He may have deceived his children, but he could not deceive his wife.

"Something's wrong, Eustace."

"Wrong! How?"

"You're worried. You're not yourself."

"Since when have you noticed this terrible change?"

His facetiousness was useless.

"Oh, ever since Cragg took over. You may just as well tell me the truth, dear."

Mr. Montgomery did tell her. He told her much more than he had meant to tell her, though, after all, she had been his best friend. Mary Montgomery was greatly indignant. She did not regard her man as a failure. Far from it.

"You must give notice."

"Give notice! At fifty-three!"

"You don't look much more than forty."

"My dear, in these days, jobs don't grow on bushes. Who wants an elderly man? I shall have to stick it."

"I think it's abominable. I should like to——"

"Oh, the man can't help himself. He's made that way. He's after money. I

dare say I shall get used to it. One mustn't be too sensitive. Besides, I haven't much to complain of at home, Mary. You and the kids are pretty good to me."

Christmas arrived, but this year there was no bonus. Mr. Montgomery had not counted upon any such windfall, but he missed it considerably. He had a little sum of money put by, and he and his wife agreed that some of their savings would have to be spent on education. Both children were doing well, and Ralph had his eyes on a scholarship. His ambition was to be a doctor. The Montgomerys agreed that they could not curtail their children's education at this most critical juncture.

Mr. Cragg, too, had a son, rather a lumpish lad who had been sent to a public school. Young Cragg had no particular ambition beyond sensual gratification. He was just a lout to whom a number of cultured gentlemen were attempting to apply some polish. In all probability he would develop into an excellent business man, quite as self-assured if not quite so shrewd as his father. Cragg senior was absurdly fond of Olly, and if he saw himself in Oliver he was not ashamed. Olly was a chip of the old block, and inclined to be rough and aggressive, and Mr. Cragg would say to himself that the lad had the right stuff in him.

Trade seemed to be particularly brisk that Christmas in spite of the financial crisis. The dispensing side of the business was keeping up well, yet Mr. Cragg grumbled, and talked about income tax. He talked about it to Mr. Montgomery, and with such an air of truculence that poor Eustace trembled before the voice of doom. Was Mr. Cragg giving him the broadest of hints on future economies?

"Penalizing the brains and the guts of the country, that's what's happening. Pauperizing everybody for a lot of paupers."

Mr. Montgomery hurried to agree.

"Yes, a most fatal policy, sir."

"Income tax doesn't worry you much, does it?"

"Just a little, sir. Of course—in my small way——"

"You're lucky."

Mr. Montgomery smiled faintly. Was it not probable that Mr. Cragg would subscribe to the craze for economy, retain one junior certificated dispenser, and import two or three young women to attend to sales? Probably Mr. Cragg would regard an elderly and more highly paid assistant as a luxury, and axe him. Financial stringencies! It was all very disturbing and tragic.

If only he could make himself indispensable, mix some magic mixture in an eight ounce bottle and prescribe it for Mr. Cragg, one ounce, t.d.s. after meals!

Mr. Cragg's Christmas dinner was a champagne affair, and also in the nature of a family reunion. Two of Mr. Cragg's brothers and their wives were staying in the house, and Mrs. Cragg had invited a sister. It was quite a merry party. There were crackers, and Mr. Cragg wore a pink cap. Had his shop assistant seen him under such circumstances he would have been both puzzled and surprised. This domestic Cragg was a wholly different creature from the formidable idol with the glaring blue eyes who gloomed at the back of the shop. The domestic Cragg was a jovial fellow, generous and expansive.

Over their port and cigars the men talked money and business.

"How's the new place doing, Bob?"

"Oh, not so badly."

"Got a manager yet?"

Mr. Cragg watched young Olly beginning to dally with his first cigar.

"Well, no. I had thought of putting in the chap who was with the Pendleburys for umpteen years, but he's a bit of an ass. No guts. Talks too much."

"Been too long in the place—perhaps."

"Besides—he's so scared of me. I can't stick a man who can't cock his tail."

"How old is he, Bob?"

"Oh, fiftyish."

"Children?"

"Believe so."

"The poor devil may be afraid of being out of a job."

Mr. Cragg refilled his port glass and observed his son whose complexion had taken on a suggestive sallowness.

"Better chuck the rest of that cigar away, old lad."

Master Olly was insulted.

"Why? I'm all right."

“You won’t be—in three ticks. I told you to take a half corona and not one of those bombshells.”

“It won’t beat me, dad.”

“Righto. It’s your funeral.”

And it was.

The party spent the rest of the evening playing roulette. Master Olly had retired to the upper regions, and his father left the party to see how Olly was bearing his first defeat. He found his son lying on his bed complete as to dinner jacket and white waistcoat, and with a face like yellow parchment.

“Well, old lad, feeling a bit cheap?”

Mr. Cragg junior was sullen and subdued.

“Something wrong with the champagne.”

Mr. Cragg laughed.

“Oh, was there! I think not. You’d better undress and get into bed. Here, I’ll give you a hand.”

He helped his son off with his clothes.

“Nothing like experience, old lad. Got a hot-water bottle? No. I’ll have one sent up.”

The new year had reached Easter, and Mr. Montgomery still trembled and endured. Never had he applied himself so sedulously to the pleasing of people, especially Mr. Cragg. He did not dare to hope, for it seemed to him that his employer’s face was as unfriendly as ever, and that Mr. Cragg just tolerated him. Also, on May 1st Mr. Montgomery would be fifty-four years old, and May 1st had yet another place in the calendar. Mr. Montgomery’s one physical accomplishment was swimming. He was a really fine swimmer, and he had taught his son to swim almost as well as himself. On May 1st the season opened for them officially, and each morning at 7 a.m. they would walk down to the Municipal Bathing Station, and go in off the high board.

It was at Whitsuntide that the thing happened. The weather was vile with a strong south-wester blowing, and the sea too rough for any but hardy swimmers. Mr. Montgomery was bathing alone, for Ralph had had flu and was not quite fit for strenuous exercise. There were very few people on the beach, and Mr. Montgomery had just come in when he heard someone shouting.

“There’s a boy drowning.”

A woman was pointing seawards, and Mr. Montgomery saw a half submerged head, and a hand protruding above the crest of a wave. He had never saved a person from drowning, but he and Ralph had often practised the procedure, and he plunged in and swam towards the figure in distress. It had disappeared, but came to the surface again quite close to him. The boy was semi-conscious, but still struggling.

Mr. Montgomery clutched him from behind.

“Don’t struggle. Leave it to me.”

He brought the boy to shore in the presence of a small crowd. A passing doctor hurried down to the beach, and had the lad carried into a shelter. Someone fetched blankets from a house. A little pump-handling by the doctor soon brought the boy round.

“Where do you live, son?”

“Gore Park.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cragg.”

Mr. Montgomery was standing by with a towel over his shoulders.

“Not Mr. Robert Cragg’s son?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Montgomery went pink.

“Well—that’s an extraordinary thing. My name’s Montgomery. I’m your father’s assistant.”

Young Cragg was packed into a taxi with borrowed blankets and a hot water bottle, and accompanied by the doctor, was driven home to Gore Park. He arrived just as his father was leaving to play golf, but Mr. Cragg did not play golf that morning.

“Who was the chap who pulled you out, Olly?”

“A fellow named Montgomery. Quite an old chap. Said he was in your shop.”

Mr. Cragg’s blue eyes stared.

“Well—I’m damned!”

Mr. Montgomery was mowing his very small lawn when his visitor appeared at the gate. It was a new and revised edition of Cragg so far as

Eustace was concerned. One of Mr. Cragg's very large hands was held out.

"It was you who pulled my kid out."

"Yes."

"Well, it was damned fine of you."

Mr. Cragg sat down on Mr. Montgomery's garden seat. The sky had cleared, but the seat was still rather wet. Mr. Cragg did not notice it.

"Excuse me, sir, that seat's wet."

"Is it? Well, never mind. As man to man, Montgomery, I'm damned grateful to you."

"Oh, that's quite all right, sir."

"No—it isn't. Fact is—I'm a plain-spoken man. I've had something on my mind for a long time. Couldn't make it up—somehow—but now it's as clear—as crystal. Obviously, you've got guts, my dear chap."

Mr. Montgomery blushed. Was he dreaming? Had Mr. Cragg really addressed him as my dear chap?

"I'm sure—I'm very glad——"

"Look here, I'm not a man who uses soft soap. I've made up my mind. I want you to manage the St. Helen's shop. Will you take it on?"

"With pleasure. But—I would prefer——"

"Well?"

"To take it on trial for a year. To be perfectly frank, sir——"

"Yes."

"I always felt you weren't quite satisfied."

Mr. Cragg laughed.

"Oh—that's me—all over. I'm a bit tough in business. You take it on, Montgomery. And I'll make you a bet. The takings will be up at the end of the year."

"I don't want to bet against myself, sir."

"All right. Four hundred a year, and a bonus of fifty—if the returns are up. How's that strike you?"

Mr. Montgomery could not deny himself a characteristic and rhetorical

gesture.

“Right on the heart, sir, right on the heart.”

ATALANTA

THE sleeping-car attendant came to warn her, and to place her hand luggage in the corridor.

"Beaulieu, m'amselle."

As if she did not know! She was standing, looking at a blue bay and a black headland and above it a sunset. Below her were the red tennis courts of the Hotel Bristol, and on one of these courts a woman and a man were just finishing a knock-up. The great white façade of the Hotel Bristol confronted the sunset like an iceberg. She was staying at the Hotel Bristol.

The train pulled up; the attendant passed her hand-luggage to a porter. It included three racquets in presses, for Miss Joan Fortescue was very much a rising star, and the courts of the Hotel Bristol had a particular significance for her. It was on these courts in the Beaulieu Tournament that she had first met that damned German woman Fräulein Fink. And Fräulein Fink had effaced her.

Well—this year she was out for the *revanche*. She was in pretty good form and completely fit. She left her keys and registered luggage ticket with the Bristol luggage-porter, and got into the hotel bus. The Bristol Hotel was only just round the corner, but tennis and cinema stars are expected to arrive in chariots.

She was received most urbanely by a reception clerk who remembered her.

"Ah—Miss For-tes-cue—delighted—to see you."

Her manner was somewhat off-hand.

"You're giving me a decent room."

"Of course—Miss For-tes-cue—O—certainly."

He would show her the room. And had she enjoyed a pleasant journey?—Yes, the courts were playing—beau-ti-fully. He bowed her into the lounge, for

in the eyes of a Frenchman she was reflected as a somewhat ravishing creature, so English and fair and tall. On the court—*psst*—she blew about like a feather, a white and gold feather.

“So many—celebrities—here—Miss For-tes-cue.”

She saw one instantly, that damned German woman mounted on the arm of a chair in which was seated a butter-headed boy. Fräulein Fink was laughing, and when she laughed she showed all her teeth like a horse. She showed her teeth at Joan Fortescue; she extended a hand.

“Halloo—Miss England—— So glad.”

“Evening—Fräulein.”

The butter-headed boy, who was the Austrian champion, stood up and bowed.

“In form, Miss Fortescue?”

“No—rather rotten—this year.”

Fräulein Fink laughed. She had an unpleasant laugh.

“We are all rotten—so rotten—and so modest.”

Ironic beast! Joan passed on. She was carried up in the lift with the gentleman in the morning coat who had wonderful cotton eyelashes. He—too—did not like Fräulein Fink.

“You beat her this year, yes?”

Joan felt tired and peevish. She gave a little flick of the head.

“Oh—I don’t suppose so.”

She remembered last year, and how she had been put out of poise by Fräulein Fink’s purple bandeau and her eternal and complacent teeth.

There was a feud between them, and temperamentally the Fräulein had proved herself the more resilient of the two. She could play to a gallery, and especially so when her opponent was looking a trifle grim. She would indulge herself in airs and graces, little leaps and caracolles of laughter. She was so polite, so gracious to an opponent who was a little heated. Joan accepted the room. She ordered tea to be sent up. She unpacked some of her immediate necessities, and her mouth was tight, and compressed.

She was saying to herself—“Smile—smile. You simply mustn’t get ratty this year.” But the bother of it was that Fräulein Fink always made her feel that way.

Morning. The tournament did not begin until the following day, and Joan was out on the courts at ten. She had arranged for the “Bristol” pro. to play her a practice single. He was a somewhat famous person, flamboyantly frank, and full of *élan*. She was out of form; the light bothered her. She kept over-driving, and that wretched slice betrayed itself in her back-hand.

He was blunt about her back-hand.

“Follow—through. Right shoulder down.”

“I know.”

She was annoyed. She knew that when she was feeling a little temperamental and out of form—her wretched back-hand betrayed these failings. The clean shot would not come, and the smoothness was absent.

The pro. made her run up and volley.

“Upee—upee.”

It was his quaint and characteristic cry. But she was off her volleying—also. Thank the Lord she had drawn a rabbit in the first round.

Perfect weather, with the wind in the north, but gently so, and the sea marvellous. She went on to the court at eleven to play her rabbit, a Frenchwoman, a Madame Boulanger. On this first day the attendance was somewhat thin, but Joan made a point of never looking at spectators. They were just so many rather silly faces and rows and rows of chairs.

She and Madame Boulanger knocked up. The umpire was ready on his stand, the ball boys waiting. The service was with Joan and an inattentive ball boy was staring into space. She liked three balls for serving.

“*Bal.*”

Her voice was sharp. Her glance happened to go beyond the boy and rest upon a man who was sitting in the second row, a youngish and rather intense looking person. He was staring at her with quite unnecessary interest. It was the kind of scrutiny that penetrated a player’s concentration and became like a piece of grit in her consciousness. She was vaguely annoyed.

The game began. Madame Boulanger might be classed as a rabbit, but she was one of those persistent and steady players who are capable of putting out a tigress when the tigress is out of form and unused to the southern light. Joan lost the first two games. Her service wouldn’t function; she was over-driving, and Madame Boulanger ran about and scooped everything back.

Joan felt hot. What an exhibition! She ran for and played a back-hand shot

in the corner, and the ball nearly hit the stop netting. Idiot! She happened to glance aside—something seemed to draw her glance. She met those particular eyes. They were as bad as a camera.

Actually, she gave him a look that said, “O, damn you, don’t stare like that. It puts me off.”

She felt more hot. What a lapse! To allow herself to flash a message at one of those anonymous faces. She was doing just what she had schooled herself not to do, losing her poise. She steadied herself, but her game would not arrive. She lost the first set to the French woman.

In the cross-over she found herself looking in the direction of the dark young man. He was leaning forward—he seemed to smile faintly, and significantly. Did he find her lack of form amusing? Was she indeed affording him an exhibition? Silly ass! But was not she the silly ass? She was conscious of a moment of self-revealment. She was behaving like a spoilt child who was angry because she was not getting the self-applause that pleased her.

And suddenly she found her form. Her feet were just where they should be, her sighting and timing perfect. She moved about the court like a blown feather.

The man was watching her. She was quite delightful to watch, long-limbed, supple, graceful, with her sunny head and grave young face. She tantalized him—because—he was lame, and could not play the games he had loved to play. He had to sit and stare and write books. He was writing rather successful books, but scribbling is not living.

He wanted her to win; he willed her to win. He wanted, yes—just what did he want? Casually to come and watch a game and be suddenly and absurdly smitten by one of the players! Ridiculous. But how she moved! And suddenly he thought of her as Atalanta—but an Atalanta with whom a man with a groggy leg could not run races. She was like so much of life—beyond him.

She won the next two sets easily. She was smiling. Said someone in a chair—“Bad temperament. She can only smile when she’s winning.”

Julian Peters glanced sharply at the speaker. It wasn’t true. She had been annoyed with herself for being off her game. Women said such feline things.

He watched her go off the court with her opponent. She had slipped on a light blue knitted coat, and her colour was the colour of a shell.

To someone in the hotel lounge she said, “I played most utter tripe. Something put me off. I wish people wouldn’t stare and fidget.”

The second day was much as the first. The man was there in the same chair. She saw him at once and wished him away. She had to play a Spanish girl, an opponent of different quality, a creature as swift and as light as herself. She began badly. In running to retrieve an angle drive, she slipped and fell against the knees of an elderly and eminent gentleman in the first row. She saw a face, two sympathetic eyes—sudden solicitude. Confound him!

The eminent gentleman raised her.

“I hope you are not hurt?”

She was abrupt, rude. Making an ass of herself!

“No, not a bit.”

She ran back to the fray, and played with temper in her eyes. Had that fellow with the stare looked shocked? Well—what business had he to be shocked because she had been a little abrupt? She fought Spain at speed, the blonde against the black. She won in two straight sets. But she was not pleased. She thought, “If that fellow sits there and stares when I am playing the Fink—I shall get—temperamental.”

That evening Lady Glendower gave a dinner party at the Hotel Bristol, and Julian Peters was one of her guests. Joan’s table was not three yards away from the Glendower table, but Miss Fortescue was so placed that she could not see Peters, though Mr. Peters saw her. He was sitting on Lady Glendower’s left; she liked him; he both amused and interested her.

“I see—Miss Fortescue is staying here.”

“Do you want to be introduced?”

“Would you recommend it?”

“These tennis people get terribly spoilt.”

Julian smiled at her.

“I’ll take the risk.”

Afterwards, the hotel danced—but Julian could not dance. He sat in a little crowd of chairs with his rubber-tipped stick hidden away. Lady Glendower and her party were dancing, and when at the end of the dance the crowd streamed back to its seats, Lady Glendower brought Miss Fortescue with her.

“Mr. Peters—Miss Fortescue.”

Julian made an attempt to rise, but the movement appeared so casual that Joan treated it as such. The man with the eyes! Just a coincidence. She nodded

at him.

“Delighted.”

She had not seen his stick and lame leg. If a lad could be so slow in getting up, she could be still more brisk in effacing him. She turned to Lady Glendower. She did not see the little badge of pain that she had pinned upon Julian Peters’ coat. She joined Lady Glendower’s party, and so large was it that it spread itself considerably. Miss Fortescue and Lady Glendower were five chairs distant from Mr. Peters.

Lady Glendower lit a cigarette.

“Not quite in form yet, Joan.”

Miss Fortescue looked annoyed. Why stress the obvious? And Lady Glendower smiled like Mona Lisa. This young woman——

Said Miss Fortescue, “It takes me two days to get used to the light. Besides—things put one off.”

“I suppose so.”

“I’d be most awfully bucked if you would do me a favour. It is rather a curious coincidence—but—that lad you just introduced—happens to be my pet snag.”

“What—poor Julian?”

Her tone was challenging, and Miss Fortescue laughed.

“Only—joking—you know. But he sits and stares.”

“At you?”

“Rather so. Regular jettatura.”

“You’d like me to tell him——?”

“Only joking, you know. But he does put me off.”

“How—reprehensible!”

The Austrian champion came to carry off Miss Fortescue for a waltz, and Lady Glendower moved to an empty chair next to Julian. She could not help noticing that his glances followed Miss Fortescue. Poor lamb! How unsubtle of him to be attracted by a little tin goddess.

“I have a message for you, my dear.”

Julian’s eyelids flickered. He had allowed himself to forget that other

people could be socially proximate.

“I beg your pardon——”

“You have been doing a dreadful thing, Julian.”

“I?”

“Yes—disturbing the concentration of a celebrity.”

“Who? How?”

“Miss Fortescue confided to me—that you sit and stare and put her off her game.”

He flinched.

“But—really—she moves—rather beautifully—I didn’t know—How very *bête*.”

“Very,” said Lady Glendower. “One wouldn’t expect a hard young person like Miss Fortescue to be so sensitive—but then—the self-consciousness of these picture paper people—is rather—ghastly.”

“You mean—it annoyed—Miss Fortescue?”

“Apparently.”

“She told you?”

Lady Glendower nodded.

“I’m terribly sorry——”

She patted his sleeve.

“Quite—unnecessary. The complete egotist. Quite insufferable—some of these—stars. I heard one of them ask to have the orchestra stopped—when she was playing. It performs in the gardens, you know.”

Mr. Peters smiled wistfully.

“I did not mean to stare like that. I’ll refrain—in the future.”

“No, go and stare, my dear. I’d like to see the Fink woman beat her, even though she is a German.”

Julian changed the position of his lame leg.

“Being a crock cuts one off—rather. But does she think of nothing but ——?”

“Nothing but—cups—Julian,” and her ladyship lit another cigarette.

The third day.

Joan had gone to the courts with her three racquets, and had forgotten her eye-shade. Very fatuous of her. She ran back through the gardens, and coming up the path she met a man. He was lame; he helped himself with a stick; he raised his hat, looked at her and then looked away.

She nodded and smiled. She thought, “Why, he’s a poor cripple.” Something in those very sensitive eyes of his had surprised her. He had seemed self-conscious and guilty, as though the Glendower woman had told him that she—Miss Fortescue—resented being stared at.

She had left her eye-shade in a chair in the lounge. She recovered it and hurried back, for she was due to play the lady champion of Greece. In fact they were calling her name—“Miss Fortescue—Miss Fortescue.” As she went on to the court she could not help glancing in the direction of that particular chair. It was empty.

So—the Glendower woman had told him. Well—really, hadn’t the woman any sense of humour?

She found herself bothered by that empty chair—which was preposterous. The man was lame—and she had hurt him. People shouldn’t be so absurdly sensitive. But she was playing Mademoiselle Xanthos and she was two games down to her in the first set. O, hang empty chairs! She gripped her concentration, and bent it to the crisis. This was the semi-final; unless she survived it she would not meet the Fink woman. She did survive, but very narrowly so. The Greek girl took her to five all in the third set.

Afterwards, she strolled across to watch Fräulein Fink who was playing in a mixed double on No. 3 Court. She saw Julian Peters there in somebody’s vacant chair. She saw him applaud one of the Fink volleys.

“Oh, great shot!”

She was piqued. Had she driven him into the Fink family?

The fourth day was a blank day so far as she was concerned, for the finals of the singles were being reserved for the last day. She was not playing in any of the doubles; she was supposed to be less potent in doubles. She did not combine well. Did she meditate upon her particular sin, as she walked along the sea path in the direction of St. Jean and the Cape? People said of her that she was a hard young woman, which was not quite true. She was immature, full of the urge of her youth and its forcefulness, a striding girl, head up, eyes to the front, lips and breasts firm and full. The mystery of things was yet to be, but on this perfect February morning she was moved to feel the beauty of sea

and sky and headland. These midnight pines, this water of varying shades of blueness. She passed through St. Jean, and took the sandy track along the headland where the sea and the pines sang to each other. It was very solitary. She saw nothing but a roving yellow dog who looked askance at her when she spoke to him.

Funny creatures—French dogs.

But there were other funny creatures in the world.

She heard someone calling:

“Hallo—hallo——”

The voice was a man’s and English. It came from among the pines on the hill-side. She paused to look, but it was some seconds before she picked out the figure among the trees. It seemed to be half lying—half sitting, in the heather.

She turned up the hill.

“Did you call?”

“Yes—I’m awfully sorry, but could you——”

The recognition was sudden and simultaneous. She was conscious of a curious pang. The lame man!

He was shy—apologetic.

“Awfully sorry to bother you. It’s my wretched leg. It drags a bit, and I caught my toe on a root scrambling around here.”

Almost, his face suggested shame—that he should have to appeal to a woman who was so strong and lithe and swift. He had been that once.

Miss Fortescue was other than Miss Fortescue. Why, she did not know or care. Something stirred in her, a strong, strange and instinctive thing.

“You’ve hurt yourself.”

“Just a twist. I shall have to get a lift back. So rotten—being a crock. And I used to be a wing three-quarter.”

His protest hurt her. Really, how beastly self-centred one could be; think of nothing but hitting a ball. She knelt down, and looked at his leg.

“I’m so sorry. Ought you to have a doctor?”

“O, no—sometimes the beastly thing behaves like this and I have to humour it for a day or two. If I could get a taxi—as far as the road.”

She looked at him.

“How did it happen?”

His eyes opened wide to hers. She was so different. She——

“I just caught my toe.”

“No—I mean, the leg?”

“Oh, a motor smash.”

“What bad luck. I can get a taxi or a carriage in St. Jean.”

“Could you?”

“Of course.”

“It’s awfully good of you.”

“O, no. I’ll go—at once.”

How absurd of her! She was suddenly hot and confused. She got up, and smiled—not at him, but over him. Her face was a different face.

“I won’t be ten minutes.”

She ran.

She found a carriage in St. Jean waiting by the little harbour. Her French was not very good, but she managed to explain to the man that he was to drive to the headland and wait for her. Someone had sprained a leg. Returning, she found Julian sitting there with the air of a patient child. He smiled at her.

“I’ve got a carriage. But do you think—you can manage?”

He looked shy. If someone would lend him a shoulder—? She understood. She helped him up, and made him put an arm across her shoulders, her left arm encircled him.

“Rather like a three-legged race.”

She watched him take a step, moving to keep in rhythm with him.

“Put your weight on me. That’s right.”

“Yes—I can manage.”

It took them five minutes to reach the carriage, and in those five minutes a completely new attitude to life had affected both of them. The intimacy of an impersonal occasion had become self-conscious. That racquet arm of hers was supporting a live thing. She got him into the carriage. He was a little flushed,

whether with pain or pleasure or both, she could not say. Her own face had come into sudden bloom.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Oh, the Bedford.”

The carriage rattled back to St. Jean, and they sat self-consciously side by side, demure and dignified. They had become suddenly shy of each other, two young souls in profile. But their silence was like a pause between two musical movements.

He said, “I’m awfully sorry I upset your game. It never occurred to me—that——”

She held her breath. So the old wretch had told him!

“But—really—you didn’t.”

“Yes—I did. It bothered you. You see—I can’t move, and it was rather good watching you move.”

She was speechless. And then she said in rather an off-hand way, “I wonder if it’s worth while?”

He looked at her a little anxiously.

“What?”

“Rushing about—banging a ball, and making such a beastly business of it. I think I’ll lose to-morrow.”

“Please—don’t.”

“I don’t think I should mind much.”

He said, “I should.”

When the carriage drew up outside the hotel she jumped out quickly.

“I’ll get a porter.”

And then she saw that he had something to say.

“Might—I come to-morrow?”

Her eyes met his.

“But you can’t. You mustn’t.”

“Oh, yes—I could. I’ve still got my old splint and a crutch. Kept in reserve, you know. But if it’s going to put you off your game. And I won’t stare.”

Her face had a new mystery.

“I’d like you to come—if you want to. No, it won’t worry me.”

She ran up the hotel steps to fetch the concierge to help him.

It was a crowded day. When she walked on to the court with the Fink woman she looked towards that particular place. He was there. He raised his hat, and she gave him a little wave of the racquet. Fräulein Fink, lean, kinky-haired, all teeth, flashed them at the crowd. Hands clapped. Fräulein Fink smiled upon the world. Her big nose seemed to transfix victory. She smiled upon her opponent. O, yes, she was feeling supremely confident, and Miss Fortescue was looking nervous.

The game began in an atmosphere of tension. The German girl was at the top of her form, and she won the first two games with supreme ease. Joan was netting or driving out. Most of her first services were faults. The crowd’s tension relaxed. The affair looked like being a walk-over, and the crowd began to be a little sorry for Joan.

Their compassion was premature. Suddenly, and apparently for no reason at all, she found herself; and one of those sudden changes came over the game. She had been fumbling and asleep, but now her thrusts were deep and true, her counters cunning and swift. Her drives went deep into the corner, pitching within a few inches of the base-line. Her anticipation became exquisite. She ran in on some of those deep drives, intercepted the return and put the ball away.

The crowd grew clamorous. Fräulein Fink was still all teeth and smile—but her eyes were anxious. She began to lob the English girl, but her lobs lacked length and subtlety. Joan killed most of them, or gave back more deadly lobs.

First set to Miss Fortescue at 6—4.

Julian Peters seemed to be sitting on a hot chair. He squirmed. The lady next him became annoyed. Why couldn’t the man sit still?

In the second set Joan lapsed. She became cautious. She lost that set, though it was a long-drawn duel. Both girls were all out—but it became obvious that Miss Fortescue was the fitter of the two. The German’s big mouth was open—not to smile, but for air. Her nose looked pinched.

Before the third set Miss Fortescue did an unconventional thing. She went and spoke to somebody in a chair, and that somebody said to her, “Go in and volley. Put them deep in the corners—like you did in the first. You’ll win.”

She did. She attacked from the first stroke. She had a tiring opponent running to and fro. Once more—her anticipation was beautiful, her volleying crisp and deadly. She played like a man, and on her day few men could have beaten her. She won the final set at 6—2.

Applause, hand-shakes, smiles, a very eminent gentleman standing forward to congratulate both ladies, a lame man with a crutch hobbling behind rows of chairs to stand at a gate.

He met her coming out.

“Splendid. I knew you could. The best game you ever played.”

She looked strangely confused.

“I felt—like—playing in my sleep.”

He laughed.

“Well, it was a wonderful dream.”

And that was what he imagined his own affair to be; a beautiful, tantalizing and poignant incident; a little bitter to him in its beauty—perhaps, but just a day in the life of Atalanta. He could not play with her. She was—in a sense—a public person, a draw, a prize for the photographers, but not for him. This crowd was dispersing, but other crowds would gather at Monte Carlo and Menton and Cannes, and Joan Fortescue would perform before them. No, he was not going to Monte Carlo or Menton or Cannes.

The Hotel Bristol was concluding the week’s festival with a Bal Fleuris. Everybody was going to it; but Julian did not go. He remained at the Bedford Hotel nursing his leg and a secret and absurd passion.

Said the Austrian champion to Joan as they fox-trotted, “You are going to Cannes, of course?”

She seemed tired, a little distraught. Her glances wandered, and were not for him—which was unusual, for he had been given to understand that all women were mad about him.

“No—I’m scratching.”

“Scratching?”

“Yes—feeling stale.”

Which—of course—on her day’s brilliance—was absurd. He could only suppose that she was shy of meeting the Fink woman a second time.

A dream and an awakening—but why—either? She sat in the gardens and

walked to St. Jean, but she saw no Julian. Had he gone to Cannes? She climbed the steps of the Bedford Hotel, and feeling absurdly self-conscious, she inquired casually for Mr. Peters.

“How is Mr. Peters—I hope his leg is better?”

She was told that Mr. Peters had gone out for a drive.

She remembered that wonderful drive of theirs. She was feeling acutely romantic. She walked to St. Jean, and on to the headland. She would go and sit among the pine trees where he and she had come together for a moment in their lives. She came upon a taxi waiting under the pines. Had he——? She held her breath for a moment; she hesitated. Was he, too, up there redreaming a dream?

She saw him. She waved a hand. She ascended through the sunlight and shadow. She saw that he was trying to rise.

“Don’t. Please—don’t move.”

His face was a complete self-betrayal, and hers was not much better. She sat down.

He said, “I thought you had gone to Cannes.”

“No—I scratched.”

“Scratched? But—you——”

“Oh—I’m rather stale. I’m rather off rushing about and hitting things. I think I want to sit and stare.”

He looked infinitely grave.

“That’s what I do. I have to—but you—— Do you know what it means?”

She looked at the sea showing blue between the pines.

“I’d like to find out. One must miss such a lot just rushing about. More than you miss, perhaps.”

He prodded the ground with his stick.

“There’s a difference. If you get tired of sitting and staring—you can rush off; I can’t. I watch life and scribble about it. Of course there is a lot in life—my sort of life, but it’s limited.”

She watched that restless stick of his.

“Not so limited, perhaps—as—mine. I’m reading one of your books.”

He glanced at her sharply.

“Yes—I do get some movement in books—but wouldn’t that bore you?”

She had the air of a woman marvelling over some mystery.

“No. It didn’t bore you watching me play?”

“Hardly. I could always watch you.”

She gave him a shy little laugh and a glimpse of her eyes.

“Doesn’t that cut both ways?”

And suddenly he had hold of her hand, and for half a minute they sat in silence.

Then he said, “It’s too wonderful. I simply—had it at first sight. But—it can’t go on. I can’t ask you to marry a crock.”

She looked at the sea.

“Then—if you don’t ask me—— Won’t it be rather hard—for the real crock—that’s me?”

“My dear—my——”

They looked steadily at each other and kissed.

So—in spite of mutual protestations, a star fell from the firmament of the tennis world. Mr. Peters insisted that Mrs. Peters must not disappoint her public, and Mrs. Peters humoured him and herself—but when Mrs. Peters became a wife and something more than a wife, the rhythm of life altered. Some people said, “What a pity”—others, “How very old-fashioned,” but Joan was not listening to what people said of her, or what the Press had ceased to say.

THE MALICE OF MEN

BECAUSE Oscar Blount said something scurrilous and funny about Harold Tarmac, and because a waspish friend repeated the remark to Tarmac, the feud began.

"Oh, old Harold takes his sex and his sugar—three lumps to the cup."

Blount was that most rare bird—a poet, and Harold Tarmac wrote novels of infinite solemnity and porcine dullness. Blount was a little, sallow monkey of a man with a hungry profile and much black greasy hair. Tarmac was vast and red with a ruff of sandy hair crowning a high and shiny forehead, blue eyes that stared, large teeth of a dubious yellowness. He gave you the impression of being in a perpetual perspiration.

Tarmac retorted upon Blount.

"Oscar's linen and his license both might go to the laundry."

The feud was venomous from its inception. It was the clash of two pretentious personalities, of two persons who—it so happened—found themselves posing to the same public and were mutually offended. Each wanted the little public occasion for itself, and resented the presence of the other fellow. And, circumstance, as though enjoying the jest, so arranged it that Harold and Oscar were always joggling against each other.

Both belonged to the Green Cat Club, and though Harold lunched there regularly, Oscar could not afford to do more than use the club matches in the smoking-room. It was said of Oscar that he purloined those matches, but then a poet must have his perquisites.

They attended the dinners of the Bulbul and the Brick-a-Brac clubs, and made speeches in which they contrived to advertise themselves with a nice subtlety.

But their mutual superfluities became most evident at the house of

“Chloe,” Chloe being one of the bright young women of the day, a kind of Madame Recamier with an Eton crop and various nudities, who gave cocktail parties. Chloe, or Miss Iris Parmoor, had a house in Gaunt Street, and collected “funny faces.” Both Tarmac and Blount could be included in that category.

So these two eminent men were always meeting and getting in each other’s way. Both were great talkers, and not being able to engage each other with swords, they would cross tongues. Miss Parmoor and a mischievous world encouraged the scuffles of the two celebrities.

Mr. Tarmac, arriving late at one of these parties, and delayed for a moment in the vestibule by attention to his tie, heard through the half-open door the voice of Oscar Blount.

“Harold puts the baby in the font, you know, all the baby and nothing but the baby. The sentimental sacerdotalist. But when you realize that Harold’s baby is not a real baby, but only a sort of stuffed bambino, you know all that you need know about Harold’s books.”

Someone retorted.

“But ‘The Crown of Thorns’ had distinction.”

Mr. Tarmac heard Oscar’s little, clattering laugh.

“I sat on the ‘Crown of Thorns’ in the *Monitor* and it did not penetrate my trousers. Harold thinks himself highbrow of the highbrows. He buzzes in sentimentality like a bee in a bottle full of sugar and beer.”

Tarmac dallied over the adjustment of his tie. His colour was high. That Blount should have called him a sentimentalist was the supreme outrage, particularly so when Harold Tarmac was flinging that word perpetually at the heads of other novelists. He wrote pontifical articles in the *Weekly Standard* in which he admonished all literary prostitutes and panders.

He entered. He looked heated and moist and massive. Miss Parmoor’s guests were seated upon cushions disposed about the white enamelled floor. Chloe’s cushions and her white floor were part of her vogue. There was an interested silence. Probably fat Harold had overheard Oscar’s irreverent jibes.

Miss Parmoor presented a hand to be kissed. That too was part of the ritual.

“And how is St. Harold to-night?”

Tarmac was producing one of his ironical suavities when he was disturbed by Blount’s fancifulness. Almost Oscar impinged upon Tarmac. He had dragged his cushion close to Chloe’s knees, and he knelt on it, with his paws

together in supplication.

“O, my god, Chloe—mercy, mercy. I have blasphemed. Oscar is afraid.”

His insolent little slate-grey eyes challenged Tarmac.

“I have cast a stone at the stained-glass window. I have blasphemed against an almost best seller.”

Tarmac looked down at him over his ample waistcoat. He was stout for a man of forty. He showed himself sententious, and savagely suave.

“It grieves me that I have no bag of nuts to-night, Oscar. But I sometimes go to the Zoo on Sunday.”

The room laughed. Miss Parmoor’s clique cultivated supreme frankness, and Oscar was very like a monkey. He could caper; he could make himself look pathetic as though some dream-world of palm trees mocked his captivity. But the lash had stung him. He showed his teeth.

“Nuts. O, my god, he speaks to me of nuts! Brazil and Barcelona. But—people—I implore you, defend me from Behemoth and Buns.”

He wriggled on his cushion. He raised ironical, supplicating hands.

“Throw him buns, throw him buns quickly, or Behemoth will trample on me. Praise him, praise him. Throw him buns, Bath buns.”

Tarmac stood and observed him. He perspired. This fooling had a bitter edge to it.

He said—“You have given the monkey too many cocktails, Chloe. Do get up, my dear Blount. The knees of your trousers are so precious.”

He smirked. He strolled across to the drink table, nodding at various acquaintances. He helped himself to whisky. He flattered himself that he had flattened Blount. And then he heard the voice of the poet appealing to pathos.

“Harold’s peeved. O, my god, what have I done! Sat on the crown of thorns. And they weren’t prickly. No, not in the least prickly. Let Harold suggest that my trousers were too thick. No, I assure you I must have sat on one of his bun books.”

Tarmac sipped his whisky. He was trying to think of a retort, and nothing would come. He began to feel that the candour of Chloe’s clique was a little too primitive.

But the world of such egoists as Harold Tarmac and Oscar Blount is a jealous world, and there can be no malice more venomous than that of the

literary gentleman who is ceasing to please his public. Tarmac had had a certain vogue, and was losing it. He had arrived at that phase when a man—ceasing to be creative—takes refuge in criticism. He must have his audience. He must be listened to, even if he shows an envious eloquence in abusing his betters.

Blount, with his monkeyish quickness, knew how to plant the dart. He planted it in Tarmac's stout back as the novelist was saying good night to Miss Parmoor's crowd.

"Poor old Harold—becoming a back number, written out. Makes him touchy. Obviously."

Tarmac heard the remark; he had been meant to hear it. He went out with blue eyes glaring in a red and shiny face.

Blount had called him Behemoth, and Tarmac had some of the cunning and the unforgetfulness of that order of mammal. He could wait for his opportunity and plant a ponderous foot. Yes, with his trunk, he would catch the monkey, and dash him to earth. Very vain creatures, both of them, and vanity makes men cruel. Tarmac did not rage for a night and forget in the morning. For years he had taken himself so seriously that he took insults seriously.

If Blount had a malicious finger, so had he, and his finger was twice as thick as Blount's. He cogitated. He knew, what many of the members of the Green Cat Club knew, that Blount concealed his burrow. No one had ever discovered where the poet lived. He had no address. His letters came to the Club. His secretiveness had a shabby significance. Someone had suggested jokingly that in his unpoetic moments Blount ran a pawnbroker's shop.

Tarmac cogitated. Then he called upon a private detective agency and explained to the gentleman who interviewed him that he wanted a certain person shadowed.

"I want to know where he lives."

Nothing could be simpler. Mr. Tarmac had only to point the person out to one of the firm's inquiry agents.

"Look here, send your fellow to have lunch with me at my club. Probably I shall be able to put him on the trail from there. I should like him to report to me at my flat."

It was done. A somewhat dressy and sophisticated young man was lunched by Harold Tarmac at the Green Cat Club. Blount had a habit of appearing in the club about two o'clock. In the smoking-room, over coffee and cigars,

Tarmac explained the vagaries of the animal.

“Watch that door. If I say—‘Have a liqueur’ when a certain person enters—that will be your man.”

It happened fortunately for Tarmac. Blount came mincing in as though the room was full of women who adored his poetry. The young man was offered a liqueur. He accepted it, a brandy. And Tarmac paid. Being a careful man he had expected the fellow to say no.

“Exceptionally good cellar here.”

The sophisticated young man savoured the bouquet.

“Yes, it’s it.”

Half an hour later, Mr. Tarmac left him to the sleuth game. He supposed that the affair would be of the simplest, and that by the evening he would know where Oscar hid himself, but the poet proved to be the most circuitous and suspicious of animals. On three successive days the agent shadowed him from the doors of the Green Cat Club, and lost him during the pursuit.

He reported to Mr. Tarmac.

“Never went after such a slippery devil. You think you have got him, and suddenly he’s gone—like the conjurer’s egg.”

Oscar Blount’s elusiveness was more annoying to the young man than to Harold Tarmac, for it suggested to Tarmac that Blount must have very good reasons for his doublings, and that the secret was worth discovering.

“What’s he do?”

“Without any apparent reason at all he will make a sudden dive into the traffic, and when I have got through after him he has vanished. He has done me twice that way.”

“Do you think he suspects——?”

“No, sir. I’m pretty silky at this sort of job. It strikes me that it’s just part of his routine. I’ll run him to earth. Don’t you worry.”

He was as good as his word. On the fourth evening he called on Harold Tarmac with an address.

“Got him, sir.”

He handed Mr. Tarmac a card.

“That’s where he lives. Just a little unexpected.”

It was. The novelist read the address, “No. 7, Saffron Street, Islington.”

The young man appeared to be waiting for Harold Tarmac to ask questions, but Harold was the sort of man who preferred to cut the cake himself.

“I am much obliged to you. Just one thing—did you make any inquiries?”

“Discreetly, sir, yes.”

“One has presumed that the gentleman is a bachelor.”

“Not quite a bachelor—I think, sir.”

Tarmac smiled.

“Ah—like that. I wondered. I am much obliged to you.”

On the following morning Tarmac took a taxi as far as the “Angel.” He discarded the cab, and went forth on foot to discover Saffron Street. It was an elusive street, and he had to ask a postman and an errand boy before he ran Saffron Street to earth. It was shabby, and very much at the back of things, and full of frowsiness. The hour was half-past twelve.

Mr. Tarmac traversed Saffron Street, and No. 7 discovered itself to him as a shop, one of those strange, little shops that play the part of universal providers in miniature. Its window offered to the world bottles of sweets, mummified jam tarts in cardboard boxes, ham, sardines, picture post cards, cheap stationery, cheese. The fascia board bore the name of Blount, and the fat soul of Tarmac gloated. He walked up the street and down the street; he stood and stared at the window. So this was the poet’s corner. He chortled. And at this hour of the day the gentle Oscar would be parading his person in other alleys, or lunching with the more exquisite world.

“By Jove, what a jest!”

Lyrics from Saffron Street! And who was the Sappho who sold the cheese? Was it from here that “Piccadilly Perfumes” had emanated? Ye gods! Little Blount handing out sonnets and stale eggs.

The street was full of children, and not very clean children. Three or four of them were playing a game on the pavement close to No. 7, and a little, saucy wench, seemed interested in Tarmac.

He beamed upon her. He offered her sixpence.

“And what’s your name, young lady?”

She looked at him suspiciously, while making sure of the sixpence.

“Barbara.”

“What a lovely name. And what else?”

“Blount.”

Yes, there was a likeness.

“B.B. That sounds precious. Any brothers and sisters?”

“You bet,” said the child, and sidled off. She did not quite trust Tarmac. He was too sugary.

Harold hesitated for a moment, and then he entered the shop to the jingling of a little bell. A big, florid, dominant looking lady waited for him behind the counter. She had the air of having borne many children. She had a bold, golden buxomness that suggested to Tarmac that once upon a time Blount had put a barmaid into poetry and that she had pinned him down to prose.

He said—“Have you any ink?”

“Penny bottles.”

“One—please.”

The bottle and the penny were exchanged. Tarmac smirked. He produced one of his suavities.

“Most comprehensive shop—this, madam.”

She observed him suspiciously. His inference was correct. Years ago she had been behind a bar, and her golden amplitudes had ravished little Blount. But she knew something about men, and she did not like the ironical succulence of Mr. Tarmac. He was unusual. He might have designs upon the till.

“Anything else?”

Her abrupt blue eyes repulsed him.

“No, thank you, not this morning.”

He removed himself to the tinkling of the bell, and meeting Barbara upon the pavement, was playful with her.

“Guess what your mother has sold me, my dear.”

She stared up into his huge, red, shining face.

“Soap. You looks like it.”

And Harold Tarmac went his way. The Blount tongue lived in the mouth of the daughter.

But Harold was a careful person. He sent again for the young gentleman with the roving eyes, and gave him instructions.

“I want you to find out—if you can—whether the man serves in the shop. Find out what his movements are. You understand?”

“Quite, sir.”

“That will suffice.”

In a day or two he reported to Harold Tarmac that Mr. Blount assisted in the shop between the hours of ten and twelve, and three and six. Yes, and he had unearthed a few details with regard to the intimacies of No. 7, Saffron Street. Would Mr. Tarmac care to hear them? Yes. Local gossip had it that Blount was a free-lance journalist, one of the prowling members who hunt the sensational and the unsavoury, an off and on gentleman, sometimes at home, sometimes not. But apparently, when at home, he was kept in docile subjection by his wife. Yes, they had five children, and it was said that Mrs. Blount had been a barmaid. She was more of a person in Saffron Street than her little husband. She might be hot-headed, but Saffron Street understood her large humanities. As for Blount he was regarded as a supercilious little person, an oddity, a mystery. He had an opera hat. Saffron Street supposed that gentleman of the press had to appear as toffs on certain public occasions.

Tarmac purred. He was inspired. He betook himself to Miss Parmoor’s flat and was playful. He was giving a party, a very particular sort of party. They were going upon a pilgrimage.

“To visit the Castalian Spring, dear lady, and the Temple of the Muses. Sappho and the Isles of Greece. Can I persuade you and some of your scintillant creatures?”

He was mysterious, jocund.

“You’ll come? Splendid. If fortune is with us I can assure you we shall be thrilled.”

One of Chloe’s young things perched on a purple tuffet asked Harold to be a little more explicit.

“What’s the pose? That last stunt of ours was rather septic.”

“Which one was that?”

“Oh—when a dozen of us went to dine at a sausage and mash shop. I got something in my sausage.”

Tarmac reassured her.

“In this adventure we don’t eat. We may smell pickles and ham and cheese. I shall have two cars. I’m going to show you domestic bliss in Islington.”

He piqued them. He made up his party. He would arrange a lunch at “Tortoni’s,” and afterwards the cars would collect them and carry them upon the adventure. Well, yes, six of them could crowd into each car. The more the merrier. He could assure them that they would not be bored.

It was a very warm day in June. The gentlemen of the Weather Bureau described it as “Rather warm,” while the Press was shouting about a heat wave. Harold Tarmac met his guests at Tortoni’s with a saffron coloured rose in his buttonhole. His head was buttered. He had the air of the high priest perspiring beneficently while conducting a ceremony.

He gave them champagne. It became evident that he was sentimentally interested in Chloe, though his supreme interest would always be in Harold Tarmac. He had put on new white spats and new trousers.

Molly Armour remarked to young Challis.

“Harold looks almost matrimonial.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t perjure himself. Love and cherish. He spends all that on H.T.”

“Malicious creatures—you men.”

“Being a feminist, my dear—I have taken on the qualities of Eve. But if I was a woman and Harold came hot and sizzling to the sofa, I’d either throw a fit or deflate him with a hat pin.”

“Watson! It appears that you don’t like——”

Young Challis grinned at her. He was an out-of-doors young man.

“Now, how on earth did you guess that?”

“Rather bright of me, wasn’t it!”

But the lunch was a successful meal. It fizzed and chattered, and Tarmac boomed, and was mysterious, and like the showman would let no one peep prematurely behind the curtain. He allowed that he would conduct them on a pilgrimage to the Temple of Domestic Bliss. No one suspected the issue.

“In these decadent days, peoples, one should hasten to gaze upon any picture of purity in the home. In cathedral close or in cottage the lily still blooms. We will salute it.”

Challis was getting bored.

“Rhetorical old trout. Wish he’d get a move on.”

“Something is due to your host, my lad.”

“Oh, yes, heaps of things.”

It was half-past two. The brandy liqueurs and the coffees had been finished, and cigars were grey at the middle. Tarmac looked at his watch.

“The procession will start in ten minutes.”

“On wheels all the way?”

“No. We have to walk up the steps of the sanctuary.”

Two big Daimlers hired for the occasion carried them northwards into Islington. Harold Tarmac sat beside the driver of the leading car and directed him, for Saffron Street was not on the social map. Moreover, the procession was to pause in Upper Street, and Tarmac would lead the party on foot to Oscar’s secret sanctuary. They left the two cars in Upper Street, and took to the wilds, and people stared. It looked like a wedding party. The attention grew more marked and less reticent as they approached Saffron Street. Tarmac, walking in front with Miss Parmoor, was superlatively the toff.

Shining hats! Rude children stared.

“Come on, Gertie—it’s a movie stunt.”

They had collected quite a creditable little following by the time they arrived at the end of Saffron Street. Young Challis was growing restive. This was not the sort of sensationalism that suited him.

“What—is—the game, after all?”

Tarmac halted his flock.

“Just—one moment. Talk to the nice little children while I go on and prepare the ground.”

He left them. He walked with stout alacrity up Saffron Street, and showing caution, peered through the shop window. He was not observed by the person within, a little man in his shirt sleeves who was cutting slices of ham. Tarmac retraced his steps and waved, and was joined by the procession. He smiled upon them.

“The Muse is at home. We must be ceremonious.”

He offered Miss Parmoor his arm. They arrived at the shop door, and with a gloved hand Tarmac pushed the door open. The bell jingled, They entered. The tableau was complete.

Behind the counter stood little Oscar Blount, a knife in one hand, and sundry slices of ham supported by the other on a piece of paper. He was in his shirt sleeves; his head was untidy. His face had a kind of horrid vacancy, mouth open, eyes at gaze.

Tarmac raised his hat to him.

“My dear Blount, we pilgrims——”

The crowded shop had a hot silence, but the silence seemed to melt into rapid movement, for Blount, dropping the knife and the ham, incontinently bolted. He disappeared through a back door leading into a kitchen parlour where a large woman was ironing shirts.

Tarmac emitted a silly giggle.

“Dear, dear, we have frightened poor Oscar. Sensitive fellow——”

But the faces behind him were neither mocking nor merry. Miss Parmoor’s lips had a thinness. Young Challis was frowning, and obviously not liking himself where he was.

“I say, isn’t this rather——”

Voices could be heard in the back room. Its door opened abruptly, and to them appeared the large virago. She was aflame. She confronted them with a human and convincing wrath, while a right hand seemed to grope below the counter.

She addressed herself to Mr. Tarmac.

“Met before, haven’t we?”

Tarmac raised his hat to her.

“I have had that pleasure. We are friends of Mr. Blount——”

She scorned him.

“Ah, is that so! You toffs—I suppose you think it’s a scream—crowding in here. Nice people. You think you’ve got the laugh of him. Well—here’s luck.”

She had found her missile, half a pound of butter that was feeling the heat. She had peeled back the wrapper, and she flung that yellow mass well and truly in Tarmac’s face. It adhered; it spread and oozed and oiled itself down over chin and tie and coat.

“Got it. Now—clear out—the whole crowd of you.”

But from the background rose sounds of applause emanating from young

Challis who had begun to detach himself from the adventure.

“I say—that’s splendid. Mrs. Blount—do chuck another. I’m with you ——”

And suddenly, she smiled at him.

“Well—there’s one gent——”

They all walked out of the shop, deserting Tarmac who was still busy with the butter. Nor did they wait for him. Miss Parmoor sailed off as though severing any bond of sympathy that had attached her to the novelist. Challis walked beside her, and the rest followed.

Said Challis: “Spiteful old tom-cat, Harold. But—I say—that was a prime gesture. She hasn’t left Tarmac much panache.”

Miss Parmoor’s nostrils were shadowy with scorn.

“These celebrities—too much venom. They can’t play nicely without clawing. I’ve every sympathy with the Blount woman.”

“Same here.”

None of them troubled to tarry for Mr. Tarmac, or to put his buttered pride in countenance. How he escaped from that particular Isle of Greece, history does not relate. The party returned to the two cars and left the novelist to the problems of publicity.

But the tale got abroad, and so much abroad that Harold Tarmac took an island in a lake somewhere, and became temporarily reclused. A wag wrote a little poem upon “St. Harold and the Buttercups.” It was found pinned upon one of the notice boards of the Green Cat Club.

Possibly, it was Oscar who wrote it.

But Miss Parmoor’s cocktails ceased to inspire him.

AN ENCORE

It was early June when Herr Joseph Siegl of Munich collected Ferrers and his luggage from the Hotel Continental and took the road to the Wurm See, and since the season was young and the road very empty between the dark spruce woods, Herr Siegl talked.

He spoke English well, and he liked to practise it. Moreover, he was a kindly and highly intelligent man, with a round head which was hatless, and his Bavarian pate suggested to Ferrers that Mr. Siegl had worn a German steel helmet and worn it so unwillingly that now that peace had come he eschewed all head-gear.

He said: “You will find Parker’s Hotel very comfortable at Tutzing. Yes, and the cooking is excellent. Not much traffic. Yes, we walk a great deal in Germany these days.”

The little man drove very doucely, and sometimes he would slacken speed as though he understood Ferrers’ love of the country and shared it, for Mr. Ferrers was no ordinary tourist. It might be said that he had a European reputation in that it was known to Joseph Siegl.

“Things haven’t changed much here.”

The Bavarian smiled.

“No, we are too poor; we have to content ourselves with rucksacks and flowers. The older philosophy. So you have been here before?”

Ferrers’ face had a peculiar sadness.

“Oh, yes, some eighteen years ago. Same month, same weather, same hotel.”

Herr Siegl’s round face beamed.

“Ah, and you will not be disappointed. That is rare. The same terrace, the same lime trees, and grass and water. Perhaps—even the same room.”

The Englishman's eyes were half closed.

"I am going to ask for the same room."

He became silent, and there was a quality in his silence that roused in Joseph Siegl a gentle curiosity; also, it was a silence that could be felt like the aloofness of the pine woods, and Mr. Siegl drove his car and remained quiet. For, after all, it was very pleasant to drive in silence where other cars were not, and where the sky was innocent and unvexed by machines that flew. Peace prevailed, and all the floweriness of June.

So Herr Siegl deposited Ferrers and his luggage at the hotel above the Wurm See, and the Englishman and the German shook hands.

"I am at your service always, sir. Just a message on the telephone."

"It will be you and no one else, Siegl. I may feel moved to go to Salzburg. You drive like an artist. Good-bye."

In the office of Parker's Hotel a big, bland frau smiled upon Ferrers. She, too, spoke English.

"You would prefer a room over the lake."

"Can I have Number Eleven?"

She looked surprised.

"Number Eleven? Why, certainly; but it is a double room."

"I should like it, if it will not interfere with your arrangements. Of course, you will charge me correspondingly."

So he had been here before, but it must have been long ago, for Frau Blick and her husband had been in charge of the hotel since the war, and Mr. Ferrers was a stranger to her. There was a letter lying on her desk, and she glanced at it, and seemed to be about to make some reference to the letter and then she changed her mind. An English agency had written to reserve a room for a client, and they asked that the room might be Number Eleven.

"Will you be staying long?"

"Oh, possibly a week."

She put up a hand and smoothed her hair. Well, if that was so, room Number Eleven would be in a position to oblige both parties, for the other client would not be arriving for a fortnight.

"Shall I show you the room?"

“Please don’t trouble. I think I know the way. Nothing seems to have changed.”

“Then I will have your luggage sent up.”

“Thank you. Can one still lunch on the terrace?”

“Why—yes.”

Ferrers did not go directly to his room. He wandered out through the door of the sunny corridor on to the terrace with its pollarded lime trees and its array of chairs and tables, and crossing to the balustrade he leaned against it. He seemed to dream. The little white hotel with its woods and sloping meadows was just the same, poignantly the same, and in recovering a memory he re-experienced moments of passion and regret. The Wurm See glimmered beyond the trees, just as he and she had seen it eighteen years ago on just such a day in June. They had come here for their honeymoon, two romantic and live young things who had been very much in love with each other.

Love!

He closed his eyes for a moment, and the face of the man of five and forty became almost the face of a boy. But there were ironic shadows about the mouth and eyes. How much of life was an illusion! How was it that one came to kill the thing one loved? And this whim of his, to return in the month of June, and to look again upon the landscape of a memory! As though life could repeat itself! As though that which was dead could live!

He turned away, and re-entering the hotel climbed the stairs to the broad, white corridor. He noticed the same clock at the head of the stairs, and as he was about to pass it the clock began to strike the hour of noon. Its deep notes startled him, and he supposed that this clock had been striking the hours all through those eighteen years.

He opened the door of Number Eleven, and as he did so he thought: “Nothing matters but youth. If one could put back the clock——”

The very room had not changed. The furniture was the same. He remembered the big wardrobe made of some very dark wood. He remembered her opening the door of the wardrobe and turning to him with a question, “Which dress shall I wear to-night?” He was conscious of a pang of bitterness and of self-accusation. What a damned fool he had been! Yes, he supposed that in the eyes of the world he must appear as one of the favourites of fortune, and yet he was unhappy. The fire of his youth was dying, and he was beginning to grope among the ashes.

His luggage had been carried up. A big brown suit-case had been placed on the luggage stand at the foot of the bed, and he was about to unlock it when an unexpected sound startled him. Someone was singing, and the sound was as strange to him as the song of some bird in the depths of winter. A shadow seemed to pass across his face. He left the suit-case and went to the window.

The voice of youth!

It was singing a song of Noel Coward's, from "Bitter-Sweet," and it seemed to suggest abandonment, joy, youth in the spring of the year, full-throated, exultant. Bitter-sweet! The sound appeared to come from the direction of the lake, and to tremble above the flowery grasses, and to rise and fall in the sunlight. It was a voice to which poor Mad Ludwig might have listened while drifting and dreaming in his Swan Boat.

And then Ferrers saw the singer. It was a girl. She came out from the shadows of the spruce trees, a dark young creature in a yellow knitted coat, and a sage-green skirt. She was bare-legged, bare-headed, and she seemed to move up the flowery slope with a lightness and a fluidity that matched her singing. She was English.

He stood and watched her, and suddenly he was smitten by a sense of infinite sadness. Youth—youth!

She was coming to the hotel. He saw her climb the flight of steps to the terrace and stand there looking towards the lake. Her singing ceased. She put her hands behind her head and clasped them, and stood at gaze. He supposed that the world seemed fresh and exquisite to her.

He watched her turn and walk across the terrace. She was dark and slim, with one of those very white skins, a vivid, lissome creature. All her movements were beautiful. And suddenly her eyes lifted to his window. She saw him there. She seemed amused, and her glance was frank and jocund. Almost it said, "Hallo, old thing! What a solemn face we've got! I'm jolly hungry."

They met at lunch. That is to say they found themselves at neighbouring tables under the lime trees. She was alone, but quite obviously ready to renounce that state. The season was young, and the whole terrace theirs, save for two elderly women with cameras and Baedekers. Franz the head waiter, and a youth in a white apron, seemed to regard her table as particularly important.

It was Fritz who introduced them, Fritz the hotel dachshund, waddling out to share in possible luncheon dainties. He, too, seemed attracted to the young

thing’s table, but he did not forget to turn interested brown eyes on Ferrers.

He sat up to beg.

“Oh, you greedy old darling.”

Ferrers was preparing to tempt him with a fragment of pork chop. His eyes met the girl’s, and they smiled at each other.

“No affectation about Fritz.”

“Yes, rather refreshing, isn’t it? No troublesome inhibitions.”

Her smile became challenging.

“That’s an outside size word.”

“Just how?”

“Oh, number seven shoe, and the London school of economics, and high, bald foreheads!”

He laughed.

“You prefer spontaneity?”

“Well—rather! Did you ever taste a more eugenic pork chop? What’s Fritz think about it? Bow-wow. This place makes one feel so gloriously irresponsible.”

She was a most attractive creature, vivid and vital, if a little restless. Her red lips seemed to open at life like a cherry.

He said, “It’s a wonderful spot. It makes you feel that you have got mixed up in the prelude to ‘Tristan and Isolde.’ I think I heard you singing.”

Her glance was mischievous.

“Probably. It was most disgracefully naked.”

“I rather thought we had outgrown—such——”

“Isn’t ‘Bitter-Sweet’ absolute petticoat? ‘Blue Danube’ and all that? Yes, I like it. Oh, yes, Franz, I’ll have a jam omelette.”

Fritz, feeling himself just a little out of the picture, put his paws on her knees.

“Darling, aren’t we paying you ’nuff ’tention?—By the way, don’t think me awfully forward, but I’m sure I have seen you before.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh, yes, I have, on a platform and in the papers. You made quite a nice little speech at the last *femina* show.”

His face grew serious.

“Well, put a name to it.”

“What about ‘Morals and Mayfair’? I have got the German edition upstairs.”

He laughed; he was pleased.

“You read it in German?”

“Yes.”

“It is a bad book. It must be even worse in German. Why do you read it in German?”

“Why? Saw it in a Munich bookshop. Yes, it’s not one of your best.”

He knew that she was right, for it was the book of a tired man, a man who was growing old.

He said, “Well, you have me labelled. And here’s your jam omelette. What about it?”

She smiled at the stolid Franz.

“Oh—I paint pictures, or try to. Lola Lingerman. My grandfather was a Hun. Yes, I had a thing in the Academy last year. That’s supposed to be disgusting, isn’t it? What was more disgusting—no one bought it. But this omelette—is—marvellous.”

That was the beginning of it, and perhaps Ferrers’ impression of her was like a first glimpse of some audacious picture that provoked his more sober sense impressions. It may be that she tantalized him, challenged the remnants of his youth, and dared him to desire all the colour and the chaos of her. Her voice and her glances stung him, and during those early days she was like a wind blowing upon the embers of his manhood.

Besides, there was no interference. But for the two serious women with cameras they had this little world within a world to themselves, and to Ferrers she was more than a coincidence. She had rushed into the recrudescence of a memory.

Her bare legs and arms growing brown in the sun made him feel that he had been sitting in a chair for years like some peevish valetudinarian.

She went about singing.

She would provoke the sober Fritz to run races on the terrace, and his short and grotesque legs were not equal to her swiftness.

It did not occur to Ferrers that he was rather like the dog, a creature to be played with simply because there was no one else for her to play with.

She called him “Lion,” for his Christian name was Lionel.

“Hallo—hallo, show a leg.”

Her vitality was exultant. He felt that he had to match it somehow, though the effort did not distress him to begin with.

“Come on, race you.”

She had him out at seven in the morning. She headed him down the terrace steps in her light-blue bathing dress and white canvas shoes. They raced down the meadow to the spruce wood, and half-way through the wood she still led him by two strides. He laboured, and was suddenly wrath with those five and forty years. He managed to pass her on the grassy path going down to the water, but he was a little pinched about the nostrils, and his breath came harshly.

She flung herself on the grass and laughed. She was panting a little.

“I’ll beat you to-morrow. I’ll knock off five cigarettes.”

He lay on the grass beside her, conscious of physical distress. He had not done this sort of thing for years.

“Right. We’ll go into training.”

He was glad of the grass and of the imagined respite, but her restlessness was not a thing that nested. She was up again and making for the diving-board.

“Come on. No slacking.”

He watched her go in like an arrow. He realized that he had never been much of a diver, but he got up and walked to the board. She was shaking her wet head and laughing.

“Come on. It’s marvellous.”

His header wasn’t quite of that order. He went in with a flop and a splash, and came up to the sound of her laughter.

“Oh, what a flat one!”

She splashed a handful of water into his face.

She outswam him, and next morning she outraced him, and he was

conscious of more than the physical soreness of heart and muscles. He told himself that he was flabby, and that he had not walked ten miles at a stretch since the war, and Bavaria was a land of walkers and mountaineers. Damn it, he would match her youth, even if he didn't visualize her as mischief.

"Look here, we ought to tramp, you know."

"Oh, rather. Are you going to dress the part, nice charming shorts and a purple shirt?"

"Not quite that, but I'll carry the lunch."

They walked. His marching orders were for the Oster See, and the day was hot, and five miles out a shoe began to chafe him. She sang; she challenged him to sing, but he made a very bad second. He had set out very much Lion, but before they reached the Oster See he was more nearly related to an overladen ass.

Lunch. They sat down on a grassy slope that was incredibly gay with flowers, and he had brought a bottle of red wine with him, and he was glad of that wine. She might send the blood to his head, but he had a sore foot and had been concealing a limp.

She ate sandwiches and drank red wine.

"Simply marvellous, isn't it? All these flowers."

He asked her the names of them. It was part of his ritual that a woman should know the names of flowers, but she didn't know them.

"Does it matter?"

"But I thought you painted flowers."

"So I do, but I don't know the names of the damned things."

He was vaguely shocked. Well, anyway he could lie on the grass and smoke a pipe and rest. She sprawled on her tummy, and lit a cigarette, and, unfolding a map, made a sudden disturbing suggestion.

"Say, Great Man, let's make a real posh day of it, and walk home round the lake."

He frowned.

"Which lake?"

"Why, the Old Wurmsee. It will be some hike."

He bit hard at the stem of his pipe.

“Good God, it must be twenty miles!”

“I did thirty last year with a lad from Oxford.”

He looked at her as she lay making little restless movements with her feet. Almost he said to her, “You young devil!” But was he going to confess that he was not a lad from Oxford, and that he couldn’t do it?

“Much too hot, my dear. Can’t you enjoy a slack?”

She gave him an oblique and considering glance.

“Poor old Lion’s got a sore paw. Righty-right. Una won’t be hard on him.”

His sudden passion to possess her youth took on a flush of anger. It was very near to hate, and being an interpreter of other people’s lives he should have been forewarned. They returned by the way they had come, and she did not sing, and he was unable to conceal a limp, and the hot pride in him raged.

“Poor old Lion. I’ll take you for a ride to-morrow.”

He said, “I was laid up for a month before coming out here; that’s why I’m a little out of training. You’ll find me as hard as nails in a week. It’s not so very long ago since I did my twenty miles in marching order on French *pavé*.”

“Oh, the war.”

“Yes, the war.”

“Ten years ago—nearly. When did the war stop?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I remember—we were beastly short of butter—and sugar. I was just a kid.”

“And the war was nothing to you?”

“Don’t be boring. Where was Blenheim fought? Somewhere down this part of the world, wasn’t it? In A.D. 10. We’ll do stunts to-morrow.”

“You mean—you want to hire a car. I know a little fellow in Munich.”

She laughed.

“My dear, I have a car. Yes, what you old warriors would call a Ruddy Bentley. Me—driven! I chaufe myself—rather.”

His voice sounded slightly sullen.

“Yes, I suppose you would. There are times when I loathe cars.”

She said, “Really! I’ll rush you over to Oberammergau to-morrow, yes, the place where they have that funny old play. We’ll go there in a fiery chariot.”

At Parker’s Hotel Frau Blick discussed domestic details and her clients with her husband.

“I rather wish that girl would go, Heinrich. She’s a little too young for this place.”

Herr Blick stroked his big nose.

“The gentleman—I think——”

“She’s making a fool of him. He told me he came here to be quiet.”

“So—he thought, my dear.”

Next day she showed her husband a letter. She dealt with the correspondence and the accounts.

“Read that, Heinrich.”

He read it.

“The lady arrives on Thursday. Well, that’s all right, isn’t it?”

“But haven’t you noticed the name?”

“Ferrers.”

“Yes, the same name as his. She was the one who asked for Number Eleven. He—wanted Number Eleven.”

Herr Blick stroked his nose.

“You are putting her in twelve.”

“Yes, but don’t you see the coincidence? Supposing——?”

Herr Blick did see it.

“Well, it’s no affair of ours, my dear.”

“Do you think I ought to tell Mr. Ferrers?”

“Certainly not. Besides, he may know. It is no business of ours.”

Next day Ferrers woke up feeling stiff and out of temper and resenting the suspicion that youth might be mocking him. Damn her, a little touch of the cave-man might be indicated. Was he not very much a lion in the eyes of the world? She was going to drive him to Oberammergau, and he rather thought that he might possess himself of the wheel and show her a thing or two. Yes,

he could handle a high-powered car.

And so he could—with limitations, limitations that were yet unrealized, but Lola Lingerman was to educate him. They set out at ten, and for the first mile or two she drove like Herr Siegl. She was douce and demure, but she had an eye on her passenger.

If Ferrers thought he knew a little about speed, he was accustomed to the controlled and balanced speed of a man who adapted his driving to the road. In touring at home the pace at which he travelled might gradually increase, and in the second hour he would be averaging ten miles an hour more than during the first. Not so Miss Lingerman. When she let go it was with a crash, and at the end of two minutes' speeding along a winding road Ferrers' feet were pressing hard against the floor-board.

"She can move a bit, can't she?"

"Yes, it's some car."

She laughed and cut a corner fine.

"And I'm some driver, what?"

He was feeling very uncomfortable and angry because of it.

"You're taking risks, my dear."

"Risks! I've got her in hand—all right. Besides, the only driving that's worth while is fast driving."

"So it seems."

He was laconic, but feeling far less laconic than he appeared. He had to stiffen himself against flinching. Confound it, he could not let a damned girl put the wind up him.

But she did. It was on the return journey after lunch, when she was driving on a cocktail and half a bottle of white wine. Oberammergau became a mere dream village left sleeping in its valley among the hills. She drove scandalously, recklessly, with an utter disregard of anything that might be on the road, and Ferrers sat rigid. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her she was hogging, and in a country that was too beautiful for such beastliness.

He might have told her so had he not begun to suspect that she was both showing off and trying to show him up. There was an edge of mischievous malice in her smile. "What ho, old thing, sit tight." He sat tight; he kept himself wedged against the side of the car; he was trying not to keep his body from squirming, despite inward qualms.

About two miles from Tutzing they had their thrill, a corner, a farm cart well in the middle of the road, and the Bentley doing fifty. Ferrers drew up his knees.

“My God, look out!”

How she got by that cart and its frightened, furious and blue-eyed driver he did not know, but get by it she did, and it seemed to him that the near wheels were in the hedge. They bumped on something, bounced, skidded slightly and were clear.

She gave two hoots on the horn.

“Bit of a squeeze, that!”

And then she looked at him and appreciated the whiteness of his face.

“Guess—I put the wind up you, old thing.”

When he got out of the car at the hotel he knew that he hated her, her youth and its mockery. All her sensuous softness was an illusion. She was just a young savage, and her beauty so much war-paint. His greying hair was a mere “scalp”; he supposed she thought she had it at her girdle.

He smiled a little twisted smile.

“Thanks, we’ve hogged it pretty thoroughly. I feel we owe every flower an apology.”

She drove off to the hotel garage, waving a hand.

“Bye-bye. You’ll feel better after tea.”

Meanwhile another visitor had arrived, and was unpacking her luggage in bedroom Number Twelve, and when Ferrers went to his room he gathered that he had a neighbour. He was feeling on edge and ready to resent the occupation of Number Twelve, for Number Eleven had been so pleasantly silent with no adventitious noises from next door. He heard the ringing of a bell, and then Frau Blick’s voice in the corridor. Frau Blick was speaking in English, and the other voice was English.

“Can I have some tea brought up here? I’m rather tired.”

Ferrers, standing by the window, turned a startled head. The English voice next door was disturbingly familiar. It was like a soft hand drawing aside the curtain of time and revealing the past in the actual present.

Where had he heard that voice before? But of course——! Yet the coincidence seemed incredible.

A strange excitement stirred in him. He went down to the terrace, strolled across to the balustrade, turned and looked towards the window of Number Twelve. He could see someone moving about the room, the outline of a head, but the figure was too indistinct for him to be sure. And yet—somehow—he was sure. She—too—had come to this place in June, but whether her inspiration matched his—he could not say.

Then it was that he heard that other voice, the voice of youth. It arrived singing, and he was conscious of sudden exasperation, as though some irresponsible child was about to throw a stone into the still waters of a magic pool.

She hailed him, “Hallo, uncle, what do I owe you for damage to nerves?”

He strolled across the terrace with his hands in his pockets. He said, “By the way, I’d like to quote you something from ‘Bitter-Sweet.’ ‘You young things understand nothing but speed and noise.’ ”

She laughed.

“You fretful old gentleman.”

“Supposing we leave it at that.”

He turned and walked to the other end of the terrace, and she sat down under one of the lime trees and Franz brought her her tea. She lit a cigarette.

“O, Franz, I’m pushing off to-morrow. I shall want you to make me up some lunch.”

Franz bowed to her, and was hailed by Mr. Ferrers.

“Franz, bring me some tea over here, will you?”

So they took tea at separate tables and at a distance of twenty yards, and the other woman, sitting at the window of Number Twelve, was poised between the past and the present.

Ferrers lit a pipe. He watched Miss Lingerman leave her table, walk to the terrace steps and disappear. Did the young wench expect him to follow her? He waited. He heard her voice singing down there in the wood, and since it was sufficiently distant he took his courage in his hands. He got up and walked along the terrace until he was under the window of Number Twelve. He stood there, looking up.

She appeared at the window, and to-day seemed to become yesterday. He would have said that she had changed hardly at all, save that she looked more mature. She had the same air of fair tranquillity, a kind of wise gentleness, the

same steadfast eyes. And he marvelled at her, and at himself, and at that other fool self.

He said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t foresee—— But if I’m spoiling anything for you—I’ll clear out—at once.”

She seemed to smile.

“You were here first. Really—it’s up to me to go—if——”

Almost he looked frightened.

“No, please don’t do that. I’m not worth it. But I’d rather like—to be worth—a little of your tolerance.”

She looked towards the lake. She said, “Isn’t it strange? Do you still dine—under the trees?”

He nodded.

“Oh, yes—but dining alone. I’ve come to an age when—— Oh, well, you couldn’t possibly bring yourself—could you—to dine with me to-night?”

She hesitated.

“I might, just once—for old times’ sake.”

He looked pathetic.

“That’s great of you. It’s about all I deserve.”

So Miss Lola Lingerman arriving at her table under the lime trees found Mr. Ferrers dining with a lady, and at the moment he was deep in the wine list, with Franz at his elbow.

“Château Turgot 1899. Yes, that was it. Have you any left in the cellar, Franz?”

“No, sir. 1919 is the oldest we have, sir.”

Ferrers looked at his partner. The date had a significance for them both.

“I’m sorry. Can you tolerate that year?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“That’s magnanimous of you. A bottle of 1919, Franz.”

Miss Lingerman received a cursory glance and a nod from him. He did not introduce her to his companion. In fact he was so completely absorbed in talking to this other woman that youth was not even part of the triangle. And Rosamund Ferrers’ back was to the girl, and she seemed unaware of her

presence.

Miss Lingerman, feeling vaguely provoked, was considering some intrusion at the end of the meal. She was quite capable of carrying her coffee cup and a cigarette to the next table, and of saying, “I’ll join you, uncle. Please introduce me,” but the opportunity was filched from her. Ferrers got up two minutes before she had finished her dessert, and stood looking down at the lady.

“Would you care to stroll down to the lake?”

She was lighting a cigarette. She rose.

“I’d love to.”

Miss Lingerman watched them descend the terrace steps and the youth in her refrained. After all, she was leaving Tutzing to-morrow.

She was packing, and a full moon was up when she heard their voices returning to the terrace. She went to her window and listened. She heard Mr. Ferrers say, “Even the moon’s just the same. Well, I suppose it would be.”

And she wanted to laugh. Sentimental old ass!

She saw them but once again, and that was next morning, when her car passed them on the road, Ferrers carrying a basket and other impedimenta, his friend a camp-stool and a sunshade. The sunshade dated them, and Miss Lingerman swept on in a cloud of dust. She left them the dust, nor did she see them stop and look at the landscape until the dust had settled.

“Crude things, cars,” said Mr. Ferrers.

“I suppose it depends on how one drives them.”

They came to rest in one of those upland meadows where the June grass was a flower garden. There were flowers of every colour, rose, carmine, purple, gold, blue, and Ferrers stood and looked at this Bavarian hill-side.

He said, “One’s first feeling is that it can’t be true.”

She was unfolding a rug.

“But it is true.”

He wandered to and fro in the sunlight, listening to the shrilling of innumerable grasshoppers. Then he came back to the woman who had been his wife, and his face looked as though a hand had smoothed it out.

“All these flowers. Do you know the names of them?”

She gave him the names of many.

“A blue campanula, a kind of cornflower, purple orchis, yellow rattle, forget-me-not, white and yellow daisies, campion, thalyctrum, a blue salvia, a pink flower that looks like betony.”

He stood smiling.

“Marvellous.”

He remembered that youth had painted these flowers without knowing the names of them. Just jolly old flowers. Yes, that was youth.

He sat down on the rug beside his wife.

MR. VERULAM'S WEEK-END

Mr. Paul Verulam's car, after sundry spittings and detonations, came to rest half-way up Bilbury Hill, and Mr. Verulam, having given sundry angry and ineffectual jabs to the self-starter button, descended from his seat. It was a Friday afternoon in June, and hot at that, and Bilbury Hill was about a mile and three furlongs in length, and though Mr. Verulam did not know the name of the hill he could appreciate its sinuosities and its steepness. Moreover his infernal machine had elected to go on strike at a spot where the full glare of the afternoon sun beat down upon the chalk hills in a little pocket between two ridges. A hundred yards or so to the south and the north two groves of beech trees offered a pleasant shade, but that accursed chariot had not considered Mr. Verulam's comfort.

He raised a bonnet flap, and almost immediately he began to perspire, for Paul Verulam perspired upon the slightest provocation. He was one of those large, red, bald-headed men, with a chin like the toe of a boot, and of an adipose habit. He was travelling to Melfont Abbey to stay for the week-end with the Duchess of Leinster. Mr. Verulam had written about duchesses, but this was the first occasion upon which he had been invited to stay with one. Hence the barbarity of this break-down.

Mr. Verulam began to fiddle with things. He had but little knowledge of the inwardness of cars. The overheated engine breathed in his face. Inadvertently touching a metal surface with his wrist the metal surface burned him.

He swore.

"Damn your oily soul."

Which was quite a good swear, and yet the car with its grinning radiator had the laugh of him. Unknown to him it had decorated Mr. Verulam's grey felt hat with a big blob of black oil from the inner surface of the bonnet flap.

Mr. Verulam stood up very straight and perspired. He gazed north and he gazed south. His supposition was that Melfont Abbey lay about seven miles away in a valley beyond these chalk hills. The desolation of these polished, grassy slopes was supreme, and the road offered him nothing but a shimmer of heat. Mr. Verulam's rather full and fierce blue eyes stared through pince-nez at the car. What was the matter with the damned thing?

Yes, just what?

He could not be out of petrol, and he reassured himself by scrutinizing the gauge. Vaguely he knew that there was a contraption called a carburettor, a brass pot that breathed life into the engine. There were accessories called sparking-plugs and he saw six of them in a row; hot, oily-looking objects with various insulated wires adding to his perplexity. But what—exactly—was the matter with the damned thing? And should he unearth the book of words from a tool-locker, and peruse it, and make experiments, and foul his nice literary fingers? And in this heat?

In the world of letters Mr. Verulam was supposed to be something of a potentate. He issued decretals, and he thundered. He was an adept at producing venomous and witty phrases for the chastisement of other people who dared to write books while remaining beyond the shadow of Mr. Verulam's historic patronage, but in the case of this recalcitrant car he was less than himself.

He determined that something should be done, and he sacrificed a pair of wash-leather gloves to the doing of it. He got out a roll of tools, and extracted spanners and a screwdriver, and attacked the carburettor. He had heard of the existence of a little orifice that sometimes became plugged with extraneous matter, but in beginning to dismantle the carburettor he forgot to turn off the petrol. He had to make a dash for the tap under the scuttle, and the incident added to his sense of anger and of heat.

Of Mr. Verulam's adventures with the carburettor much might be written, but the results were unhelpful. He dropped a fibre washer into the grimy depths below the sump, and by the time he had recovered it his gloves and arms and shirt sleeves had suffered, but when the carburettor was reassembled the engine refused to start. Mr. Verulam stood off and stared at it. He and his indignation perspired in chorus. He looked south and he looked north.

Then it was that help appeared upon the horizon. He saw a car climbing the hill, a bright blue car with white wheels. Mr. Verulam stood in the middle of the road and semaphored, and as the car approached he saw that its solitary occupant was a woman.

She pulled in to the side of the road, and opened a door. She was young,

and as much in the fashion as her sports-model coupé. She had an air. She appeared to Mr. Verulam as a dark and rather decisive young woman with a large mouth and a nose that suggested a sense of humour. She had looks, and obviously her taste in clothes and her expenditure upon them were in sympathy.

Mr. Verulam, in the heat and the pomposity of the moment, raised his hat, adding other stains to its dignity.

“Sorry to trouble you, but if you would leave a message at some garage for me——”

Her dark eyes narrowed as she looked at him. There were little glimmers of light in them.

“What’s wrong?”

He stood largely and sententiously beside his car. Apparently it did not occur to him that a young woman in a Paris model could be of any assistance to the exuberant male. The matter was too technical.

“The engine refuses to function. I have investigated the carburettor. Some slight misadjustment somewhere, I suppose.”

She was amused, and he was so unconscious of the pleasure he gave her. He, Mr. Verulam, a figure of fun! Even with a soiled hat, and a flaring, dewy face, and his condescending towards life and the machine! She gave him an oblique and humorous glance, and turned to the car.

“Ignition all right?”

Mr. Verulam could give her no opinion. He said that his London garage was paid to keep the car in running order. A celebrity could not be expected to fiddle with machinery. Always he was conscious of being a celebrity, and of waiting for the world to recognize his large red face and his pince-nez and his bulbous chin and his ruff of hair.

The girl scrutinized the car. Then, without so much as asking for leave, she went and fetched a tool-roll from her coupé, and unrolling it on the running-board of Mr. Verulam’s car, she took charge of the crisis.

“I know something about B.J.’s. If you’ll turn the starting-handle for me I’ll test the plugs.”

Mr. Verulam looked a little surprised, but he went and unearthed the starting-handle, and inserted it and stooped.

“Turn slowly.”

His bulk laboured. His hat fell off, uncovering a shiny baldness. He was not an adept at turning handles, and he was feeling that his dignity was suffering eclipse. This young woman was a bit too autocratic.

“That’s right. Turn.”

He turned, with jerks and heavy breathing.

“She’s not sparking.”

“Is that so?”

She concentrated her attention and her deft fingers upon some other contraption. She said: “I guess your distributor’s dirty. Probably it wants filing up.”

He stood hot and huge by the radiator as though in accusing his distributor of being unclean she had offended against his dignity.

“I have no time to descend to these details.”

She said nothing. She was investigating. She detached things, and made a little grimace.

“Yes, your distributor—is—dirty.”

She took a piece of rag and a small file, and with lips compressed set about rectifying the foulness. She was conscious of his looming silence, of something waiting to be recognized and saluted.

She spoke.

“Going far?”

“Melfont Abbey.”

“So am I. Due for tea. Time to give Pat a bathe.”

Mr. Verulam’s blue eyes stared. Was she referring to Patricia—Duchess of Leinster—as Pat? He boomed:

“Singular coincidence. I’m there for the week-end. My name is——”

But a glance from her interposed.

“Yes, I think I’ve recognized you.”

He seemed to emit a delicate simper, a kind of adipose tremor.

“Oh, possibly.”

“Mr. Verulam, isn’t it?”

He bent at the hips. He was pleased.

“You have perspicacity.”

What a peach of a word, and rather like his face! She made a little grimace.

“My name’s Hyde. But that won’t convey anything to you.”

Most obviously it didn’t.

But that she should dirty her dainty fingers in his service became comprehensible to Mr. Verulam, for he was one of the archangels of the literary world and he wore his vanity like a halo. From that moment he stood and watched with a genial condescension the activities of this handmaiden, and with a gentle playfulness he praised her efficiency, for in five minutes she had his engine running obediently.

“Now—that’s really very clever of you. A hobby of yours, I suppose.”

She left him to lower and fasten the bonnet flap while she wiped her hands on a rag soaked in petrol from a flooded carburettor.

“Not exactly, but I like to know how things work.”

Mr. Verulam adjusted the bonnet flap.

“The B.B.C. and Brooklands are the gods of the new generation. I must confess that I’m a little Elizabethan.”

With her glance on his very stout legs draped in badly cut grey flannel trousers she chose to wonder what the Virgin Queen would have done with him. Made him a bishop, or had him soused in the Thames?

She said: “We’d better be pushing on. Pat likes her bathe, and there may be tennis. I think I had better lead the way. I drive rather fast.”

He gave her a little urbane and complacent bow.

“The honour is yours, Miss Hyde.”

As far as the driving went she played hide-and-seek with him. He had the blue tail of her car in view for the space of two minutes, and though he hunted her to the limit of forty miles an hour, she became lost in the landscape. Mr. Verulam was not a fearless driver. Something flinched in him when the speed became adventurous, but he could console himself by condemning all those young sensationalists who delighted only in speed and in noise.

Miss Hyde arrived at Melfont some seven minutes ahead of him. Leaving her car by the *porte-cochère* she waved to a group that was gathered for tea under one of the cedars. A tall, jocund, golden woman in the late thirties came

sailing to meet her.

“Late, my dear.”

Miss Hyde showed a row of strong, white teeth.

“Had an adventure. Found the great man stranded on the road. He should be here in five minutes.”

“What, the hyperbolical Paul?”

“Yep. Behemoth in grey bags. He’s rather marvellous, my dear. But he was hot and cross when I found him, with a beautiful splodge of grease on his hat. I cleaned his distributor for him. Shall I put the car away?”

“No—Jobson will do it for you. Come and have tea.”

“I’d like a wash first. His confounded car was filthy.”

“All right. You’re in the Amber Room. Know your way.”

Miss Hyde washed so expeditiously that she was able to join the party under the cedar tree before Mr. Verulam arrived. It was not a large party, being what the journalists would describe as small and select. It provided a tennis or a bridge four for the week-end, with a fifth person in reserve. Mr. Verulam was to meet his hostess, Miss Joanna Hyde, Major Ian Calthrop, and Mr. Rupert Byng. The names of the four were abbreviated to Pat, Joan, Jack and Billy.

Mr. Verulam arrived. His hostess went to meet him. He was led across to the cedar and introduced to his fellow-guests. He gave the party a little comprehensive and condescending bow as though he was receiving a deputation. He had failed to discover the grease on his hat. The two lean, brown, out-of-door men discovered other greasiness in him.

“You and Joan have met already.”

Mr. Verulam shone upon the maiden.

“We have had that pleasure.”

His use of the plural was significant. He sat down, and with complete and ponderous complacency began to make conversation. In fact, he made all the conversation while a footman provided him with tea. Major Calthrop and Mr. Byng became strangely mute. Miss Hyde lit a cigarette, and listened as to the running of an engine. The Duchess maintained her jocund, golden smile.

Mr. Verulam had stepped immediately upon the appropriate pedestal. He wore the laurel wreath and twanged the lyre. The other men exchanged a silent stare.

The Duchess used the velvet glove. Mr. Verulam was showing a partiality for sweet cakes, and the party proposed to bathe. She mentioned the plan.

“Oh, Mr. Verulam, we’re all going to bathe. Yes, in the lake. You’ll join us?”

He hesitated.

“Delightful! But I must confess I forgot my bathing costume.”

Major Calthrop was suavely helpful.

“I can lend you one, Verulam. Of course, you swim.”

There was something in the suggestion that penetrated Mr. Verulam’s pride.

“Oh, certainly. Very kind of you. I accept.”

And he continued to devour sweet cakes.

Major Calthrop and Mr. Byng got up and strolled across to the house, it being the major’s duty to hunt up a reserve bathing dress, while Mr. Byng accompanied him in order to ask questions and to escape from the atmosphere of too much Verulam.

“What on earth made Pat ask that fellow——?”

Calthrop smiled.

“Oh, Pat must have her buffoon, you know. She picked him up at one of her parties, and thought him priceless.”

“Fungoid—I should say.”

“Besides, Bill, Joan and Paul should be sympatica, both being scribblers of books.”

He glanced mischievously at Mr. Byng.

“Probably she’ll take him in tow. Possibly he doesn’t know that Richard Clarendon and Joan Hyde are one and the same person.”

They climbed the stairs together, the soldier still smiling, Mr. Byng darkly combative.

“You mean it is Pat’s idea that Verulam might be useful to Joan?”

“Not exactly. I think Joan might be of much more use to Verulam. There’s a situation in it.”

Mr. Byng went into his room, and leaving the door open, stood by the

window and observed the three under the cedar. Apparently, Mr. Verulam had completed his assault on the sugar. They were standing, and Mr. Verulam was holding forth. The duchess made a persuasive movement in the direction of the house.

Mr. Byng walked to Major Calthrop's door.

"Jack?"

"Hallo."

"Do you think the fellow can swim?"

"Oh, probably. He looks as though he couldn't sink."

"Well, I think Pat might have postponed him till next week end."

"Pat is a bit of a Puck, you know."

Possibly it was unkind of Major Calthrop to provide Mr. Verulam with a bathing costume of purple and orange stripes running horizontally. The great man appeared a little swollen in the costume, even when wearing a red and black silk dressing-gown. They went down to the lake to a spot where two diving boards were fixed. There was a pause. The Duchess and Joanna had precedence. They went in off the high board, and Major Calthrop and Mr. Byng waited upon Mr. Verulam.

He hesitated. And then he trundled on fat feet along the lesser board. It sagged beneath him. He stood poised for a moment, and then went in as flat as a pancake and with a prodigious ventral flop.

That, in a measure, was his debut, and he appeared spluttering with shining pate and a flash of yellow teeth, and as Calthrop had suggested he was incapable of sinking. He had buoyancy; he was not to be submerged or suppressed. He attached himself to Miss Hyde, and swam beside her like some golden galleon as far as the island. He even babbled about books.

Mr. Byng was left cruising solus.

Later, they played tennis, and Mr. Verulam played tennis, and Mr. Byng had to fetch the balls that the great man smote into space. Mr. Verulam's tennis was spectacular and inaccurate, and rather like his prose. He partnered Miss Hyde, and though the Duchess and Major Calthrop won three love sets against them Mr. Verulam was not depressed. Mr. Byng, observing him with malevolent amusement, realized that the great man was great because nothing could deflate him.

Then came dinner, and Mr. Verulam sat on the Duchess's right, and talked

still more about books. Mr. Verulam spoke of other people's novels as fiction, but when he himself produced a novel it was literature. The conversation was conducted in the direction of the work of the moderns, nor did Mr. Verulam realize that this Juno of a woman was luring him towards a pit. Possibly she should not have dug this pit but Mr. Verulam's trampling complacence provoked the digging of pits.

He gave a little discourse on the novel. And then the name of Richard Clarendon cropped up, and Mr. Verulam floundered, but he did not know that he was floundering. Had he remembered his history he might have associated the names of Clarendon and Hyde.

He said—"Oh, yes, Clarendon. In the interests of real literature one tries to suppress the Clarendons. Sugared slime, you know."

He did not observe the momentary silence, nor the curious look Miss Hyde gave him. The Duchess went on to deepen the discussion. Her voice was golden and deliberate.

"I must say I rather liked 'Luna Maris.' "

Mr. Verulam beamed upon her. He would have said that "Luna Maris" was a dreadful book, but you did not say such things to your hostess, however innocent she might be.

"Yes, perhaps a little less succulent than the others."

But the great lady continued. Of course she read Mr. Verulam's weekly literary articles in *The Mentor*. Yes, she remembered that he had attacked Mr. Clarendon very mercilessly. He had been witty and facetious. "The Sickle of the Moon" had been parodied into "The Sickly Moon"—"Unadulterated Smith" had been re-christened "Unadulterated Glucose."

Mr. Verulam simpered. Yes, that had been so. He had castigated Mr. Clarendon. And he was beginning to speak of some of his own books, when the voice of Mr. Byng broke in.

"Who is Clarendon, anyway?"

The table appeared to wait upon Mr. Verulam. He shrugged.

"I believe it is a pseudonym, and perhaps better so——"

Mr. Byng was persistent.

"But these disguises don't cover anything in these days. Especially when publicity is—it, and we all parade in a circus."

Again Mr. Verulam shrugged.

“I take Clarendon as Clarendon, be it he or she.”

He implied that the identity of the author of “Luna Maris” was quite unimportant. The fellow might be a mere best-seller, but after all——

Miss Hyde was heard. She asked a question.

“That piques me. Do—give us—your impression. Would you say that Clarendon is male or female?”

Mr. Verulam answered her at once.

“Oh, male, undoubtedly. Only the male could produce such sentimental stuff.”

Afterwards, in a corner of the billiard-room Mr. Byng spoke feelingly to Miss Joanna Hyde.

“He spifflicated you, Jo. What are you going to do about it?”

She appeared bored with Mr. Byng.

“Oh—I might convert him to Clarendon. It would be very easy.”

“And greasy.”

“Don’t be coarse. But there’s just one thing I want to find out.”

“And that?”

“Nothing doing.”

“Let me assist?”

“What an obsolete idea. The noble fellow is out of fashion.”

But it was apparent to the house party that she was prepared to be kind to Mr. Verulam, so kind that Mr. Verulam began to put on proud flesh, for Miss Hyde was an unusually attractive young woman, and not one of the mawkish sort that wrote great men sentimental letters, but a somewhat fierce, untamed Diana. Mr. Verulam had dreamed at times of an affair with so free and sophisticated a mistress. He believed that he would be equal to the most passionate of occasions, and Miss Hyde was all that he was not, dark, slim, swift, and a little enigmatic.

Mr. Byng began to discover that his own romantic tendencies were to be postponed, and that the week-end was all veal and Verulam. It annoyed him, and considerably so. Even if Joan was making a fool of the fellow——! But was she? The modern young woman may prefer power to passion, or choose to both have her cake and eat it, and Mr. Byng supposed that Verulam might be

useful to Joanna. He and his associates had their own little literary Olympus upon which the favoured few were exalted before the eyes of an adoring public.

Mr. Byng went about very much solus, and with an inward voice that exclaimed—“Damn the fellow.”

By the morning of the Sunday Mr. Verulam was becoming more than a little forward and foolish. He—the world’s ordained bachelor, was flirting with the idea of a little house in Chelsea, and a cottage in the country. Diana, the moon goddess, seemed to be sitting meekly at his feet. She gazed at him with dark, deep eyes. Joanna! What a sweet, devoted, domestic name!

She was spinning her web, and he was blind.

On the Sunday afternoon she lay in a hammock, and Mr. Verulam reposed in a deck-chair beside her. A hand seemed to hang provokingly over the edge of the hammock.

Mr. Verulam observed it.

He said—“Modernity is just a phase. You emancipated women are as old as time.”

She showed her baby’s eyes.

“Am I as old as all that? And if we are going to be sentimental let’s copy that book you condemned—‘The Sickle of the Moon.’ You remember how Iris and Peter took a houseboat?”

Mr. Verulam attempted to hedge.

“A houseboat, was it? My memory——”

“Oh, but you must remember, for I can remember your slashing review in *The Mentor*. Now, what happened when Iris and Peter went down to Marlow?”

He simpered.

“Can’t we proceed without Iris and Peter. Let us be Paul and Joanna.”

She swayed gently and gazed at the sky.

“No, let me have my whim. After the houseboat incident, what happened next?”

Mr. Verulam shrugged.

“Really, I can’t contain all Clarendon. When I have dealt with a book like that——”

“You don’t remember?”

“Well, I remember Iris and Peter and some of their sentimental adventures.”

She laughed softly, and Mr. Verulam wondered why.

“Yes, of course you’re such a busy man. You can’t be expected to remember all the books you review. Besides—you have to write your own inevitable books.”

And then, Mr. Verulam, feeling so full of conquest, allowed himself a moment of swashbuckling naughtiness.

“I’ll let you into a secret. My life is so full of the big things that sometimes I have to delegate the little things.”

She gave him an oblique glance.

“Such as reviewing a book?”

“Exactly.”

“Someone else does the work and you sign your name?”

“Oh, of course I edit the article.”

“But that means that you don’t always read the book?”

“I glance through it.”

She smiled, for now she knew that Mr. Verulam had never read “The Sickle of the Moon,” for no such persons as Iris and Peter had appeared in it. The tea-bell rang, and she got quickly out of the hammock before Mr. Verulam could raise his great bulk from the deck-chair. She offered to race him to one of the cedars but he was gallant.

“I can’t pretend to compete with Atalanta.”

During tea she was very vivacious. She exchanged a telepathic glance with Mr. Byng, and after tea they strolled away together.

She said—“I’ve caught him. I’ve got him by the scruff,” and she explained the situation, and Mr. Byng’s humorous face grinned. She went on to say that she would like Mr. Byng to explore Mr. Verulam’s familiarity with “Unadulterated Smith.” It could be done during dinner, and Mr. Byng was to persist and pin Mr. Verulam into a precise corner.

Mr. Byng laughed softly.

“I’ll do it. I’ll dissect him”—and he did.

It must be confessed that during dinner Mr. Verulam grew a little hot and peevish. Mr. Byng was like a terrier scratching at a rabbit hole. He would talk of nothing but “Unadulterated Smith.” Mr. Verulam had reviewed the book, and therefore he should know all about it, but Mr. Verulam was pompous and vague.

Irritated by Mr. Byng’s persistence he grew petulant.

“My dear sir, you don’t expect me to remember every trashy novel——”

“Then—you can’t have read it.”

“My dear sir——”

The Duchess, who was in the plot, spoke mellifluously to Mr. Verulam.

“Don’t you think that this custom—of novelists sitting in judgment on other novelists—is just a little—indiscreet?”

Mr. Verulam looked at her suspiciously, but she had so golden an air that he could not think the worst.

“Dear lady, we are experts.”

And someone said—it was Mr. Byng—“Even when you don’t read the other fellow’s stuff?”

Mr. Verulam looked hot.

“My dear sir, there are some things you don’t understand.”

In his complacency he had proposed a walk by midnight amid the Melfont yews, but after coffee the party most strangely deliquesced. Nothing was said. The Duchess and Major Calthrop disappeared into the billiard-room. Miss Hyde and Mr. Byng drifted together through one of the French windows. Inexplicably and unexplainedly Mr. Verulam found himself alone.

Mr. Byng was laughing under one of the cedars.

“Absolutely—on toast, my dear.”

“Yes, almost.”

“A poached egg. Are you going to wreck him?”

“Is it worth while?”

“Yes, do, he deserves it.”

“I might.”

“Then you ought to——”

“Oh, yes—play with the balloon before——”

“May I hear the bang?”

“I don’t suppose anybody will hear it. But you can sit and observe—at breakfast.”

But she explained to Mr. Byng that full inflation should precede sudden deflation, and going in she found Mr. Verulam moodily fiddling with the wireless. She was very nice to him, and Mr. Verulam had his stroll by moonlight, and grew saccharine and sentimental, like an overripe gooseberry about to burst. Almost he proposed to Miss Hyde—not marriage—but an experiment in romance, and crooned over her.

“We’ll meet in town. Dine with me at Roberto’s?”

She said—“Don’t let’s think of London to-night. Look at the stars winking at us through the yews.”

Mr. Verulam went to bed feeling that he had made a conquest, and that in a little while the conquest would be consummated, and in the morning a maid brought in his early tea. There was a book on the tray, and Mr. Verulam’s blue eyes looked just a little bleary.

“Miss Hyde asked me to give you this, sir.”

Mr. Verulam did not examine the book until the maid had gone. To his surprise he found that it was “Luna Maris,” by Richard Clarendon. His surprise was still more vivid when he found written on the fly-leaf—

> *To the most perspicacious of Critics—from Richard Clarendon.*
> (*Joanna Hyde*).

Mr. Verulam was so disturbed that he spilt tea upon the sheets.

His appearance in the dining-room was both tardy and tentative. The Duchess and the two gentlemen were eating bacon and eggs. Miss Hyde’s chair was unoccupied. There was a sardonic silence, and Mr. Verulam was the colour of underdone meat.

“Good morning, everybody.”

Mr. Byng grinned. The Major grunted—“Morning.” The Duchess smiled over the morning paper.

“Porridge, Mr. Verulam. It’s on the sideboard.”

They watched the bulk of him spooning porridge. He looked overheated;

he perspired. He glanced at the vacant chair.

His hostess spoke.

“Oh, Mr. Verulam, Joan asked me to say good-bye to you. Yes, she went off early. She has to lunch with her publisher.”

Mr. Verulam emitted a sound that was like a grunt extracted from him by a body-blow.

Mr. Byng seemed to be simmering over his coffee-cup. He was constrained to get up and go to the window and blow his nose. He surveyed the landscape.

“Wonderful day, Verulam. Hope you won’t get punctured going home.”

And again he blew his nose, and made moist noises.

Mr. Verulam was still perspiring. The porridge was very hot. He managed to say something to his hostess.

“I hope you won’t mind me leaving early. I have to——”

She beamed upon him.

“Of course not. Charming of you to come. Such a busy man——”

It was Mr. Byng who planted the last barb.

“I expect Mr. Verulam has to hurry back to review a book.”

THE WOOD

He was a bachelor aged forty-seven, and he lodged at No. 47, Oxford Terrace, Barnes, and was the owner of a dog named Bob. During twenty-five years or so he had been a clerk in a stockbroker's office, and he was still a clerk. For a man who had spent his life in the city he was most extraordinarily innocent, a gentle, bookish creature with peculiar ideas about women and the ways of nature. His name was Aubrey, James Aubrey, and he liked to think of himself as a descendant of the famous antiquary.

The office called him Aunt Jemima.

"Hallo. Have you heard that old Aunt Jemima's been left a legacy?"

"How much?"

"Don't know. Wonder what he'll do with it."

"Buy a ton of books. I know what I'd do with it. Buy the breeziest car and the brightest young thing on the market."

"A gamble in hot stuff, what!"

The office was not æsthetic. In fact it was rather vulgarly male, and had it been given twenty chances it would not have guessed what James Aubrey would do with the five hundred pounds left him by his Aunt Guye. He was one of those very innocent and refined creatures who labour under the illusion that society can be uplifted by nice essays and letters to *The Times*. Aubrey himself had written occasional letters to *The Times* or the *Daily Telegraph*. He had sundry soft spots in his consciousness. He became quite excited when corporal punishment for violent criminals was under discussion. He would protest against the brutalising influence of the "cat." He was an anti-vivisectionist. He believed in the abolition of the death sentence.

James Aubrey had possessed one ambition, and that a most strange one, to be the owner of a wood.

He was an Arcadian. He spent his week-ends tramping with a pack, a pair of binoculars, and a book of poetry. He knew his Surrey and Sussex as well as any Londoner could know them, but he knew them as a Londoner, a creature who took his dog for a run on Barnes Common, and was Wordsworthian in his attitude to the first primrose, and who painted impossible mind-pictures of the shepherd and the ploughman and the farmer's boy. He had a liking for such words as lush, and sweet, and aftermath, and glimmering. He was a nice, innocent soul, and he loved his dog.

He loved his dog very dearly, and his dog loved him.

James Aubrey bought his wood. He discovered it where the chalk meets the greensand on a semi-derelict estate that was up for sale. The place was as wild as any nature lover could desire, and the wood was a lot by itself. It was marked on the Ordnance Map as "Lady Wood." The plot contained fifteen acres of woodland and three of rough grass and scrub.

Aubrey was greatly excited. He talked to his mongrel rough-haired terrier about the wood and their mutual plans.

"Bunnies, Bob, hundreds of bunnies."

But being a dreamy humanitarian he had to harmonise his belief that wild things should not be slaughtered with Bob's natural urge to chase and kill rabbits.

The month was March, and Aubrey's solicitors were busy with the conveyancing of Lady Wood. Spring was in the air, and Aubrey bought a little second-hand car and was taught to drive it. He purchased also some camping equipment that included a small tent and a camp bed. His plans were taking shape. He was going to make of Lady Wood a delightful week-end retreat, and more than that. He would erect a small and inoffensive bungalow in the centre of the wood, and create a refuge to which he could retreat when the Stock Exchange should know him no more. He had saved a little money and he supposed that a man could live on a few shillings a week in a wilderness like Lady Wood. He could make a garden, turn a part of the rough pasture into a vegetable plot, and keep a few chickens. He would have wood to burn, and old clothes would suffice him.

Aubrey dreamed dreams and he translated them to Bob in front of his sitting-room fire.

"Beech trees, Bobbo, beautiful dreaming beeches, and old yews, and thorns and oaks. Not a sound, my lad. A deep, deep stillness. Birds to watch. We'll have a wonderful time, old lad."

Bob whimpered, and wagged a stubby tail.

“You’re a wonderful man, my master. Let’s get out the car and go down there at once.”

Bob became a car-fan. He stood perched with his fore paws on the dash, and his nose thrust out and sniffing the air. So far as camping was concerned Aubrey had to possess his soul in patience, for April was proving itself truculent, and a flimsy tent was not a hut. He had arranged for the purchase of a very small sectional bungalow, and had interviewed a jobbing carpenter in Tillworth village. The carpenter had agreed to erect the building for him.

The great day arrived. Aubrey obtained the whole of Saturday, and he and Bob set forth at six in the morning with a marvellous assortment of stores piled in the car. It was a Robinson Crusoe affair. A rough lane led from the high road to the black gate of Lady Wood, and in the wood itself an ancient track climbed to an abandoned chalk pit and the ruins of a kiln. These interesting relics were part of Aubrey’s property. He got the car up as far as the chalk pit and parked it there. He had chosen for his home a glade among the beech trees where a stretch of rabbit-sleeked turf lay under the open sky. It was an adorable spot, with the great grey trunks ascending and spreading into a network of bronze gold buds.

Aubrey and Bob unpacked. It was a lengthy business. There was the tent, and a camp bed, a primus stove, four petrol tins full of water, a canvas washing basin, rations, crockery, blankets, towels, a certain white enamelled toilet article into which Bob poked his nose, a suit-case with pyjamas and spare clothes, three books, a pair of binoculars, methylated spirit, a waterproof sheet.

Aubrey had arranged to interview the carpenter from Tillworth at three o’clock that afternoon with regard to the siting of the hut, and shortly after three the man arrived, wheeling his bike up the track to the chalk pit. Aubrey happened to be covering up the car for the night with a small rick-cover that he had bought for the purpose, and the man placed his bicycle against a tree and helped him. He was a fellow with a long, narrow face, and the eyes of a gipsy, and thin lips that were laconic.

They walked up the hill to the glade, and Aubrey made conversation.

“I suppose you know this wood pretty well.”

“Never been in it before, sir.”

“It’s a lovely spot.”

The man had no opinion in the matter. Aubrey noticed that he turned his

head and glanced back in the direction of the ruined kiln.

“Can you tell me why it is called Lady Wood?”

“We don’t call it that.”

“What do you call it?”

“Bloody Wood.”

Aubrey paused in his stride. Was the fellow using the word in the vulgar sense, or was the adjective historical.

“Why—bloody?”

“A woman was murdered here—a lady—I should say.”

“Not recently?”

“Oh, no, a hundred years or more ago. It’s an old tale in the village.”

The sun had been shining, but a passing cloud cut off the sunlight. Aubrey noticed it; so did the man.

“Your village must have a good memory. I suppose when something happened in those days, people made a lot of it.”

“Maybe they did. The body was burned in that there kiln.”

Aubrey frowned protestingly. Really, these foolish old horrors were rather superfluous! And, after all, these trees were innocent and peaceful, and no trace of the tragedy could linger here.

“So—I see—Lady Wood got its name from that unfortunate woman.”

The man glanced at him queerly.

“You don’t believe in none of them things.”

“What things?”

“Ghosts, and such like.”

“No, of course not. But—why a ghost?”

“It’s the lady’s ghost.”

“What, here?”

“Yes. She walks in the wood with her head hanging down her back. Just a bit of skin holding it.”

How very gross and realistic! Aubrey was conscious of slight, emotional nausea. This fellow was an unpleasant brute, and a silly brute. Why tarnish all

this beauty with some sordid and ghoulish legend?

“What a nice story. Well, we’ll forget the poor woman. Here’s the place where I think of having my bungalow.”

Bob had joined them, a Bob who sniffed at the strange man’s trousers.

“Never mind the dog. He’s quite gentle. I suppose you can’t put the hut up here?”

“We could.”

“What’s the objection?”

“It’s a long carry from the end of the track. Some of the sections will be all there.”

“You need help?”

“Yes, to get the stuff up here.”

Aubrey was growing a little tired of the fellow. He did not like him, but he had set his heart on having the hut in this glade.

“All right, arrange for help.”

“What about water?”

“You won’t want water, will you?”

“I was meaning you, sir.”

“I bring my water with me in cans.”

“Just a camping hut, a sort of week-end place. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe—then—there won’t be any trouble made about that.”

The fellow could not conceive that the gentleman could be so ignorant of the ways of the official world as not to know that there were certain formalities to be considered. Besides, it was no business of his. He was to be paid for erecting a sectional building, and that was the end of it so far as he was concerned. He cut a couple of hazel sticks with a clasp knife, shaped four pegs from them, and inserted the pegs under Aubrey’s direction.

“That’s the place then, sir?”

“Yes.”

“When do you expect the stuff?”

“It should be on rail now. I suppose you could arrange transport from Tillworth station?”

“I could do that, sir. I know a chap with a Ford lorry.”

“Then—I’ll leave it to you.”

Aubrey and the dog shared a supper-tea in the tent, and while the man was lighting his pipe the dog disappeared upon adventures of his own. Aubrey was conscious of a feeling of vague unrest. The evening became grey and overcast. Was he imagining things, or had the wood suddenly changed its atmosphere and become strange and sinister? He recalled a fantastic picture of a wood in which each tree showed a grotesque face peering from its trunk. Ghosts! How absurd! But he did wish that fellow had not blurted out the details of that ancient and nasty story. Nature was so clean. Hearing distant barkings in the wood, and realizing that Bob had disappeared, he got up and walked in the direction of the sound. He whistled and shouted.

“Bob—come here, heel.”

A Bob with a very earthy nose returned to him out of the grey-green gloom. Bob had been down a rabbit hole, and rabbits were real live furry things and not ghosts.

Aubrey turned in about ten. He left the flap of the tent open for air, and because he liked to look at the dim shapes of his trees. Bob lay on an old cushion beside the bed. The wood was infinitely still, and its stillness seemed deep and reassuring. His camp bed was comfortable and warm. He dozed off, and then woke with a start. The dog was growling.

“What’s the matter, Bob?”

He could hear nothing, not the crack of a twig or the stirring of a light breeze in the branches, but the dog still growled.

“Don’t be silly, Bob.”

He could suppose that a wood at night was so new to an urban dog that Bob imagined all sorts of canine terrors. At all events, he himself could distinguish no sound in the deep silence, and presently the dog curled himself up again, and Aubrey fell asleep.

Sunday proved itself an exquisite day, and when Aubrey packed up his gear and climbed into the car on Sunday evening Lady Wood had regained all its reassuring beauty. He thought of its yews and beeches all the week, and on the Saturday he and Bob shared the tumult of the week-end road, but the lane from the Tillworth road brought peace.

Aubrey ran the car up to the chalk pit. He heard voices in the wood, and a sound of hammering. He was vaguely displeased. He had not imagined that the fellow from Tillworth would work on a Saturday afternoon. Walking up hill to the glade he saw the raw white sections of his hut partly erected. It looked very crude and new among the tall trees.

The carpenter gave him a laconic nod.

“Good day, sir.”

“Getting on all right?”

“We had a tidy business humping the stuff up here.”

“Is the hut satisfactory?”

“Bit flimsy. I suppose you put in plans, sir?”

“Plans? What plans?”

“To the U.D.C. at Gayford.”

“Who are they?”

The man looked a little contemptuous.

“The Urban District Council. The surveyor has to pass all plans. You’ll be in trouble—if you don’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Why—I thought everybody knew.”

“Could you do it?”

“Yes, I could. But I shall have to charge you.”

“All right.”

Since the glade promised to be full of activity till dusk, for the man confessed that he would be working late at the job, Aubrey pitched his tent by the chalk pit and within twenty yards of the ruined kiln, and that night Bob was most unaccountably restless. He woke Aubery up no less than five times during the night, and just before dawn he rushed out of the tent barking savagely. Well—really! Aubrey got up and putting on a raincoat and slipping his feet into his shoes, went out to see if any tangible cause could be discovered. He neither saw nor heard anything. The wood was steeped in grey and mysterious gloom.

The dog stood on the edge of the glade, barking, and Aubrey lost his temper with Bob.

“Come here, you fool. Stop it. Lie down.”

Bob slunk back to him apologetically. There really was something over there in the wood, but apparently the great man his master either could not hear it, or attached no importance to it. Well, well, even the best of masters had to be humoured.

Dogs are wise creatures, and Bob refrained for the time being from raising alarms, but not so the guardians of civilization. Aubrey had proposed to be at peace and apart in the solitude of his wilderness, but the minions of local government do not permit man to live as he pleases. During the week Aubrey had a letter forwarded to him by the Tillworth carpenter, an official and peremptory letter.

> DEAR SIR,
>
> It has been brought to our notice that you are erecting a dwelling-house in Lady Wood. No plans have been submitted and no permission has been obtained to erect any such building. The work must cease at once pending the submission of plans.

That was but the beginning of much tribulation. Aubrey wrote to the official, explaining the case, and apologizing for his own ignorance. The building was only a week-end hut, not much larger than a good-sized fowl house. Was it still necessary for him to submit plans? It was necessary. He drew them himself, since the Tillworth man had been rebuffed, and posted them to the surveyor’s office. Nothing happened for three weeks, and the hut remained a half-completed shell.

A further communication reached him.

> “Please state what system of sanitation is to be installed.”

Aubrey replied, “I propose to instal an earth closet.”

Officialdom went one better—“Please state how you propose to deal with sullage water.”

What was sullage water? He consulted Tillworth. Oh, slops, the contents of sink and bath. He was told that he would have to instal a brick pit. No, seepage down the hill-side could not be permitted.

Yet another letter arrived. “Please state how you propose to obtain your water supply.”

Aubrey, mild creature, was growing a little impatient. Why hadn’t they

thought of this before? Why fuss about sullage pits before posing him with the problem of water? Was this a sort of game? It might be amusing to the official mind and it might help to justify the official existence, but all this interference threatened to cost him much money. He consulted someone at the office, and that someone tipped him the wink.

“Dish ’em, old lad. Buy a trailer, and tell ’em you have changed your mind, and that the hut’s to be for tools and potatoes.”

This was an inspiration. A tiny caravan on wheels would solve the problem, and Aubrey wrote a careful and dignified letter to the Gayford U.D.C. He was sarcastic. He said that in view of the official obstructiveness and bureaucratic interference he did not propose to inhabit the hut. He proposed to spend his week-ends in a small caravan on wheels.

“Besides,” said the authority, “you’ll dish the blighters over rates.”

He received a final letter from the U.D.C.

> Yours of the 8th duly noted. Please understand that in no case must the wooden structure be used as a habitation. We reserve to ourselves the right to inspect the site from time to time.

Aubrey indulged in a mild chuckle. He felt that he had finished with the official world. He would be left in peace now to play the hermit as he pleased. In his innocence he rejoiced, and purchased a minute sleeping hutch on wheels.

He enjoyed four successive peaceful week-ends. Certainly, his first experience of trailing a caravan was somewhat hectic, but he consoled himself by reflecting that his hutch on wheels could be left in Lady Wood during the season and if he so chose it could be stored at Tillworth for the winter. The weather was perfect, what the journalists describe as Flaming June, and Aubrey mooched about in an old tennis shirt and grey flannel trousers.

His last week-end in June produced other happenings. Bob had been restraining himself under protest, though there were sounds in and about the wood that his master did not seem to hear. On the Sunday morning Aubrey and his dog were about very early, and on the edge of the rough grassland westwards of the trees Bob made a sudden dash at something. There was a scuffle in the grass before Aubrey pounced and dragged the dog away from a rabbit in a snare.

A rabbit in a snare on his land! Poachers!

The rabbit was still alive, its red and congested eyes expressing throttled

anguish, and Aubrey went down on his knees and set about releasing the creature. Bob attempted to join in and received a cuff from his humane master. He stood off and whimpered while Aubrey fiddled with the wire noose. The rabbit's struggles to escape had drawn it tight, and it was not easy to get a finger between the wire and the creature's neck, but he managed it, and the bit of brown fur crouched there panting and dazed.

Aubrey held Bob by the collar.

"No you don't, my lad."

The rabbit gave three or four feeble and tentative jumps, crouched and then as though realizing that life and liberty had returned it broke into an amble and disappeared behind some furze bushes. Aubrey stood up and released the dog. He did not know that he was being watched by a man lying prone behind a thorn tree.

"Poachers, Bob."

He supposed that he ought to inform the police. Or should he put up one or two notices—"Trespassers will be prosecuted."

He had other trespassers that afternoon. He was enjoying an afternoon nap on his camp bed when he was roused by the sounds of an invasion, voices, the noise of cars.

"Up a bit more, Jack."

"That'll do. Easy all."

Bob, couchant, watched his master. Was barking in order, or was this one of the occasions when a dog lay still? Aubrey got up and went down through the wood to investigate. He found three cars parked on the track from gate to chalk pit, and a dozen young things preparing to picnic.

He addressed the party.

"Excuse me, you're trespassing."

Of course they were trespassing, but they were not doing any harm. They had come up the lane and seen the gate. They were quite nice young things, and the lads addressed Aubrey as "sir." And suddenly he felt rather ashamed of interfering with them. Was he going to be the selfish curmudgeon and forbid them the wood on a lovely day in June? He relented for this one occasion.

"All right. I'll allow you to stay to-day, but please don't leave litter about."

"Thanks most awfully, sir. We'll clear up everything."

But Aubrey proposed to exclude all invaders in the future. He had two notice boards prepared at Tillworth and erected them, one at the gate and one on the piece of grassland where he had found the rabbit, and in his innocence he supposed that he had warned off all intruders.

Next week-end, in spite of his notice, another car party invaded the wood. They were rude people. They argued. They propounded brusque opinions upon the owners of private property. Aubrey ordered them out.

“I’ve got your car numbers. If you don’t go—I shall prosecute.”

They went, and Aubrey purchased a padlock and chain and secured the gate against future crashers.

But—somehow—Lady Wood had lost for him some of its tranquillity. It was not quite his, or the haven of peace that he had expected. Its green silences held an atmosphere that was almost sinister. He would find himself listening for sounds of some invasion. He began to see imagined figures in the wood, shapes skulking behind trees. At night he would lie and listen, and the dog too was restless.

He was taking his fortnight’s holiday in September, and he proposed to spend it in Lady Wood, loafing and dreaming, and again the official world had something to say in the matter.

One Saturday afternoon a surly and heated postman delivered a letter.

“I’ve been trying to get rid of this all the week.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You ought to have a box on your—— gate.”

Aubrey opened the letter. It was an official communication from a person of whose existence he had never dreamed, a person who was called the County Agricultural Officer. To the letter was attached a nice little map with a blue line traced on it. The letter informed Aubrey that a complaint had been received on the state of the ditch marked blue in the plan. It gave Aubrey curt orders to clean the ditch.

He was annoyed. He went and inspected the offending fosse and found that it was a bramble-grown hollow extending along the edge of his property between the wood and a meadow, and that it ran for nearly a quarter of a mile and ended in another ditch skirting the lane. He was still more annoyed. Did the official expect him to clear and dig a sort of miniature Devil’s Dyke? Moreover, if the ditch had been allowed to get into that disgraceful condition by the previous owner why hadn’t the official world dealt with that person and

not descended upon an innocent neophyte?

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and decided to take no notice of it, but the thing worried him, and on Monday he consulted young Blaber, a fellow clerk whose father was a farmer.

“I’ve had this. Is it of any significance?”

Blaber read the letter.

“Oh, yes, you’ll have to do it.”

“What, clear out a quarter of a mile of ditch which some other fellow neglected?”

“Yes, they can make you do it.”

The mild Aubrey swore.

“Well—I’m damned! One goes into the country to be peaceful.”

And young Blaber laughed.

“You’ll find much less trouble in Piccadilly.”

Aubrey was both annoyed and worried. He had spent more money on Lady Wood than he had intended; in fact, he was short of money, and his holiday was to have been both a joy and an economy. And now he had orders to shift so many tons of useless earth. How much would it cost to clear that ditch? Ten pounds? He hadn’t the faintest idea, but he did know that he couldn’t afford the money.

“I’ll do it myself.”

He would spend his holiday clearing that damned ditch. He supposed if he scraped the bottom of it he could report obedience to the official world. And who was the complainer? Why hadn’t the fellow had the decency to come straight to him and not go sneaking behind his back to a little mandarin in an office?

He bought a spade and a bagging hook. He was hopelessly inexpert in the use of either, and on that first September day, he tidied up about ten yards of ditch, and got his hands blistered and scratched. He was mobbed by flies and mosquitoes. He sweated. He even swore a little. Arcady was not teaching him poetry and tweety-sweety sentiment. In fact it was preparing to teach this city clerk the redness of tooth and claw creed, and to uncover in him strange, primitive things.

One night somebody walked off with the notice board from his piece of

grassland.

Was it a challenge?

On another evening he found himself short of water, and he took the car down to Tillworth and dined at a local inn. He was growing perhaps just a little tired of cold tongue and jam and boiled eggs. When he returned to Lady Wood and shone his torch upon the tent and trailer he saw that the grey ropes of the tent had been cut. Bob was sniffing suspiciously at the steps of the trailer. Aubrey flashed his torch into the interior. The place had been raided. His blankets had gone.

“Well—I’m damned!”

Then, quite suddenly in the stillness he heard the report of a gun. It was in his wood. He was quite sure about it. What infernal cheek! Someone with a gun in his wood! Besides, how could they see to shoot anything?

He went exploring with an alert and growling Bob, and found nothing. He returned and slept in his clothes, and next day he called upon the local police.

The local sergeant was a genial cynic. Didn’t the gentleman know that Lady Wood had been a poachers’ paradise for the last twenty years? The late owners had not bothered, and here was a fellow from London buying up the local playground and living in it and putting up boards. Aubrey wasn’t popular, and setting the law on one side the sergeant rather sympathized with the local toughs whose delight was to set snares or pot at something with a gun by moonlight or in the grey of the dawn.

“You mean to tell me, sergeant, that I’ve no right to control my own property?”

“I was just putting the situation to you, sir, that’s all. Besides—theft is theft, not like pinching a rabbit. Of course, we’ll take the matter up.”

But some primitive streak glowed in the mild townsman. These savages came into his wood to trap and kill, and his wish was to make of Lady Wood a wild sanctuary.

“All right, sergeant. I mean to stop this cruelty. I’ll deal with it myself.”

The officer opened blue eyes rather wide. Cruelty! Could anything that was done to a cony be called cruelty? Obviously, the gentleman was a crank. Also, he thought it his duty to warn him.

“Some of these chaps are a bit rough, sir. What’s more we’ve had cases recently of the new sort of poaching, fellows who crowd down from London

by car and shoot up estates. They are pretty sly, and difficult to catch. What's more—they're dangerous. A keeper was shot at over at Rookhurst last week."

"What nice people. But I'm not afraid of men with guns. I don't keep a gun."

As a matter of fact he wasn't afraid. He had the courage of innocence. The sergeant smoothed his moustache. He wanted to say to Aubrey—"Look here, sir, if you hear a gun in your wood at night, I'd just turn over and go to sleep again, or you may be asking for trouble." But what he could have said to Aubrey as a man he could not say as an official.

Meanwhile Aubrey persevered with his ditch, and purchased two new blankets and went to bed fagged out, and slept like a log. On that particular night he did not hear a car crawl up and through the gate and park itself in the blackness under the trees. A full moon was up. The car extruded six men. As a matter of fact they knew nothing of Aubrey and his hermitage. They climbed up through the wood and were heard by Bob the dog.

Bob, full of a sense of doggish duty, rushed out to his doom. He ran straight at the dim figures. There was a flash and a report, a poignant yelp. Aubrey, suddenly awake, heard the bitter howling of his dog. He dashed out just as he was and saw something white twitching in the moonlight.

"Bob."

The men saw him as a dim figure. The supposition was that he was a keeper.

"Clear out—you——"

Aubrey stood still for a moment, his eyes searching the shadows for the owner of that snarling voice.

"Damn you, who's shot my dog?"

He was down on his knees beside Bob, a Bob who had ceased to twitch. Something gathered in Aubrey's throat. This devil had murdered his dog, the best friend he had ever had. He rose, shaking at the knees, furious.

"You swine. I'll——"

Figures moved in the shadows. A shape confronted him with levelled gun.

"Here, you keep a civil tongue in your head. What the hell are you doing here?"

Aubrey, in a blood rage, moved towards the figure.

“This is my wood—and you’ve——”

“Stand off, or I’ll blow your bloody——”

Another voice chimed in.

“Easy, Alf. The chap’s in pyjamas. Say, what are you exactly?”

“I’m living in this wood. I’ve bought it—I’ll make you pay for this——”

He became aware of figures surrounding him. The same unpleasant voice addressed him.

“Got a crib here?”

“A what?”

“A hut or something?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you damned well kennel up in it, see. None of your sauce or your interference.”

Something wild and primeval exploded in Aubrey. He made a dash for that man, but before he had taken three steps the figures closed on him. A fist caught him full in the jaw. He went down and was kicked by heavy boots.

“Tie the swine up, Fred.”

“Where’s his hut? Better truss him up and shove him inside.”

And that was what they did, making a sort of mummy of him with roped sheets and blankets, and leaving him on his bed.

“You keep quiet, my lad, or something worse will happen to you.”

He lay still. It was not that he was frightened. Had he had a gun he would have shot that man even as the brute had shot his dog. But he was helpless, and something seemed dead in him, romance, an illusion, the loveliness of Nature. And out there his dog lay still, his best friend. Oh, damn this fatal wood! If he had never sat eyes on it his dog would not have died.

They had trussed him up pretty securely, and squirm as he would he could not free himself. He heard distant gun shots. There was a pheasant preserve on the other side of the hill. He felt bruised and sore and savage. Later, in the grey of the dawn he heard footsteps going down through the wood, and the sound of a car being driven off down the lane.

Somewhere about six in the morning Aubrey was released by a police constable who had been sent up to patrol the lane. He went at once to where

the dead dog was lying, and bending down, touched Bob's bloody head.

"They killed my best friend, constable."

"Crashers from London. A dangerous crowd, sir. Motor-cars have made things pretty difficult for us. It was a dirty trick shooting your dog. Can you give me any description of the men?"

But Aubrey was not listening to the officer. He picked up the dog, and holding him in his arms, looked around him at the fallacious green deeps of the woodland. Leaves and bracken were utterly still.

He spoke—"One would have thought—one could find peace here."

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing."

The constable went back to report, and Aubrey, having dressed himself, brought out his spade and buried Bob in the centre of the glade. Sunlight was sifting in, burning the bracken with gold, but to Aubrey the place had become sinister and hateful. When he had put Bob to sleep he went and tossed the spade into the ditch that he had been ordered to clean.

After a breakfast of tea and bread and butter he packed everything into the trailer and car, and collecting all the rubbish he could find he piled it in a corner of the hut and set light to it. The place was blazing cheerfully when he ran car and trailer down to the gate. The chain had been cut through, and the gate was open. He left it like that.

Thus, Aubrey abandoned his dream of Arcady. He returned to Barnes and a more calculable environment. At the end of six months he bought a cairn, and was Content with Nature as she showed herself in Richmond Park or at the Zoo. It took him two years to sell Lady Wood. It was bought by a wealthy merchant, who built a house there, and felled many trees, and who—growing wise as to his poachers' paradise—kept two fierce Alsatians and left them loose at night.

Aubrey's correspondence with the Agricultural Officer lasted for five months, and in the end he had to pay two men to dig out that ditch.

He never visited Lady Wood again. Its other name was too real for him.

And Bob lies buried under the new owner's rock garden. Aubrey had dug deeply, and Bob's bones were not disturbed.

MISS TELFORD'S BED

TWICE a year, on the first of January and the first of June, Mr. Verreker took a bus or a taxi to Highbury Station and walked down the Canonbury Road to Vigo Place.

Vigo Place was Georgian, a single row of massive old houses fronting upon a broad alleyway that ended in a cul-de-sac, and in its day Vigo Place had known some notable people, but now the houses had a decayed and battered look. Plaster had flaked from the cornices; woodwork needed painting; shabby muslin or lace curtains hung like ghosts in the windows; the splendid old doors had not been treated kindly.

But even in this derelict terrace No. 7 shamed its neighbours in the quality of its shabbiness. It stood at the end of the row, and its two lower windows had been boarded up, while the windows on the first floor had had pieces of wood and cardboard inserted where the glass had been broken. The area gate was fastened with a rusty chain and padlock, and the area itself was full of rubbish. Presumably, to the casual eye, No. 7, Vigo Place was uninhabited, but Mr. Verreker knew that it contained a very singular person—Miss Caroline Telford.

Mr. Verreker was sixty-five and able to remember the Caroline Telford of the seventies. As a boy he had seen her act. She had been a great beauty, one of those big, dark, dominant women, fierce in her tempers and in her infatuations, but into the life of Caroline Telford there had fallen some strange catastrophe. In the early nineties, as Caroline Telford, she had disappeared.

Mr. Verreker paused outside No. 7. He looked at the house as though he never ceased to be astonished by its appearance. As a lawyer he had found himself involved in many queer situations, but the quality of No. 7, Vigo Place had a queerness that was both fantastic and perennial. He came here twice a year; he was expected, but on this particular June 1st his visit had other urgencies. Until two months ago the house had held two women, but one of

them had died, old Eliza who had lived with Miss Telford for more than thirty years, and had been almost as odd a person as her mistress.

For Miss Telford had relations, or rather one remaining cousin, a country clergyman, the Rev. Samuel Telford who had a living in Dorsetshire. Mr. Samuel had married late, and was the father of a large and partly immature family that rendered his three hundred pounds a year desperately and sordidly inadequate. The Rev. Samuel Telford had been worrying Mr. Verreker. It was presumed by Mr. Samuel and his wife that Caroline had money.

Presumably! That was one of the problems, and as Mr. Verreker climbed the three steps to the front door of No. 7, he was reflecting upon Miss Telford's financial position. Actually he did not know what property she possessed, and whether she was as poor as she pretended to be, but on the doorstep he met other realities. A bottle of milk and a loaf of bread had been left outside the door.

Mr. Verreker eyed them. His thin lips uttered one word. "Impossible."

Yes, the whole situation was impossible, and he had come to No. 7 to do something about it. Either Miss Caroline would admit hygiene and a doctor and domestic servants into her house, or she would have to go into a nursing-home. But that bottle and loaf of bread!

Mr. Verreker tried the door. It opened to him as was usual on the first of January and the first of June. Tradition had it that he was to walk straight up the stairs to Miss Telford's bedroom on the first floor, but first, with a sort of gingerliness he gathered up the bottle of milk and the loaf of bread, and placed them on the hall table.

Once again he uttered to himself the word "Impossible."

Yes, everything about the house was impossible, everything was dust. The hall table was grey with it, and Mr. Verreker's top hat shrank from contact with that table. Dirt, silence, a kind of hush as though the whole place was clogged with dust. It coated the picture frames, and lay in a film on the hand rail of the banisters. The windows were grimed and cobwebbed. The Brussels stair-carpet had had all its colours effaced, as though some grey fabric had been spread over it.

Mr. Verreker paused at the foot of the stairs. He held his top hat shoulder high as he held it when walking up the aisle of St. Jude's, Notting Hill.

"Impossible."

He climbed the first flight and hesitated. It was as though the silence and

the deadness of the house had suddenly affected him, and had insinuated into his consciousness strange, suggestive alarm. He looked down through the dirty landing window at a garden that was as derelict and dead as the house.

Suddenly he felt moved to break the dusty silence. His own voice startled him. Almost it seemed to disturb that grey film and to set it floating in the air.

“Miss Telford—Miss Telford.”

He stood rigid, head slightly on one side, and then that other voice answered him, deep and resonant, the voice of Caroline Telford the tragedienne.

“Is it Mr. Verreker? Come in.”

He ascended the second flight of stairs, and put his hand to the handle of the door. The word, “Impossible” was painted for him upon that door, and in the act of opening it he reminded himself that the occasion was critical. He would have need of firmness; he would have to play the autocrat.

He opened the door and went in, and instantly he was aware of those two strange black eyes, huge and steady, staring at him from the bed. Miss Telford was wearing a lace cap, and a pale pink dressing jacket. She had hair upon her chin and upon her upper lip. She was gaunt with a formidable gauntness. Yes, formidable was the word. Her eyes were like the eyes of time, yet strangely bright and somehow retaining an impressive beauty. Mr. Verreker smiled his little, neat, silvery smile. It had the gloss of his hat. He was reminding himself of the milk and the bread on the doorstep, and of the dust, and of the amazing fact that Miss Telford had not been outside this house for some twenty years.

He closed the door.

“Good morning. The occasion is—as usual.”

Always, in the presence of Miss Telford he felt a little less like the Mr. Verreker of Lincoln’s Inn. He seemed to lose height and presence, and to become a little stilted, self-consciously formal. He crossed to the bed.

Her dark eyes observed him.

“Sit down.”

She did not offer a hand, and Mr. Verreker selected a chair, and sat down a little way from the bed. He was shy of that bed, and of its atrocious quilt, and its pillows and its primeval stuffiness. He supposed, but no—he did not like to suppose too much. A mahogany bed, Victorian, massive, and that massive yet gaunt woman, who, he imagined, never washed!

“Well, how are we?”

He wanted to get rid of his hat—but how? That table? Well—he concluded that his hat would have to accept the table. He placed it there, and heard the deep voice addressing him from the bed.

“So—we are going to quarrel?”

Mr. Verreker raised his eyebrows. Quarrel!

“Dear lady—have we ever quarrelled? I have been coming here for nearly twenty years. Surely——”

Meanwhile the professional voice within him was uttering the word “Impossible” and the woman in the bed seemed to have picked up the vibrations of the word from the heavy, dusty stillness.

She said—“Probably you found the milk on the doorstep.”

“I did. And the bread. I brought them in.”

“Sensible man.”

Almost her tone was ironic, and its affect upon Mr. Verreker was provocative. He found his inspiration, and that nice, authoritative manner that could soothe family tempers and chasten domestic differences.

“I’m glad you think so. May I presume that I still have the honour to be both friend and lawyer?”

“But why presume?”

“Then I won’t. I’ll ask you a question. Two months have elapsed since Elizabeth died, and apparently——”

“But—that—is presuming.”

He twiddled his watch chain and smiled. So she was as quick and mordant as ever, the most eccentric woman he had ever had to do with, and the shrewdest.

“Well, may I presume—from appearances—that you are living here absolutely alone?”

“You may.”

“But, my dear Miss Caroline, it is impossible, quite impossible.”

She had expected that word and the attitude it expressed. She was silent, and her silence was like an emptiness which he hurried to fill.

“Really, quite impossible. You might die, you might be robbed. Besides, the house—the whole atmosphere. You may not be a lover of humanity, but after all—this is the twentieth century.”

She observed him unflinchingly.

“Indeed. Is that so? But does it matter?”

“Most certainly it matters. In fact—society——”

He was growing nettled, and she knew that he was a man who could grasp a nettle. She respected Mr. Verreker, though she provoked him. Always, he had kept his promises.

“Society—or sanity, or is it sanitation? Well—you came with an ultimatum in your pocket.”

“No—no—indeed. I really am concerned. It may seem strange—but I do concern myself with my clients.”

The gaunt head made a slight, nodding movement.

“True. But don’t insist. Explain.”

A little humorous gleam came into his eyes.

“You must have somebody here. Also—I should like a doctor to come and see you. I don’t want to insist—but in a sense I’m responsible, very responsible.”

“You think so?”

“My dear lady—I don’t think—I know. How can I—as the friend and adviser of twenty years, acquit myself——?”

The fingers of one hand plucked at the quilt. She might be a very obstinate person, but she did know that there are occasions when compromise is necessary, especially with a quietly determined and responsible person like Mr. Verreker.

“But—supposing—I cannot afford it?”

“Nonsense. You know we hold securities for you that bring in over four hundred a year. It is my absolute duty——”

Her dark old eyes were mischievous.

“I presume you could send in doctors and have me certified. Am I sufficiently eccentric? Well—one woman, but not a hag.”

“One woman would not be sufficient.”

“I’ll not have more than one woman in this house.”

“Well, one woman—and a daily help. Do realize, my dear lady—that I am not arguing for my own ends.”

She sat as though considering the inevitable, and then she put an abrupt and unexpected question.

“Has dear Samuel been worrying you?”

Mr. Verreker understood the virtues of frankness.

“He has written me letters.”

“Soapy beast.”

She was incorrigible.

“No—I don’t like Samuel. I don’t like Samuel’s wife, and I’m quite sure I should not like his children. Why should one like the people? Or slimy kisses? I don’t—and I won’t.”

Mr. Verreker did not argue with her.

“I believe two of the children are in London. One is training as a nurse, the other has got a post with Messrs. Spiffin & Winkworth.”

“That’s the eldest boy. What’s his name?”

“Roy—I believe.”

“So—he’s learning to be a draper.”

“No—no, not a draper. Spiffin & Winkworth—the art experts.”

“Excuse my memory. They used to have a silversmith’s shop.”

“Exactly—but now it is a little more than that—plate, pictures, precious stones, anything you please. Now—I am to be permitted to make some arrangements?”

“About Samuel and his family?”

“No—no, for your comfort.”

He might have added the word “cleanliness,” but if her eccentricity had to be washed it was necessary to do it with discretion, also, his preparations had been made, and within an hour of his leaving No. 7, Vigo Terrace he was able to meet Mr. Samuel Telford and reassure him. Mr. Telford had come up to London for three days, and was staying at a cheap hotel in Bloomsbury.

“Yes—I have persuaded Miss Telford that she must have someone with her

in the house. I had made arrangements. Two charwomen are to go in and clean the place, but to do it as quietly as possible.”

Mr. Samuel was one of those little men who cannot play a game without cheating, and so he was always afraid of being cheated.

“No undue influence will be used—I presume?”

Mr. Verreker stared at him.

“I beg your pardon?”

Mr. Samuel moistened his thin lips.

“As Miss Telford’s one remaining cousin—one might presume that my interest in her will—— Please understand me, I am thinking of my children and my wife.”

Mr. Verreker looked blandly cynical. On many occasions had the Rev. Samuel Telford attempted to find out just how much money his cousin had to leave and how she had left it, but Mr. Verreker did not part with professional secrets. Also, he did not like Mr. Samuel, a little snuffy fellow with thin lips and mean eyebrows.

“Miss Telford’s affairs are her private affairs, sir.”

Mr. Samuel’s curiosity withdrew itself. He was a little afraid of Mr. Verreker.

But he decided to prolong his stay in town. He even took a bus to Highbury, and walked to Vigo Place, and saw that a change had come over the house. Windows had been cleaned, and Mr. Samuel gathered to himself the significance of those reclaimed windows. Caroline was a very old woman, almost bedridden, and if in the fullness of her years she had surrendered some of her eccentricities to Mr. Verreker’s persuasions, might she not be more persuadable in other respects. Her mood might be more Christian.

Mr. Telford rang the bell. It was answered by an elderly woman. She had a pleasant face, but Mr. Telford eyed her suspiciously. So this was the woman whom that lawyer fellow had thrust into the house to take charge of old Caroline who was in her dotage! Mr. Telford had his own private opinion about lawyers and Mr. Verreker.

He said—“My name is Telford, Mr. Samuel Telford. I have called to inquire for Miss Telford.”

The pleasant woman assured him that Miss Telford was very well.

“I should like to see her. Perhaps you will tell her that her cousin—Mr.

Samuel Telford—has called.”

But Miss Caroline was not persuadable. She sat up in bed looking grim. She had compromised upon certain matters with Mr. Verreker, but the compromise was not going to include Mr. Telford.

“So it’s Sam. You can tell him to go away.”

“You don’t wish to see him, miss?”

“I won’t see him,” said Miss Telford.

She didn’t, and Mr. Telford, rebuffed, went away feeling more suspicious. That Verreker fellow had put his minion into the house, and Caroline might no longer be a free agent, and pressure might be brought to bear on her, improper pressure. Mr. Telford thought the whole business rather fishy, but remembering that he had two children in London he discovered in one of them an inspiration. Yes, he would go and see Edith and tell her to visit Miss Caroline; Edith was no fool, and not like Roy who was a source of irritation and perplexity to his father. Mr. Telford had never been able to realize Roy as his son. Impertinent and irresponsible young puppy!

Mr. Telford called at St. Martha’s Hospital, and saw Edith who was training there as a nurse. Edith was very like her father; she had a brown and beady eye and a hard colour and a chin that stuck out. Mr. Samuel explained the situation to her.

“I don’t quite trust this lawyer. I was refused admittance—but how do I know that Caroline was told. You see——?”

He had a way of twitching his eyebrows.

“I consider that Miss Telford should be seen by one of her relatives. I have to get back to duty this afternoon. I think—Edith, you should try to see her.”

Edith understood.

“I have half a day to-morrow, dad. I’ll go.”

She was a decisive young woman. She was learning very quickly to deal with patients, and she liked dealing with them. Neither she nor her father thought of co-opting Roy into the conspiracy, for Roy was such a flamboyant young fool. He was not Telford as Edith and Mr. Samuel understood Telford. He was always falling in love or out of it; there had been trouble down at Weybourne, almost a scandal. Yes, Roy was a flashy, irresponsible sort of idiot, and much too good-looking. He was not like a Telford, or—at least—like a Weybourne Telford.

Edith went to Canonbury. When the pleasant person opened the door of No. 7, Vigo Place Edith walked in. She was decisive.

She said: “I’m Miss Edith Telford. I have come to see Miss Telford. Yes—I’ll wait.”

Now, Miss Caroline had seen Edith Telford but once in her life, and that had been many years ago when Edith had been at the age when children say monstrous and unexpected and impertinent things, and Miss Caroline had not forgotten. She decided to see Edith. Curiosity was by no means dead in her, and she was curious to discover what Samuel had produced in the way of a daughter.

“You can show Miss Edith Telford up.”

“Yes, miss.”

“Leave her with me for ten minutes. Then come back. Ten minutes may be sufficient.”

The ten minutes sufficed, for Edith tried to deal with Miss Caroline Telford as she would have dealt with a patient who had to be humoured, and Edith’s touch was bony, and Miss Telford understood that she was being humoured. To herself she called it “Being fooled,” she the once famous and compelling Caroline who had troubled the hearts of men. That might have happened very long ago, but Edith Telford would trouble no man’s heart. At her zenith she would but trouble his temper.

They parted. Miss Caroline had said, “So you’re a nurse. I don’t like nurses,” and her deep voice had had a finality. She was much too formidable to be fooled. And Edith returned to St. Martha’s and wished that she had Miss Caroline Telford in her ward, with permission to deal completely and decisively with her. She wrote to her father and informed him that she considered Miss Telford a mental case and not fit to conduct her own affairs.

No one had thought of Roy.

Whereas Mr. Roy Telford had a problem of his own. He was being made to think very seriously upon certain matters. He was an opera-hat young man, a fellow with a remarkable flair for doing things as they should be done within a mile of Berkeley Square. But complications had arisen, for Messrs. Spiffin & Winkworth provided this exquisite young man with a miserable salary of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and since Roy had not cut the colour out of life his situation had became a little sombre. He had éclat. He could wear an opera hat. He had taken Jean Polliser out to dinner, and among the bright young things Jean was held to be the most marvellous vamp on the London

stage.

In fact, Roy was in a mess.

And being in extremes he thought of Miss Caroline Telford. She might have been so opportune, but judging by the family report she was a most horrible old woman, yet Roy had discovered that the family's views upon things feminine were thoroughly provincial. The occasion was desperate, but in Roy there was a laddishness, an irresponsible—youthful gaiety.

He took a taxi to Vigo Place. He rang the bell. It was half-past six on a summer evening, and the pleasant person who opened the door was surprised by the pleasant vision upon the doorstep. A lad in evening-dress, coated, white-scarved, with his hat just at the right angle! Inwardly the pleasant person catalogued him as a "Lamb." Women are so prejudiced.

Roy hatted her.

"Is Miss Telford in?"

Yes, Miss Telford was in, and he smiled.

"I'm Mr. Roy Telford. I ought to have been here before. I wonder if Miss Telford will see me?"

The pleasant person said that she would go and inquire, and would Mr. Telford wait in the dining-room. It did not occur to her that Roy might be a clever young crook, and that she should not have admitted him without some evidence of his identity. The pleasant person was quite sure the Lamb was all that he appeared.

She went up to Miss Caroline.

"A Mr. Telford has called."

"Mr. Samuel again?"

"Oh, no, a young gentleman. Such a nice-looking young gentleman."

"Then it can't be Sam's son. What's he want?"

"To see you, miss."

Miss Telford appeared to hesitate. Then she asked for her hand-mirror, and the lace cap with pink ribbons in it, and her Japanese dressing-jacket. Miss Telford's appearance had improved under the pleasant person's influence; she looked less gaunt and bearded.

"He may be an impostor, Mary, a young swindler."

“Oh, miss, I’m sure he isn’t.”

Roy was shown up. He entered Miss Caroline’s room carrying his opera hat and coat, and looking the young exquisite. He had an air; he could carry his clothes; he was a remarkably good-looking lad, clear cut and tallish, with a blue eye that was both jocund and innocent. He stood at the bottom of Miss Caroline’s bed and smiled at her.

“Awfully good of you to see me, Miss Telford. I ought to have been here before. I’ve wanted to come.”

Miss Telford’s large, dark eyes absorbed him, and the unexpectedness of him.

“Are you Sam’s son?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not a bit like him.”

“No.”

He was looking at her with interest. A few nights ago he had been shown a portrait of Caroline Telford as she had been in the old days. He told her so. He added: “Please don’t think it cheek, but someone said that I resembled the other branch—yours.”

Miss Caroline laughed and in a way that she had not laughed for years.

“Then—you must be a young rascal. Sit down, my dear.”

They got on amazingly well together, for—somehow—this pretty lad in black and white brought back to Caroline Telford a perfume of other days. She was quite sure that he was a charming young rascal, and in those old Victorian days she had sometimes been glad of the rebel youth. For youth asks for life, and the joy and the swagger of it, and presents to love a bunch of roses and not a Calvinistic cabbage.

“So you are with Spiffin & Winkworth?”

“For my sins—yes. Or do you think it is for the sins of my fathers?”

Her old eyes grew arch.

“Tush! How can you connect sin and Mr. Samuel? I am afraid you lack reverence.”

“Do I? But really—Aunt Caroline, one can’t help being young.”

She liked his candour, and his coining of the “Aunt Caroline.” Of course he

could not help being young. Samuel had never been young. But she was wondering how Samuel's son contrived to pay for clothes that most obviously did not come out of Holborn. And he could talk about the theatre, and places where golden youth disported itself. And quite right, too. He had the figure and the face and the air. In the old days he would have been both a wit and a dandy.

She said: "My dear, I expect Spiffin & Winkworth prefer to employ gentlemen, but in these days—a gentleman does not command full value."

He looked at her.

"That's so."

And suddenly he grew shy. He was a nice lad, and at the back of his mind had flickered the hope that something might be procured from Miss Telford. It had been a rather desperate hope, and he was in a rather desperate mess, but now that the vulgar occasion confronted him he could not begin to make use of it. Yes, it was too damned smeary to come up and see this old woman and ask her for money.

He said: "Aunt Caroline, I wish you would tell me about the times you knew. It must have been marvellous——"

"Just what, my dear?"

"Being the rage, and a reigning beauty. You know, I'm an awfully romantic sort of fool. I'm afraid I'm a swaggerer. I should like to have been a little Beau Brummell. Swish—you know."

"Swish! That's a new word."

"Is it? It means—'it.' The perfect peacock. So you see—I'm a bit of a rotter."

She laughed.

"How nice to be like that. Apple blossom, my dear. Something to be experienced. Your father never wore vine leaves."

Their eyes met.

"Priceless! The pater wearing a wreath of vine leaves. I say, Aunt Caroline, aren't you a bit of a wag!"

"I used to be, my dear. One likes to wag a tail."

He remained with her for an hour, and went away without having breathed a word about his desperate situation, and Miss Telford did not ask him to come

again. All she said was: “The old image is always propped up in bed. Most people throw sticks at it.” Roy walked all the way back to his digs in Cator Street. He had one and twopence in his pocket, and a queer feeling of satisfaction inside him. Aunt Caroline was a sport. You couldn’t exhibit a sponge to an old woman like that.

A week or so later Roy went again to No. 7, Vigo Place. He might have been expected, for the pleasant person was able to carry up some cold supper on a tray, nor on this occasion, nor on any subsequent occasion did he ask Miss Telford for money. She was supposed to be very poor, and certainly the house looked sufficiently shabby, and Roy was deciding within himself that if you had poured out your own medicine, the only decent thing was to drink it. He would not squeal. He would go up and see old Spiffin in his private room, and confess to the pawning of sundry articles. It would have to be done very soon, for the monthly checking of stock was imminent, and the lapse would come to light.

Yes, he would take his medicine.

But on the evening before the day of doom he went to see Aunt Caroline, and as he was leaving her she produced an envelope from under her pillow.

“My dear—I’m sure Spiffin & Winkworth don’t pay you as they should do for wearing such beautiful clothes. I want you to let me make you a little allowance. After all, one is only young once.”

“Aunt Caroline!”

“No, don’t open it now. When you get home.”

He kissed her, and to him her gaunt old face had the beauty of kindness, of salvation. At the corner of Vigo Place he stopped to open the envelope, for he could not wait. How much had she given him? A five-pound note? The envelope felt rather fat. It disclosed to his trembling fingers five ten-pound notes.

He was saved.

On the following evening he called again on Aunt Caroline. He had an air of having grown up. Almost, he spoke to her like a father.

“You know, it was topping of you, Aunt Carry, and I’ll take it just this once, and I’m most awfully grateful, but you mustn’t do it again, you know.”

“And why not, my dear?”

“Well, Aunt Carry, I don’t want you to feel I’m a sponger. There are

certain things a fellow oughtn't to do."

"My dear," said she, "I'm very old, so we won't argue. I like to do what I like—which—of course—according to your dear father—is quite sinful. When I was young I used to love fine clothes. And why not? It is good to feel debonair."

That same evening she wrote to Mr. Verreker and asked him to call on her immediately, as she wished to make some alterations in her will, and when Mr. Verreker arrived she asked him sundry questions.

"Samuel is down for a hundred? Isn't that so?"

Mr. Verreker consulted the document.

"Correct."

"Leave it at that figure. And the rest of my estate——?"

"Fifty pounds to each executor. The residuum is left to charities, as you know."

Miss Telford appeared to reflect.

"You can put down the Pleasant Person for two hundred pounds."

"Yes."

"And I bequeath my bed to Sam's eldest son, Roy Telford."

Mr. Verreker looked at her shrewdly.

"Your bed?"

"Yes, bed and bedding. I presume the words are adequate—and cover the case."

"You mean——?"

She nodded, and he smiled.

"I'll so word it that the terms are comprehensive."

On the third of September Miss Telford passed away in her sleep, and Mr. Verreker, who could be as mischievous as the old lady, dispatched the necessary letters, and made the necessary arrangements. Mr. Samuel received a letter, and in a moment of presumption saw golden possibilities and posted up to town with his wife. Of course he would conduct the funeral, and Mr. Verreker had to chasten his enthusiasm. Miss Telford had expressly stated that all such formalities were to be dispensed with. And she was to be cremated.

She was cremated, and when all that was flesh had become ash, Mr. Verreker and the various Telfords gathered at No. 7, Vigo Place. Two more children had come up from the country to reinforce Mr. Samuel and his wife. Edith was there, suspicious and sceptical, and prepared to be disappointed. Roy did not turn up. He had a certain feeling about things. He was less of a commercialist than he had believed himself to be.

The contents of Miss Telford's will shocked the family. It was a malicious will. When Mr. Verreker read the clause in which Miss Caroline bequeathed her bed and all that it represented to poor Roy, even his mother exclaimed:

"Well—really!"

Yes, really! Leaving the boy her bed, that very disgusting bed in which her old body had wallowed for so many years.

Mr. Verreker looked down his nose, and spoke to his confidential clerk.

"I think we had better examine that bed, Sims. Borrow a pair of scissors from Mrs. Luker."

The company transferred itself to Miss Telford's bedroom. Edith was heard to titter; she was a young woman with no imagination, and she was thinking of how Roy would look when he heard about his legacy.

Mr. Sims and Mrs. Luker had laid bare the mattress.

"Split it open," said Mr. Verreker.

It was done, and he groped, rather like an elderly child exploring a bran pie. A kind of twinkle came into his eyes.

"Ha—I thought so. There is something here."

He began to extract packets of papers, things that crackled. He passed them to Mr. Sims, who arranged them on the table.

Mr. Samuel was moistening dry lips.

"Presuming, sir, that these packages are of value—are we to understand ——?"

Mr. Verreker smiled at him.

"Certainly. Your son's legacy, the bed—bedding and all that it may contain."

The packages were examined. They contained some twenty thousand pounds in Gold Bonds and Bank of England notes.

Mrs. Telford’s voice was heard again:

“Well—really—really!”

And Mr. Samuel was remembering that his son had ceased to be a minor.

OLD MISCHIEF

MR. ALLARD was watching a man fishing for sea-urchins. He had set out to walk to Portofino, and had turned aside to lean over the low stone wall where the coast road ran some twenty feet above the rocks. The sun shone, sea and sky met in an absolute blueness, and Allard was constrained to stand and stare. He preferred to regard life as a picture and not to fret over it as a metaphysical abstraction, and he contemplated the green-blue water with the black patternings of submerged rocks, the white boat gliding, and the Italian standing in it with his pronged stick ready to strike.

Another man came along the road, paused to stare at the boat, and, glancing at Allard's figure, looked startled. For a moment he was motionless, and then moved rapidly and almost surreptitiously behind Allard's back, his string-soled shoes making hardly any sound, but Allard was conscious of his passing presence. He turned an idle head and saw an Italian peasant in blue linen trousers and a faded black coat walking away along the road.

The man was tall, with well set shoulders and hollowed back, nor did he move like a peasant, and Allard's stare ceased to be casual. There was something familiar about the figure. The back of the fellow's neck and the shape of his head made some memory click in Allard's consciousness.

"Exactly like Wellsford."

The absurdity of the suggestion reproved him. Human contours could not claim an individual uniqueness, and *homo sapiens* might be somewhat the same in England and Italy. Types persisted and resembled each other. Besides, Wellsford was dead—anyway; he was supposed to have died of drink in a London slum.

But Allard deserted the hunter of sea-urchins and followed the other man along the road, and then it struck him that this fellow was walking with unnecessary speed. Allard saw him glance back, and then diverge towards a rough path that looped its way up the hill-side. His long blue legs were vividly

active before he disappeared amid the maquis and the dwarf pines.

Allard strolled on. Obviously the thing was a mere coincidence. The fellow had no reason to run away from him; he was in a hurry and had taken a short cut, and Allard's eyes discovered a white building shining through the trees, the Hotel Bella Vista set on a terrace about a hundred metres above the sea, a little family hotel whose *en pension* terms were exceedingly sympathetic. Allard knew one or two people who were staying at the Hotel Bella Vista—Edith Morley the novelist, old Trevor Cane who was as poor as a church rat. Allard paused again at the gate of the Bella Vista. A private road zigzagged up the face of the hill.

Should he climb up and call on old Cane? No, it would be tactless, for old Cane would feel it his duty to give him a drink, and as far as drinks were concerned Cane was not Abel. Mr. Allard winced. What a dickens of a joke! And then it occurred to him to wonder whether the man in the blue trousers was connected with the Hotel Bella Vista. He might be the gardener or something.

But supposing it had been Wellsford? Mr. Allard resumed his walk, reflecting upon the vagaries of the original Wellsford. Why did a man take to drink, and remain immersed in it to his own undoing? Heredity? But there had been no such taint in Geoffrey Wellsford's case. The sordid submergence had seemed inexplicable.

That afternoon Allard met Miss Edith Morley at the casino of Santa Maria. Miss Morley was a celebrity of the new school, whose clothes suggested an old-fashioned plush portière. Her dusty meagreness matched her air of negative, pale irony, but Miss Morley was amusing, and Allard had passed beyond the pretty face.

"May I join you?"

She wriggled her shoulders, and the eyes that looked up at him through horn-rimmed spectacles were the colour of frosted glass.

"Does man condescend?"

Allard sat down and ordered tea with lemon in it. He knew that conversation with Miss Morley proceeded on original lines. It was as jerky and as modern as her prose.

He said—"Nothing coincidental convinces you."

She put her head on one side.

"Why so Judish? They have brought me two stale éclairs. Why are

chocolate éclairs always stale in Italy?”

“Isn’t that a matter for Mussolini?”

“Hush, they’ll eject you! But you were suggesting a coincidence.”

Allard surrendered to a sudden whim.

“You have a fellow named Wellsford staying at your hotel.”

“I’m not responsible.”

“A tallish, finely made man with curious blue eyes—and an air.”

She put a spoon to her second éclair.

“Plenty of hair, my dear, but no one with an air. We’re mostly old and obvious.”

“Then there is no one to whom my description applies?”

“The only reputable male about the place is the padrona’s husband, and we only see him once a week. A hairy creature who looks after the garden and the vines, and who is stone deaf and never speaks. Yes, now I come to think of it he has lapis lazuli eyes.”

Mr. Allard chuckled.

“Another coincidence. You ought to make use of that phrase. How about jacynth locks?”

Miss Morley said, “Don’t be silly.”

Now Mr. Allard was not a malicious person, but he was an idle man of mature years who had so little business of his own that he was constrained to dabble in other people’s affairs. He was excessively curious, so much so that some of the younger members of his London club had christened him “Aunty.” He had a nose for anything that was exciting and savoury and a little scandalous, though the excessive candour of the younger generation is eliminating the spinster mind and clarifying muddy waters.

Mr. Allard discovered a mule-path that climbed through the olive groves behind the Hotel Bella Vista, and Mr. Allard pursued his hypothesis up this path. It was a warm day, with the sea like watered silk and the sky blue crystal, and looking down through the olive trees above the little hotel Mr. Allard saw a man at work, turning over the rich dark soil with the big mattock-like tool used in the south. His blue trousers and white shirt showed up against the vivid green of the herbage which was starred with narcissi and wild tulips.

Mr. Allard removed his hat and sat down for a moment on a rock. His eyes

twinkled, for the fellow at work there was the man he had seen on the road, the Italian ghost of a dead Englishman. Mr. Allard had slipped a small pair of opera glasses into his pocket, and he extracted them and turned them upon the peasant. The man Wellsford had been clean shaven, but this fellow had a tawny beard and moustache, and a face the colour of cedar wood.

Then Mr. Allard had an inspiration. It did not occur to him that there was anything reprehensible in the trick. It was a perfectly harmless experiment. He put a hand to his mouth and called.

“Hallo—Wellsford!”

The reaction was instant. He saw the stooping figure straighten like a spring that had been held flexed. The man stood holding his mattock in two brown hands almost as though he was ready to defend himself. His very blue eyes stared up through the flicker of light and shadow under the olive trees.

Mr. Allard stood up. The effect of the challenge had surprised him. He smuggled his glasses back into his pocket.

“Excuse me, you understand English.”

The blue eyes continued to stare. Almost they were like the eyes of a startled and angry animal. Mr. Allard felt vaguely uncomfortable.

“Perhaps you can tell me if this is the path to St. Pietro?”

The man gave a shake of the head and resumed his work on the soil. The mattock rose and fell with a kind of rhythmic ferocity.

Mr. Allard raised his eyebrows. Had not Miss Morley said that the man was deaf? And the name of Wellsford thrown like a stone into the solitude of his toil under the trees had provoked that sudden, startled lifting of the head and shoulders. Mr. Allard’s curiosity had a bone to play with, and the morning’s bone sufficed him. He carried it off with him down the path.

“Damn it—I believe it is Wellsford!”

Miss Morley was at work at the third chapter of her new novel when the man Allard arrived on the terrace of the Hotel Bella Vista. Miss Morley held that a particular corner on the terrace was sacred to herself and her craft, and when she saw Mr. Allard’s busy legs and self-assertive hat travelling in her direction she was annoyed. A woman’s work can always be interrupted! It occurred to her that Mr. Allard resembled a dancing faun, an irresponsible and mischievous creature to whom the whole of creation was a joke.

He took off his hat to her.

“Scusi. But—really—I have something important to ask you.”

Miss Morley put down her fountain pen.

“Indeed!”

“Yes, you remember the Italian chap I was talking to you about. I think you said he was deaf?”

Miss Morley snubbed him.

“Yes, he is so fortunate, so very fortunate.”

She resumed her pen and sat waiting for Allard to appreciate the superfluity of his presence. That third chapter had just begun to trickle down on to the unruled foolscap, and though Miss Morley’s inspiration was apt to be tenuous she cling to it tenaciously, but Allard pulled out a cigarette case and sat down on one of the iron garden chairs.

“Scusi. You’ll forgive me if I unearth for you a human document. You say that this fellow is the husband——”

Miss Morley once more laid down her pen. Obviously, that third chapter and Mr. Allard were incompatibles.

“O, yes, the husband of the proprietress. They live in that little white house above the hotel. Three children. All the conventions.”

“Have they been married long?”

Miss Morley shrugged. Well—really! Did the man expect her to be intimately familiar with the history of these Italians? She hastened to tell him all that she knew.

“The lady is buxom and swarthy, and some day will have a moustache. To us she is the padrona, a good sort and fat. She feeds us well, and the beds are clean. Her name? Oh—Ambrogia Panicale, or something like that, but Italian names go the other way round, don’t they? We call her Ambrosia, ice-cream, spikenard. No, I don’t know her husband’s name. Why should I?”

She gave Mr. Allard a brittle glance that said—“Now, go away, you incurable old gossip. If there is a flea in a bed, I’d expect you’d find it.”

Mr. Allard smoked his cigarette.

“Have you any idea how long Ambrosia has been running this hotel?”

“Not the least idea.”

“Does she speak English?”

“Passably.”

“I think I shall come and stay here for a few days.”

Miss Morley was frank with him.

“I shouldn’t—if I were you. The ‘bridge’ is rotten and we are not conversational. Besides—the hotel is full”—and she breathed to her pen a faint—“Thank god.”

But knowing her Allard, and realizing that the third chapter was hanging in the air, she chose to remember that she had forgotten her bottle of ink and that her pen needed refilling. She left Mr. Allard on the hard, iron chair, and found Mrs. Ambrosia in the little bureau behind the lounge.

“Oh, madam, a few words.”

The Italian woman, huge and tranquil and pleasant, looked at Miss Morley with eyes like grapes.

“Yes, Mees Morlee.”

“If an English gentleman named Allard should come and ask for a room I should like to suggest that he is a tiresome creature.”

Ambrosia was knitting a pink woollen jumper. Her large white face remained placid, but for a moment she lowered her eyes.

“I quite understand, Mees Morlee. In English—fussee. Is that not so?”

Miss Morley smiled at the admirable creature.

“Exactly. A man who nibbles, and interferes.”

Ambrosia nodded her magnificent head.

“He shall not come. I expect other people. Always—I expect other people on such occasions.”

Miss Morley, having blocked Mr. Allard’s rat-hole, went up to her room, and Ambrosia, after linking up six more stitches, rose with a kind of large deliberation, and walked out of her hotel and up through the garden and the terraces to the white house among the olives. An Italian girl was sitting on a chair by the door, preparing a salad, and under the vine pergola three children were playing a game. Ambrosia smiled at the girl.

“The padrone?”

The girl turned her head.

“Working. Pruning vines.”

Ambrosia walked slowly round the white house, her knitting still in her hands. Her face had a thoughtful solemnity.

She climbed a flight of steps and stood listening. Birds twittered, for it was one of her husband's eccentricities—his refusal to shoot small birds. She approved, and above the twittering of the little creatures she heard the snip-snap of the pruning shears. Ambrosia ascended more steps and saw the figure in blue and white bending over the gnarled and twisted vines. She looked to the right and to the left before calling to him with her deep, smooth voice.

"Pietro."

The man heard her at once, and Miss Morley's assertion that he was deaf could only be explained by the supposition that Pietro Panicale preferred to be deaf in the presence of strangers. He turned and walked between the vine-rows towards his wife, who, with an air of placidity had resumed her knitting. They looked at each other, and the blue eyes of the man were troubled. He had an air of waiting upon the woman, of depending on her, while she—a large and dark Madonna—diffused a protective and placid beneficence.

She said—"The little man has been here. Miss Morley has told me that he wishes to stay with us."

She saw her husband's blue eyes grow fierce.

"Stay here! The infernal little rat! I told you, Ambra, that some day——"

He blurted out three words in English, and her dark eyes reproved him, while her placid hands continued to knit.

"But I shall not have him here. Do not worry."

She gave him a quiet and comprehending glance, a glance that was both possessive and protective. She smiled.

"Besides—what difference would it make? A little, idle creature who runs about the world—sniffing."

"He played a trick on me. He recognized me."

"My dear, do not be so sensitive. You are afraid that the English who come here——"

His blue eyes fell into a stare, while his right hand played with the pruning shears.

"Life's so good here, Ambra. Oh, I suppose I'm a fool, but when you have buried a thing and some little busybody comes along with a spade and amuses himself by digging up your past—yes, it makes me see red. Why can't the

devil just shut his mouth and go away? But no, he is one of those little sensation-mongers who feel a little important when they have a bit of tainted flesh to show.”

She went and stood close to him, as though her very nearness would be soothing.

“My boy takes things so seriously. An insect may bite you, and you just brush it off.”

“An insect can leave poison behind.”

She laid a large, soft hand on his shoulder.

“Now, now, do not see what you call red. See the sun and the sea and Ambra, and the children, and the olive trees and the vines, and Bo-bo the dog. It is all real, my dear. No one can take it away from you. What does the past matter?”

And suddenly he turned his head, and bending, put his mouth to her hand.

“Yes—you’re real. I’ll try not to be such a fool. But when you’ve put on clean linen, and a little fellow comes along with a handful of dirt——”

“Yes—a mischievous little urchin of a man. But do not take him too seriously. People are kinder than you think, my dear.”

“I tell you what, Ambra, if he comes sneaking round here I’ll get my gun.”

She made herself laugh.

“Now—now, you know you do not shoot small birds—and this little old parrot——! Don’t be foolish. Perhaps I will flap my apron at him and he will fly away.”

She showed him her wise, dark eyes, and with a nod of the head she turned away.

“Go on pruning the vines, my dear, and forget the travelling English. We make money out of them, that is all. Go on pruning the vines.”

She left him and returning to her small hotel, found Mr. Allard sitting in the lounge. He looked innocently perky, rather like a sleek little jackdaw. He rose and addressed Ambrosia.

“Madam, your hotel seems very quiet and comfortable. I should like to stay here.”

Ambrosia smiled upon him.

“I am full of regrets, sir, but my hotel is full.”

“Next week, perhaps?”

She put on a tragic air.

“I am so sorry; it is impossible. I have other clients coming. Every room is let.”

Mr. Allard’s face suggested that he did not quite believe her. Or was she preparing to pick his pocket?

“I might make it worth madam’s while.”

She assumed an expression of solemn stupidity.

“How can it be so when I have no room, sir? I cannot disappoint my clients. You see—it is impossible.”

Mr. Allard gave a curious little snigger, and with his head held on one side, observed her for a moment, and then moved towards the door.

“Apologies for troubling you, madam. Ahem—good day.”

Ambrosia, still knitting, watched his departure. She frowned, and with needles clicking busily she went and stood in the doorway, and squared her massive shoulders. Her lips moved expressively, and the words that rose to them were dressed in the Italianate English of Soho, but she did not utter these words. Her full lips seemed to compress themselves. She walked out on the terrace, and standing by the balustrade made sure that Mr. Allard was taking the winding road that would lead him down to the sea. Interfering, meddlesome little wretch, the kind of man who would lift a sheet and look at a dead face just to satisfy his curiosity.

Now, had Mr. Allard been anything of a man instead of a little, desiccated, gossiping quidnunc he should have known that Ambrosia could be a far more dangerous enemy than her husband. She might appear to be a placid creature with grapelike eyes, a mother and a wife, a stout lady who kept an hotel, and a most respectable hotel, and whose hands played with soft pink wool. But Ambrosia belonged to the south, and Mr. Allard had spent a great part of his life chattering in club chairs. If he was a little mischievous dog with a bone—well it was just a bone. He could bury it and dig it up again. The game of resurrecting Geoffrey Wellsford was just such another form of recreation. It did not suggest to Mr. Allard the rifling of a tomb, or any sort of sacrilegious interference. He would be able to go back to his club in Pall Mall and tell a story. “Who do you think I dug up in Italy? No, not Cæsar or Marcus Aurelius, but that chap Wellsford. Yes, the Wellsford who was involved in the Hennessy

affair, and who was supposed to have died of drink. Yes, he's gone native in Italy, married a dago woman with a moustache, who weighs about twenty stone. Funny world, isn't it!"

Ambrosia happened to have a brother who was head waiter at the Santa Maria casino, one Luigi, who bore a very great resemblance to Italy's dictator, and in private life Luigi was a very truculent fascist, and the leader of the local squadrilla or whatever it was called. Ambrosia sent for Luigi. She explained Mr. Allard to him, and Luigi sat and dandled Ambrosia's latest baby and agreed that such interfering foreigners were an insult to Italy. For centuries Italy had been the sport of the interferers, but now Italy was to do some of the interfering. Besides Ambrosia's English husband was a very good fellow who had bought his wife this property and settled it upon her.

Luigi kissed the top of the baby's head.

"I'll have the fellow watched."

But it was Mr. Allard himself who provoked a crisis. He had made certain tactless remarks upon the Italian regime in the hearing of one of the casino waiters and this was reported to Luigi, and an agent was sent to make inquiries at Mr. Allard's hotel. The English gentleman was out. As a matter of fact Mr. Allard had gone out to play with his bone. He had taken the mule path that led up behind the Hotel Bella Vista. He had made up his mind to unearth Wellsford and make the dead man talk. Why shouldn't Wellsford talk? Mr. Allard was incorrigible.

But in scrambling down the rocky hill-side just above the Bella Vista vineyards Mr. Allard precipitated both himself and a crisis. He fell with his foot wedged between two stones; he felt something go crack in his left ankle, and when he tried to stand that left ankle hurt him so acutely that he was constrained to sit still. And he was sitting among the vines upon Ambrosia's property, well away from the path, and out of sight of the world.

He realized that he might sit there till sunset, and Mr. Allard was very fussy about his health. Unquestionably he had broken a bone in his ankle, and unless some Good Samaritan should arrive he would be left there derelict. He would be obliged to shout for help, and shout he did in a voice that was a little shrill and tremulous, for Mr. Allard was pitying himself very seriously.

He had come to speak with the ghost of Wellsford, and it was Wellsford who heard that voice calling in the wilderness. He stood listening with his mattock resting on his shoulder, and then, climbing from terrace to terrace he came suddenly upon Mr. Allard.

Mr. Allard’s little face brightened.

“I say—I’m afraid I’ve broken my ankle.”

He was about to say “Wellsford” when something in the other man’s eyes made him smother the name, for Wellsford’s eyes were fixed on him with a queer blue glare. The sunlight glinted on the blade of the mattock, and to Mr. Allard it suggested a weapon. Moreover, the man who carried it had the appearance of some fierce barbarian, blond and blue-eyed and wrathful.

Mr. Allard’s face fell. Almost he looked apologetic; he spoke nervously.

“Sorry to trouble you, but I was explaining——”

He glanced up anxiously at the other man who stood and stared at him as though he was tempted to swing that mattock and strike, and Mr. Allard began to be frightened. Wellsford’s eyes were so queer.

He felt that he had to say something soothing, and he said the wrong thing.

“You’ll excuse me, but you are so like a man I used to know. Yes, I felt I had to find out, just for old times’ sake, you know.”

The reaction was not what he had hoped for. He saw the blue eyes flash. The mattock swung in the air, and suddenly Mr. Allard let out a little chattering cry and put up his hands.

“My dear Wellsford—please—don’t you know me? It’s old Tom Allard ——”

The mattock remained poised for a moment, and then that berserker glare seemed to go out of Wellsford’s eyes. The head of the tool sank to the ground. Wellsford’s shoulders drooped, and suddenly he sat down among the vines, and with a crumpled look began to speak.

“What the devil did you come here for?”

Mr. Allard was showing the whites of his eyes.

“My dear Wellsford, just a coincidence.”

Wellsford was breathing deeply.

“My god, that coincidence nearly made me smash your skull. Why the devil can’t you leave well alone, and not come capering round like an infernal little monkey.”

Mr. Allard was shocked, but terror made him sympathetic.

“My dear fellow, I assure you—— I thought you were dead.”

Wellsford looked at him.

“I—am—dead. The sot you know died in London. But a woman carried the corpse out here and revived it. Wellsford’s dead. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes—I understand. The padrona, the good lady.”

“She picked me out of a gutter in Soho. There are some women, Allard, with a curious and fine compassion. She got me clean or reasonably clean. She married me, and we came out here together. I had a little money left and I bought this place for her. We have children. It’s a sort of paradise to me. And then you come and poke your fingers——”

But something had happened to Mr. Allard. His little face looked all twisted. The shell of him had cracked.

“I’m awfully sorry, Wellsford—but I beg your pardon. I won’t use that name. Yes—I quite see; I begin to understand. It’s more—more significant than I thought. If you’ll give me a hand I’ll clear out and hold my tongue.”

Wellsford’s fingers stroked the handle of the mattock.

“That’s decent of you, Allard. I’m so damned sensitive about the past.”

Now, what did Wellsford do but pick up Mr. Allard and hump him down the hill-side to Ambrosia’s hotel, and carry him into the lounge. Ambrosia herself, appearing with the inevitable knitting, saw her husband lowering Mr. Allard into an arm-chair, and for one moment she was under the impression that Mr. Allard had been the victim of her husband’s anger. But it was Mr. Allard who smiled and winked at her and explained the situation.

“Apologies, madam. I slipped up there on the hill-side and hurt my ankle. Your husband understands no English, but he heard me calling, and came to the rescue.”

Ambrosia, with needles clicking, looked hard at Mr. Allard, and then at her husband. Wellsford smiled, nodded, and said something to her in Italian, and then—like the peasant in a palace—slouched self-consciously out of the lounge.

Ambrosia stood reflecting, with the corner of an eye on the old gentleman in the chair.

She said—“Fortunately, sir—I have a room vacant for a night or two.”

She put down her knitting, and placing a chair and a cushion she gently raised Mr. Allard’s injured limb and lowered it on to the cushion. He nodded his head at her, and his eyes were a little shy.

“Thank you, madam. It is very painful, but you touch me so gently.”

“Perhaps—sir—you would prefer to be driven to Santa Maria. I am afraid there is no ambulance.”

“I think I should prefer to stay in your hotel, madam, for a few days. I assure you I shall appreciate anything you do. I suppose there is a doctor at Santa Maria?”

“An Italian doctor, sir.”

“Will you telephone for him?”

“At once, sir.”

So Mr. Allard became a guest in the Hotel Bella Vista, and lay in bed in a sunny room with his ankle in plaster of Paris, and Ambrosia took it upon herself to nurse him. She was a very capable and pleasant nurse, but her ministrations to Mr. Allard were not wholly disinterested. She kept her large black eyes on him, and waited for Mr. Allard to prove himself either man or monkey.

Mr. Allard proved himself man. In fact, one evening after he had dined and drunk half a bottle of Ambrosia’s red wine, he had a heart to heart talk with the lady.

He said—“You have been very good to me, madam. You may be sure that I shall respect—your kindness. You see—your husband bears a strange resemblance to a man I knew in England, but that man is dead. Yes—completely and absolutely dead.”

He raised his glass to Ambrosia.

“Your very good health, madam. I am very much—your debtor.”

Luigi the blackshirt, coming up to inquire how Ambrosia wished him to handle the blasphemer, was given a glass of cognac, and told that the situation was solving itself.

“He is quite a good old puncinello, Luigi. You can let him be. He was just like an old child, a little thoughtless and mischievous. Besides, he cannot walk.”

Luigi looked admiringly at his sister.

“If necessary we can put him over the frontier in twenty-four hours.”

Ambrosia went on knitting.

“No—I do not think it will be necessary. He understands that—sometimes

—the good God wishes us to hold our tongues.”

CAKES AND SHERRY

MESSRS. COLLARD had opened a shop in Medstone, and Collard cakes and confectionery were famous throughout the Empire. Should a young man or some sentimental old gentleman desire to make an offering to Venus, a carton of Collard's Chocolates might be considered as chic and more satisfying than a bouquet of carnations.

It was only a small shop, and Medstone was only a small town, but growing fast and attracting more and more of the people who occupy the new world's villas, and house in each garage a two-seater car. The new Medstone was ripe for Messrs. Collard's products. A Collard cake in the drawing-room of "Cornerways" or "High Gables" added a *cachet* to the tea-party.

Messrs. Collard's new shop was managed and served by one young woman. The cakes and the confectionery arrived from London daily in a large white van, and rumour had it that the cake-shop girl was a product of Kensington. She was very smart and somewhat distant, with very black hair and very dark eyes. Her complexion was as perfect as the iced skin of a Collard cake. She wore a black frock and a purple apron.

Now, Medstone, or a part of Medstone, contrived to be a parochial little place in which the members of the Established Church and the supporters of Nonconformity still regarded each other as painted papists or descendants of the Rev. Mr. Stiggins. Primordial Medstone knew everything about everybody, and everybody else's business. It was a self-consciously respectable little town. In its recreation ground no games were permitted on Sunday. The white gloves of its police seemed a little whiter than the gloves elsewhere. It believed in fundamentalism, brisk trade, and a prompt settlement of all accounts.

Old Medstone did not wholly approve of New Medstone. New Medstone had a casual air. It went out in cars or played golf and tennis instead of going to church; it was rather lax in the settlement of accounts; it produced very few babies. It was considered by Old Medstone to be very much a cocktail

community, and completely contraceptive. Old Medstone would apply to this new world the one word—“Jazz.”

Messrs. Collard’s shop belonged very much to New Medstone, and so did the young woman who served in it. Her name was Eve Garrison. She lived alone in a little maisonnette at the back of the shop. Only occasionally did Medstone see her save through a glass window, for she appeared to keep much to herself, and her Sundays were spent in London. She made no friends in the town, and was not seen in the foyer of the local picture house which was Medstone’s rendezvous for democratic fashion.

Miss Sarah Bland, who was secretary of the local club that cared for the morals and manners of young women, and during the winter provided them once a week with weak tea and innocuous dancing, scrutinized Miss Garrison through the shop window, and Miss Sarah Bland, looking out of a first floor window, was able to watch Miss Eve Garrison arranging cakes and cartons of chocolates in the Collard shop. Miss Bland’s face expressed disapproval. What a flashy young woman was this! Miss Bland thought of all such young women as unwise virgins, creatures of lipstick and jazz. Jazz was a favourite word with the Blands. No cosmetics or mascara were allowed behind the Bland counters. Its world went respectably unpowdered.

Mr. Jack was the one protagonist of progress.

“We ought to be more up to date.”

Usually the family snubbed him, or tolerated him. He was the baby. But Mr. Jack could take a great deal of snubbing. He had remained a boy, and retained a boy’s hatred of humbug, and an unholy quickness in detecting it.

“Well, if you’d listen to me I’d have all our vans painted canary yellow. Cheerful—and bright—and all that.”

Someone at the table uttered the word “Jazz,” and Jack retorted:

“O, rot! We’re always three years late. What about the passion for pyjamas?”

His sister looked at him with a characteristic movement of the nostrils that suggested sniffing.

“I suppose—that new young woman across the way——”

“Wears pyjamas, Sis? Well, probably. Go and ask her. I can’t, can I?”

Mr. Bland senior boomed “John, don’t be vulgar.”

That such a parental remark should be possible in post-war England might

appear a little incredible, but in such a city as Medstone the fundamentalist may sit bearded, bathotic and stubborn in the last ditch.

Miss Eve Garrison of “Collards” was a black and white young woman, tall, slim, aloof. She wore black, a purple apron and a white lace collar, and her hands were meticulously clean. While exhibiting extreme politeness to her customers she conveyed to such as them as were male an impression of iced indifference.

Young John Bland, having surveyed both Collards and Canaan, ventured into the shop. The wife of one of the Medstone canons was buying cakes, and young Bland waited and watched.

“Madeira, madam? Yes, of course, if you prefer it, but I would recommend our golden sponge.”

The lady fell to the golden sponge. She had the episcopal outlook. She spoke kindly—if a little patronisingly—to the strange young woman.

“And how do you like Medstone?”

Miss Garrison was wrapping up the cake, and from her face you would have concluded that she was concerned with nothing but cakes.

“I don’t think I have been long enough here to know, madam.”

This was rank heresy, for ever since Ruskin had written on the Medstone spire all the world knew instantly—or should have known—that Medstone was unique.

“Have you any friends in the city?”

Miss Garrison’s dark eyes were studiously vague.

“Not yet.”

“Perhaps you would like to become a member of our social club?”

Miss Garrison handed the cake across the counter.

“Very kind of you, madam. As a matter of fact I spend my Sundays in London. Yes, that will be three and sixpence.”

Her aloofness was so marked that the canoness withdrew her sympathy into cold storage, and even Mr. Bland wondered whether his interest was not a little premature. Miss Garrison was an iced cake, but Jack Bland was somewhat bored with the too facile friendliness of the Medstone girls. He was a catch, in more senses than one. He had wavy hair.

The lady walked out of the shop, and Miss Garrison waited calmly for the

thing in trousers.

“I want some chocolates, please.”

“Three and six, four and six, and five and six a pound, sir.”

“What’s the difference?”

She did not respond to his friendly smile.

“Oh, quality—though—of course—all our chocolates have quality.”

“I see. More silver paper and frillies—and all that.”

She looked just a little bored with him.

“Are they for yourself, sir?”

He tried flippancy.

“No, as a matter of fact—they are for a great-aunt.”

“Then—I should suggest—something—quite simple.”

“Just plain chocolate?”

“Quite so.”

He selected the four and sixpenny brand, and she wrapped up the carton for him, and before he could explore her mysterious hauteur further, other people entered the shop. He paid, received his purchase, and departed.

He said to himself: “Gosh, she’s a bit stiff! Very much Collard. No change for you, Johnnie!”

Miss Garrison obtained the reputation of being a very haughty young woman. She dressed as though she had every intention of attracting the male, but Medstone never caught her walking with one. She kept very much to herself. On Sundays she travelled to London by one of the Blue Line buses that left the market-place at 9.30, and she returned by a bus that reached Medstone at 10 p.m. Miss Sarah Bland, who spent much of her time looking out of windows at a world that had suffered her to grow thin and bitter, became quite an authority on Miss Garrison’s comings and goings. Undoubtedly, Miss Garrison’s cold virtue was kept for Medstone. Miss Bland was quite sure in her own mind that the woman went up to London to meet men. The secret Sarah Bland would have sacrificed her immortal soul for some such adventure, but the Sarah whom love had scorned was almost venomous in her virtue.

Her young brother was growing more interested in the cake shop and seriously so, but he did not confide in the family. Brother Mark had a wife and

a home of his own and two little prigs of children. Inevitably brother Mark would be one of Medstone's mayors. His figure was swelling for the gold chain of office. Brother Luke remained a bachelor, and composed music for the organ. Young Jack could confide in none of these. They would not have approved. The Blands considered themselves to be the leading business people in the cathedral city. Their cult of the respectable was complete.

Young John rode alone on the adventure. He discovered that on Wednesday afternoons when the shop closed Miss Garrison took a book and walked to the St. Giles' meadows south of the city, and choosing some solitary willow, sat down by the river to read. This was unexpected. It almost suggested secret assignations, but when John Bland realized that Miss Garrison chose to be alone with herself, he was both surprised and pleased. Her aloofness made her appear even more alluring and mysterious.

He, too, developed a liking for the water meadows and the river. He studied to make his entry upon the stage appear as casual and fortuitous as possible. His face mingled shyness and audacity. He raised a hat.

"Good afternoon. Rather peaceful here, what?"

Miss Garrison looked up from the pages of her book.

"Quite. That's my reason."

She did not welcome him. She made it almost too plain to Jack Bland that she had chosen solitude, and her choice provoked him. He hesitated, fidgeted, sat down.

"I say—excuse me—but you're awfully—unsociable."

She gazed across the river.

"That's my—privilege, when the shop's shut."

"Mine—too."

She turned and regarded him with the faintest of smiles. He was a nice lad, with good teeth and eyes, and his freckles were so ingenuous.

"Really—I should have said——"

"Would you——? Now, that's unkind. I'm not a Breezy Bertie."

Her face seemed to close up.

"So—you're a regular misanthrope, a hermit. I see."

He did not like her sarcasm.

“Oh, don’t be so hard on a chap. Can I sit here for five minutes? It’s—so—peaceful.”

“Quite”—and she reverted to the pages of her book.

According to modern standards her attitude might have been considered either absurd or extremely logical, slyly provocative or calmly self-sufficient. Young Bland persevered, and on three successive Wednesdays he followed her to the river, and with quite admirable frankness attempted to convince her that he was in earnest. She did not question his sincerity, but it embarrassed her. He was just a silly young fool. In fact, he was so much more than that that mere toleration of his enthusiasm became difficult.

She had so few illusions about life that she could afford to be honest with him.

“Look here, kid, you are wasting your time. I’m not in a position to let you be serious, and if—you are just the other thing—well—I’m not feeling like it. And that’s—that.”

He said: “I am serious, damned serious. What’s the objection?”

She looked him straight in the face. “I’ve got a kid, and I’m not married. So—now you know.”

For a moment he was shocked, but her candour impressed him.

“I say—you’ve got some pluck.”

“Perhaps it is because I don’t care.”

“Oh, don’t say that. What about the—other chap? I mean——”

“Just a casual cad, my dear.”

Young Bland flushed up.

“I should say so. I should like to——”

“Much better—cut me out. I’m just a woman who has a job to do, and a kid to keep.”

“Is that why you go up to town on Sundays?”

“It is.”

“I’m glad.”

It was she who divined that other presence, and turning her head saw Miss Sarah Bland standing behind them. Miss Bland was smiling an acrid little smile, and her brother, also glancing behind him, discovered his good sister.

He was annoyed, considerably annoyed. Sarah had always been a sneak.

He nodded casually at Sarah.

“Hallo, Sis. I’d like to introduce you to Miss Garrison.”

He got up, but Miss Sarah Bland, with a significant glance at the young woman, deliberately walked on.

Mr. Bland ruffled up angry hair.

“Well—I’m damned! I say—I’m——”

Miss Garrison took it quite calmly.

“Possibly—your sister—is a good woman. You know, my dear, we all of us get found out. I suppose—if I stay long enough in this pious city—I shall be found out.”

Young Bland, after staring at the retreating figure of his sister, sat down again on the grass.

“It wouldn’t make any difference to me. You’ve told me the truth, anyway, and that takes some doing—on occasions.”

She looked at him with sudden kindness, and her eyes said: “You’re rather a lamb. I wouldn’t hurt you—for worlds, but I’m not going to take you seriously. It wouldn’t be fair.”

In fact, before they parted on that summer afternoon she did say these things to young Bland, and he—more in love with her than ever—and feeling more justified in loving her, protested against the verdict.

“Well, you wait and see. I suppose I’ll have to show you that I am in earnest.”

Miss Garrison, having confessed that life found you out, might have gone on to say that Miss Bland herself was a case of the most bitter exposure, an unhappy sadist whose sourness had to spill itself over the more fortunate frocks. Miss Bland—as a type—was becoming less prevalent, but Medstone still produced a number of such sour apples, Medstone Crabs. Incidentally, it was Miss Bland who was directly responsible for Miss Garrison’s exposure. It happened that Messrs. Bland & Boutwood had engaged a new saleswoman, a red-haired girl from London named Elsie Sharp. Miss Sharp was placed in the coat and cloak department under the eye of Miss Bland.

On the very first day, Miss Sharp, exploring the life of Medstone from a first floor window, discovered Collard’s shop and Miss Garrison in the act of leaning forward to take a cake from a glass shelf. Elsie Sharp was greatly

excited. A fellow-assistant had been standing behind her, and Elsie exclaimed:

“Gosh, if that isn’t Eve Garrison!”

She was answered by Miss Bland, a Miss Bland who had substituted herself for the other young woman.

“Miss Sharp, please understand—that even when the department is without customers—assistants do not display themselves at windows.”

Miss Sharp shook her red head.

“Sorry, Miss Bland—but——”

“So you know the young woman in Collard’s shop?”

“Rather!”

Miss Sharp giggled, and behind that giggle were sundry implications.

“I was in the same establishment. Oh, yes, I oughtn’t to gossip, but of course—we all knew.”

Miss Bland saw her opportunity waiting to be seized, nor was Miss Sharp’s reticence of a very high order. Miss Bland soon had the truth out of Elsie. So, Miss Garrison was that sort of girl! Miss Bland had suspected as much.

Few of us can resist the temptation to create an impression, and so to plan the *dénouement* that the splash shall be as dramatic as possible. Sarah Bland kept her sensation for the family dinner table. She announced her news while she was carving a leg of lamb. Sarah always did the carving; she could make a joint go further than could any of the men.

“I’m not a narrow-minded woman, but I felt rather sure about that young person over the way. Yes, the girl in the cake shop.”

Brother John was on her left, and she was careful not to look at him, but neither father Matthew nor brother Luke had become aware of Miss Garrison’s existence, and they did not rise to the occasion.

Miss Sarah arranged two slices of mutton on a plate, and continued.

“Very curious, but our new employee—Miss Sharp—recognized the girl at once. They had been in the same shop together in London, and——”

But Sarah was interrupted—and very abruptly interrupted—by the brother on her left.

“Well, you’ll never be tempted in that way, Sis, so cut it out. Some people are always cold mutton.”

That was the beginning of a fine family row. Sarah asserted that she would not be spoken to in that way by a brother, and that if John liked to associate with a girl who was—well—a Rahab—— John pushed his plate away and stood up. He said—and while he was saying it his father ordered him to sit down. Brother Luke was looking pained, and it pleased his refined spirit to feel pained. Young John was getting too cocky, and if the old man suppressed him, well—he—Luke had succumbed to suppression.

But John would not sit down. He was youth—incensed and reckless.

“I don’t care a damn.”

“Sir!”

“I knew this—before our dear sister routed it out. Miss Garrison——”

Mr. Bland senior was getting very red.

“Sit down. Do you mean to say you have been associating with this—woman?”

John shoved his chair against the table.

“Yes—I have, and I am going on associating with her. I——”

“You will do nothing of the sort.”

Young Bland stared for a moment at his father.

“Reasons, please.”

Mr. Matthew grew even more red.

“Reasons? You ask me—for a reason—in a case like this, when any decent person——”

“What if I prefer to be indecent?”

“You’ll go out of the business, young man.”

“Righto. You people make me sick. You can keep your cold mutton, Sarah. This isn’t the Old Testament. Cheerio.”

He walked out—furious and unfed—leaving shocked faces and a sense of the wrath to come.

“Well—really!”

Sarah began to weep.

“To be spoken to like that—by my own brother—just because I was trying to open his eyes—— Yes, they’ve been meeting—down by the river. I knew at

once what sort of girl she was. Trying to entangle John——”

Mr. Bland sliced angrily at his mutton.

“Don’t let’s have any more emotion. I’ll deal with Master John. I’ll get that young woman sacked.”

Brother Luke was more cautious.

“Better not have a scandal. John’s not an utter fool. He’ll soon see sense.”

But the Bland family was to have its scandal whether it desired it or not, nor was the scandal to develop in the way that might have been anticipated. Mr. John Bland walked straight out of the house and went to see a good comrade—young Fred Garron who was the active partner in the firm of Garron & Garron, motor salesmen and garage proprietors. The Garrons were successful people, almost as successful as the Blands.

“Take me on, Fred, in your show.”

“Take you on?”

“Yes, as garage hand or whatever you like. You can put me on to one of your lorries. I’m up to the job.”

“What on earth’s the matter?”

“Oh—I’ve just chucked our show. I’ll teach ’em a thing or two. Oh, yes, I’ll tell you all about it later. I don’t mind washing, or oiling and greasing. I’m a trained mechanic too, you know.”

Mr. Fred Garron offered his friend a cigarette.

“Cool off, Jack. You’re not serious.”

“Dead serious, my lad. What about it?”

“Oh, well, if it’s like that. Yes, I can find you a job, but it’s not quite a Bland job.”

“Make it dirty, old lad. I’m fed up with being Bland.”

That Mr. John Bland should dissociate himself from the Bland business and become a worker in the Garrons’ garage was for Medstone only a minor sensation, but there was more to come. The rebel meant to do the thing thoroughly. If the infinitely respectable establishment of the Blands was to cast stones of scorn and self-righteousness at the cake shop across the way, and the battle was to be Biblical, he—John—would emulate all the bad boys in the Bible. He would play Ishmael and Cain with respectability. He would set up the image of Baal. He would—— He confided in friend Fred.

“I’m going to shock ’em, old lad. You wait and see.”

His father came to visit him in the Garrons’ garage, and found his son lying under the back axle of a car.

“Get up—you young fool, and come back to business.”

John waved a greasy hand at his father.

“Sorry, sir, but I’m attending to business. Don’t you worry about me. I shan’t starve on husks.”

Mr. Bland made his way to the office and fell upon Mr. Garron.

“What do you mean by taking the young fool into your shop?”

“What young fool?”

“You know perfectly well. Unless you send him back to me at the end of the week—I’ll cut all my custom.”

Young Garron did not like Mr. Bland.

“Well, that won’t kill us. Jack’s old enough to know his own mind. Besides—he’s quite a first-class mechanic.”

Mr. Bland walked out of the garage. The parable of the prodigal son did not seem to apply.

Mr. John had gone into lodgings in River Lane. At the end of the day’s work he washed and changed and made his way to St. Giles’ Fields. He sat with Miss Garrison by the river. He was quite frank with her. He said: “I’m going to let off fireworks under my people’s pious noses. If you should hear a few squibs—don’t think I’m in danger of blowing up. It’s just a demonstration.”

She was equally frank with him.

“Do you think it is worth while?”

“Well—I’m sorry, but I do.”

“And what if I shouldn’t approve?”

“Oh, well, you’ll have to rescue me from the abyss, reform the young sinner. That’s all.”

In a very short time Medstone was given to understand that young John Bland was going to the dogs. He drank, he betted, he was seen parading the Medstone High Street on Saturday nights with companions who had the appearance of being undesirable. He was always in and out of the “Royal

George” bar. He behaved loudly and riotously in this cathedral city. He became very flashy in his dress.

On a particular Saturday afternoon he appeared in the lingerie department of Messrs. Bland & Boutwoods. He was very merry, if not drunk. He addressed himself to the young ladies behind the counter.

“Pyjamas forward—please. Purple—with green spots on ’em. Nothing like a bit of colour.”

The shop was full, and this dreadful young man was very friendly. He even addressed himself to the wife of a cathedral dignitary.

“What’s your choice, old dear? Have a glass of sherry.”

Brother Luke was sent for, and Brother Luke, looking shocked and pale, got John by the elbow.

“ ’Ssh, ’ssh—perfectly disgraceful. You can’t behave like this.”

John put an arm round his brother’s neck.

“Oh, can’t I—Eric—dear? Come across to the ‘George’ and have a wet with me.”

“Be quiet. You’re drunk.”

“Drunk—me—drunk! I’m not drunk. I’m—I’m as sober as the bishop. It’s you—who’s drunk. Madam, ’scuse me, but my brother’s drunk. Apologize.”

Brother Luke looked hot and helpless. What did one do on such occasions? Send for the police? But your own brother! He tried more persuasion.

“Now, come along, Johnnie, come and sit down in the office.”

Mr. John mounted his dignity.

“Nothing doing. Been insulted. Going outside. Good afternoon, madam, good afternoon—everybody.”

He took off his hat to the whole shop in the manner of Charlie Chaplin, and walking rather circuitously towards the door, he disappeared.

What a scandal! When Mr. Matthew Bland heard of the affair he rushed off to see his solicitor, but Mr. Parsons was playing golf. Mr. Bland deplored the world’s inattention to business, and passed on to visit the inspector of the police. The inspector was a man of the world and a humanist, and he did not like Mr. Bland, who was a very officious member of the Medstone Watch Committee.

“If you can’t manage your son, sir, we can’t do it for you. Besides, a young chap may be a bit wild——”

The inspector happened to be behind the scenes, and was rather enjoying Johnnie’s stagecraft.

Mr. Bland was disgusted.

“Wild—wild! You are responsible, inspector, for the amenities and the morals——”

“No, sir—I’m not God.”

“That’s blaspheming.”

“No, it’s common sense, sir.”

Mr. Matthew Bland was getting very little change out of Medstone, and the burlesque continued. Son John and a few more bright lads were hauled before the local Bench for breaking street lamps on Saturday night. Mr. John was the chief offender, and he was fined. A full account of the affair appeared in the local paper.

Again Mr. Bland called upon his lawyer, and Mr. Parsons was polite and sardonic.

“Might I suggest that Medstone is—perhaps—a little too tame for such a swashbuckler?”

“Tame? Why, the boy’s not responsible. He ought to see a doctor.”

“Do you think so? I have always thought John a very sound young man.”

Almost, Mr. Bland shouted.

“This has got to stop. It’s a scandal.”

“Have you interviewed John?”

“It’s his duty to come to me. Wine and women, sir. It’s perfectly—incredible. My other sons——”

Mr. Parsons nodded.

“Yes, most steady men. Look here, Mr. Bland, why don’t you give John a chance to make good elsewhere? You’re a warm man. Put down a thousand and put him into business somewhere else.”

Mr. Bland was scandalized.

“What, subsidize immorality, make blackguardism a paying proposition?

I’m sorry, Mr. Parsons, grieved. You don t seem to understand what kind of man I am.”

Mr. Parsons smiled vaguely.

“Well, think it over, Mr. Bland, think it over.”

There were not a few people in Medstone who were wise as to the secret significance of Mr. John Bland’s outburst. However soused he might appear on Saturday night, he was supremely sober and sane on Sunday morning when he entered a Blue Line bus with Miss Garrison. It was to be understood that the one chastening influence in Mr. John Bland’s life was Miss Garrison. Quite a number of sympathizers watched the comedy, and the faces of the Bland family. The Blands were not popular. They were too smug, too self-sufficient.

But the climax arrived when John was arrested for being drunk and disorderly and for resisting the police. His resistance had been playful. Brought before his friend Inspector Twite, he had been interviewed by the inspector in private.

“I shall have to charge you, Mr. Bland.”

“Go ahead, inspector. It’s quite in order.”

“You are carrying this a little too far, my lad. With your recent record it’s quite likely that you will be put away for a fortnight.”

“I hope so, inspector.”

The Bench was not in the conspiracy. This dissipated young man was beginning to make himself a nuisance in Medstone, and the Bench sentenced Mr. John Bland to fourteen days in the second division. Medstone almost expected Messrs. Bland & Boutwood to put up their shutters and go into mourning. It was a most deplorable and disgraceful business.

Brother Mark, the potential mayor, was furious. He expressed himself forcibly to his father.

“The only thing to do is to ship the young fool off somewhere. Send him to Canada.”

“And waste money.”

“Well—this sort of thing is not going to do our business any good.”

Mr. Matthew agreed. But why Canada? He went once more and interviewed Mr. Parsons, who had been expecting Mr. Bland to call on him again.

“About this boy of mine. This sort of thing can’t go on. I have been reflecting upon the suggestion you made.”

Mr. Parsons was most helpful.

“Well, why not adopt it? My impression is that John, if he is removed from Medstone and given responsibilities of his own, will make good. Try him.”

“I shall warn the young fool that it’s his last chance.”

“Quite so.”

But in his heart of hearts Mr. Bland senior was not feeling so bitter against son Jack as were his brothers. This Benjamin! By George, young Jack had some stuff in him. He had set the town alight, and Mr. Matthew could remember that in his own young days—oh, well, he had been a bit of a dog, but Medstone knew nothing of that.

When John returned to civil life old Bland went round to the Garron garage and sought out his son.

“Look here, Jack, I want a few words with you.”

Old Bland had dropped his pomposity. There was something like a twinkle in his eye.

“Let’s go round to the ‘George’ and talk things over.”

Young John put down a spanner. The “George”! His father suggesting a confabulation at the “George”!

“All right, dad. But I don’t want any Sarah, or brother Mark or Luke.”

“That’s all right, my boy. Just—us two.”

In a private room at the “King George” Mr. Bland ordered two glasses of sherry.

He said, looking at the golden liquid: “Dangerous stuff, Jack,” and then he sipped it. “Look here, I’ve been young myself. If I give you a thousand down and put you in business somewhere——?”

Mr. John smiled at his father.

“That’s awfully sporting of you, dad. I’ve made rather a mess of things here. I think I could make good—if I could get a particular woman to take me in hand.”

Mr. Bland gave a queer little smirk, and swallowed the rest of the sherry.

“And will she?”

“I’m going to ask her.”

Said his father, “I haven’t had a glass of sherry for years. I could manage another.”

And he got up and rang the bell.

FAME

MARIE STARNECK was staying in Innsbruck at the Hotel Tyrol.

It was June, and once in three years she could allow herself a holiday such as this—second-class travel and a top floor bedroom in a comfortable hotel. For a woman of forty who had to scratch a living in London as a semi-amateur journalist, a seller of symposia and perfunctory short stories, such a holiday was an experience to be dreamed of and enjoyed to the last shilling and the final minute.

Relaxation. Snow still on the mountains, the upland hay a coloured carpet, the trees and grass in the Hofgarten richly green. The Hofgarten was her favourite refuge. She liked to take her tea at one of the green tables under the trees, listen to the band, and watch the life of these quiet, pleasant people, gentle people who loved children and birds.

There were days when she took motor-bus rides into the mountains; days when she walked; but this old, shady garden gave her more satisfaction and solace than any other place. It was like green water, still and deep and peaceful.

She first saw the man one afternoon when she was sitting under the trees by the little square building that was sometimes used as a bandstand. The wind was northerly. It had the tang of the snow in it, and the man was wearing a black cloak, the kind of cloak that a chic man-about-town might wear at the opera. He was very tall, with white hair, but his face looked much younger than his hair, and in him she divined an air of whimsical and gentle sadness.

He sat down on a seat near her, produced a paper bag, and began to feed the birds. The Hofgarten swarmed with chaffinches. Five or six of the birds, bolder than the rest, perched on the man’s knees, his hands, his hat.

Marie Starneck was delighted. She bore within her—as so many women do—an unquenchable flame of romanticism, a kind of vivid childishness. She

might be a disillusioned little woman who each spring gathered a few new illusions and a few of them survived, even though they might be a little tashed and blown about. Life could be very brutal, a hedge of thorns, full of little greeds and treacheries, but somehow the sacred flame remained with her.

She thought, “How delightful! Growing old and sitting in this green place—feeding the birds. I wonder what he was and is? Some war-ruined aristocrat—or an artist? Not much money. No, not much worldly success.”

Her romanticism was always painting a picture or setting a stage. She could imagine the Man of the Cloak standing in the Goldenes Dachl and looking down on the crowd, his crowd. A Duke of the Tyrol.

Forty she might be, but she was still a vivid little person, rather impetuous, a passionate partisan. She could still enthuse about things, even to the stony-eyed, horse-faced Englishwoman who sat at the next table in the Hotel Tyrol dining-room, and with whom she sometimes conversed.

Marie would say, “Have you noticed how tame the birds are here? To me it’s the most significant sign of the gentleness of these people.”

The lady at the next table had been a schoolmistress, and was always improving the occasion.

“It’s just the same at Munich.”

“Is it?”

“Yes—and at Merano. Have you been to Munich?”

“No.”

“You ought to go to Munich.”

Miss Burr was always suggesting with cold superiority that someone’s education had been neglected. She came to the Tyrol or to Bavaria each year. She was an authority upon things and places. She was like a concrete building reinforced with dates and historical details, and the contents of museums. She corrected your pronunciation or reformed your taste. The hotel staff loathed her. She paid her ten per cent. and gave no tips.

Crossing the Inn by a footbridge one morning, and taking a steep and winding track up the hill-side, Marie Starneck happened to meet the Man of the Cloak descending. It was a very warm morning, and he wore no cloak, and he was carrying his hat in his hand. Their eyes met, and almost he smiled upon Marie as though he approved of her, and saw her as a flower-like little person. His white hair was wavy and brushed well away from his forehead.

She thought, “What a striking looking person he is. Perhaps he lives up here. Yes, in one of these houses clinging to the hill-side among all these flowers. Yes, and in appearance he is so typically Austrian.”

The very next day in the Hofgarten he came and sat down on the seat she had chosen. She was reading a book of Mallison’s, a volume of essays, and as she glanced up from the book and recognized him he raised his hat as though both saluting her and excusing himself for sharing the seat. It was no more than a courteous and formal gesture, but she thought, “How pleasant, how Austrian!” She was flattered. She had given him the faintest of smiles, only to take instant refuge in her book. Mr. Mallison was being very witty in this book. There were passages that excoriated New Grub Street. His wit annoyed her, for in her small way she belonged to New Grub Street.

She read attentively, diligently, and yet she was conscious of being observed. He had been attracted by her face, and being a maker of phrases he was searching for a phrase with which to express her face. It arrived. “A white flower with blue peacock eyes.”

Somebody else arrived, a bold and friendly baby who staggered about on short, fat legs. The baby had been surveying Marie and her book. He was a chubby creature, with jocund dark eyes, and his nether garments would keep slipping down. He was in charge of a good-tempered nursemaid on a neighbouring seat.

“Johan.”

Johan was putting two pudgy hands on Marie’s frock. His drawers were in the dust. The girl recovered him, adjusted the garments, and gave him a kiss.

“O, you bit of mischief!”

She had another small child to watch, and Johan staggered off back to Marie. He had fallen to her, and once more his nether garments showed themselves to be in sympathy.

“O, my dear!”

The offending drawers tripped up his unsure legs, but Marie caught the child, and put him on her knees. Mallison’s Essays extruded, fell to mother earth. The nursemaid intervened, laughing.

“Johan——”

“He’s quite all right. He’s a dear.”

She held Johan while further adjustments were made, but the girl carried

Johan off. He could not be allowed to make himself a nuisance to strangers. His temper was serene. He beamed at Marie over authority's shoulder.

Someone picked up Marie's book.

"Allow me."

"Oh, thank you so much."

She was aware of his amused eyes.

"Nice things, children."

"Yes."

So he spoke English, such good English, but then she had always understood that the Austrians were wonderful linguists. It appeared that Herr Babchen had introduced them, and that conversation might be permitted. She was dusting Mr. Mallison with a handkerchief.

She said, "In this country people seem able to sit and watch life. They have happy faces, not the vacant and burnt-out faces one sees in London."

"You think so?"

"I do. Have you ever been in London?"

He had. He gave it as his opinion that London was both the most dreadful and most fascinating city on earth. Certainly less dreadful than Paris. He said that he loathed Paris. It was so much like a vast exhibition, and all the Parisians were exhibitionists.

She laughed. She had a very charming laugh, with an upward lilt to it.

"I think this Tyrol of yours the most restful country I have ever found."

She received the impression that he was both amused and surprised. His Tyrol! Well, why not? But he agreed with her.

"Here—people are poor, and so they have to be content with simple things. And only with simple things can one be wholly contented."

"Birds and flowers."

"Yes. Also, in a country such as this, one can cultivate a blessed obscurity. Blissfully anonymous. It does not matter whether you are somebody or nobody. It is so much more satisfying to be a nobody."

Again she laughed.

"I have had no choice in the matter. I am a nobody."

“And contentedly so?”

“Well, not quite—perhaps. Finance is usually less of a problem if you are a somebody.”

“Not always. Then consider the post. If you are marooned in a country like this you can always pretend that your letters were lost somewhere. Silence answers them. Nine out of ten letters should never have been written, and should never be answered. But I see you read Mallison.”

She looked at the book in her lap.

“Yes. He is supposed to be the most provocative of our English authors. Do you read English? But of course——”

“I have read all Mallison. How do you like those essays?”

“I don’t.”

“Why?”

She gave a little shrug.

“Well—you see—in a sense I am a disciple of Mallison’s—when he is the real Mallison. I think he is wonderful. But this bitter stuff! That’s the other Mallison.”

He was interested, amused, but he concealed his amusement.

“Please explain. Which is the real Mallison?”

Her lips quivered. She appeared to be searching for words.

“What I mean is—was ever a man and his work—so much in contrast? The beauty, the poise, the height of the work—at its best, and the—the tarnish of the man.”

“Just how?”

“Well, his arrogance, his insolence, his bitter tongue, a kind of swashbuckler who swaggers—and strikes out right and left.”

There was a short silence. Then he said, “Yes—so I have been told. Poor Mallison. So you know something of the London world?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Did you ever meet Mr. Mallison?”

“No.”

“Even here in the Tyrol we read him. An eccentric fellow. A huge flaneur,

a world's mountebank. Is it true that he has always refused to be photographed?"

"I have never seen a portrait of him."

"Was that another pose of his?"

"I imagine so. He is a supreme poser."

"Poor man. So you like the work and loathe the author, the castigator of critics, the whipper-up of all little literary whelps. That play of his, 'Harry Highbrow in Hampstead.' "

"So bitter, so insolent, so mocking."

"You think so?"

"Don't you?"

"Well—perhaps."

She was beginning to realize that not only did he speak wonderful English, but that for an Austrian he appeared to be curiously well informed on English affairs, but then, of course, the cultured Continental was so much more educated than the ordinary Englishman. He did not give all his leisure to golf and bridge.

She said, "Judging by your intimacy with Mallison, you seem to know a great deal about our English world."

"I have English friends. I have lived in England."

"I think I understand."

Yes, no doubt in the pre-war days he had been a person of some social importance. Might he not have been attached to the Austrian Embassy in London? Possibly he had actually been the representative of Austria, its ambassador. Obviously he was so much the man of the world.

"I suppose you are Austrian?"

He smiled.

"Yes, I'm an Austrian citizen. May I introduce myself? My name is Schomberg. But I am keeping you from Mr. Mallison, and I shall be late for lunch. I have a longish climb back to my small house."

He rose, and, with his hat in his hand, gave her a slight bow.

"Shall I be permitted to see you again?"

She blushed.

“I am often in this garden. I love it. I still have another week of my holiday.”

“I am glad. But you will excuse me, may I know your name?”

“Starneck, Miss Marie Starneck.”

“Thank you. Surely that is not quite——”

“Oh, I’m an awful mongrel. My grandfather was German, my grandmother English, and we had a French side.”

He smiled at her, bowed once more, and walked away.

Her next meeting with him was to be quite unexpected and somewhat dramatic. She was walking by the river, the yellow, foaming turbulent Inn, when she saw a little crowd collected under the trees between the Hofburg and the footbridge leading to St. Nikolaus. Being healthily curious she walked towards the crowd, and as she neared it she saw a head rise above the heads of the other people. Herr Schomberg! And his head was the head of a man who had been soused in the river.

He was speaking to somebody in German. He looked shy and rather embarrassed, as though he hated being the central figure of a crowd. But what had happened? She edged her way in and was able to see a woman holding a very wet child. Herr Schomberg’s clothes were plastered to his figure.

Marie’s German was not fluent, but she managed to ask a question of a working woman next her.

“What has happened?”

“The child fell in the river and the gentleman jumped in and pulled her out. My God, he must be strong. The Inn is like a wild horse.”

So that was it. And suddenly she met his eyes. He recognized her face among all those other faces. He smiled, and his smile was whimsical and apologetic. He gave a slight toss of his wet, white head, took off his very wet coat, folded it up, and prepared to escape. The woman holding the child started forward, seized his hand and kissed it. He looked embarrassed. The crowd gave a kind of scattering cheer. He laughed, and said something about wet clothes and a two-mile climb up the hills. He extracted himself from the crowd, waved a hand, and walked at a great pace towards the footbridge.

Someone near her in the crowd said, “Aach, but Mein Herr is like a shy boy. He runs away.”

Marie was thinking, “How splendid of him.”

Her mind was so full of Herr Schomberg that at dinner she did not notice the advent of Miss Burr. Miss Burr sat down, conned the menu, scrutinized her neighbour through her pince-nez, and addressed a remark to Marie Starneck.

“I see you read Mallison.”

The book was lying on Marie’s table.

“Yes.”

“A rhetorical person. He lives out here, you know.”

“Mr. Mallison does?”

“I thought everybody in Innsbruck knew that. You will often see him in the Hofgarten feeding the birds and exhibiting his nice white hair. A most conceited person.”

“In the Hofgarten?”

“Yes. He is known here as Herr Schomberg. I believe that is one of his Christian names. Christopher Schomberg Mallison. I met the man once. Couldn’t stand him. He is the sort of creature who looks over the top of your head when you talk to him.”

Marie Starneck was blushing to the roots of her inward soul. But really he might have told her who he was and not have allowed her to make such a complete ass of herself. What, exactly, had she said to him? That Christopher Mallison was an arrogant egoist, an insolent poseur. But what did she know of the real Mallison? Just cheap literary gossip. And she had seen the real Mallison, that rather shy creature with his whimsical eyes and humorous mouth, a man who fed birds and could jump into the turbulent Inn and pull out a child. Hadn’t she described him as a gross egoist? Oh, what a fool she had made of herself! Yes, and in the eyes of her romantic Austrian, a man who had interested her—most seriously!

She thought, “I simply can’t face him again.”

For two days she avoided the Hofgarten, but she was not to escape from circumstance. She met Herr Schomberg in the Marie Theresen Strasse, close to the Palais Taxis. She was confused, furiously self-conscious. He stood there, holding his hat.

“I haven’t seen you for two days. I was afraid you had left.”

She blurted out her grievance.

“I have a quarrel with you.”

“Indeed! I’m sorry.”

“You let me make a hopeless fool of myself.”

“My dear, we all do that—every other day.”

She blushed. She could not be angry with him.

“You ought to have told me. It wasn’t quite fair. You let me talk the most disgraceful tosh.”

“Was it tosh?”

“Well—I suppose so. I was just repeating——”

“What so many of the literary lights say about Mallison?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. He put on his hat.

“I apologize. If I’m one of the worst hated men in London, does that matter? I suggest that we go and sit under the trees in the Hofgarten. Please be kind to me.”

She smiled up at him.

“Do you need—such treatment?”

“My dear, very few people have been kind to me.”

She did not refer to the incident of the river and the child. She was still feeling confused both in her mind and in her emotions. Was it possible to separate those two worlds? She walked beside him like a rather shy little schoolgirl. Wasn’t it true that the Mallison of her secret world and the Mallison of reality were one and the same?

They found a seat under a big chestnut tree. They had the seat to themselves. He offered her his cigarette-case, but she shook her head.

“Do you mind if I do?”

“Please.”

He lit a cigarette, and, getting up, threw the match into a litter receptacle.

“Wonderfully tidy people—these Austrians. I like it. Well, what do you want me to tell you?”

“Everything.”

“What is—everything? Rather a large order. Why, I have the reputation of being the most impossible, swollen-headed bounder in the modern world of—self-advertisement! But I never have advertised. My enemies had done all that for me.”

“Why?”

He gave her a whimsical glance.

“Listen. There were days when I used to sell about fifteen hundred copies of a book. I had wonderful reviews then. All the little fellows patted me on the back. I satisfied their self-complacency. Then, you know, somehow—I became the rage, a popular person, a public abomination. I never went much into the literary world. I didn’t give lunches, or present copies of books and photos. In fact, I was—in a sense—an outsider, a ruddy pirate. My dear, until you have had a rather coruscating success, you don’t realize how much venom there is in other men. Jealousy. Women are not in it. I was attacked—I was misconstrued, I was ridiculed. They tried to damn me as a purveyor of popular tripe. Well, I hit back. I realized that the only way to counter such spite is either to ignore it or to make yourself appear so supremely and insolently complacent that—you cannot be hurt or deflated. As a matter of fact, I was wrong. One shouldn’t indulge in a dog-fight with all the little mongrels. Yes, I gave that up. What I wanted was peace, to be something more than a mere scribbler. So—I came out here.”

She saw the amusement in his eyes.

“But—surely—you have friends?”

“In a sense—yes. But so many of my dear friends—when a particularly unpleasant thing was said or written about me—passed it on to me with assurances of indignation. I found no peace in such friendliness. Birds and dogs don’t worry about what Mr. Tagg of the So-and-So has said about your last book. So, you see.”

He laughed.

“Blessed obscurity. What the devil do these good people here care about the literary reputation of Mr. Mallison? I don’t know that I care much myself. I have got beyond all that. Thank heaven there are no posters on these mountains—and nothing is ‘great’ here but the mountains. I’m a blessed nonentity.”

She said, “And so am I. But I have never been anything else, and I shall never be anything else. I’m one of the little, obscure people who scratch a living out of writing snappy paragraphs and very bad short stories. Sometimes

I interview the great. Well, you see, one has to live.”

His face was mischievous.

“I’m still fair game. Why not write a coruscating and destructive little article about me? An Egoist in Exile.”

She said, “Don’t, please. Don’t rub it in.”

She looked so like a hurt and embarrassed child that he was touched.

“That’s all right. You couldn’t do that sort of thing. You are much too nice for the universal scramble. Besides, this is your holiday.”

“Yes, a triennial affair. I save up, and I do enjoy it. And I’ve got just three more days.”

He rose to deposit the fag-end of his cigarette in the litter receptacle.

“Tell me, do you like scribbling?”

“I would rather—— But if you are going to catechize me——”

“Well, retaliate.”

“Are you still writing?”

“Just when I please.”

“Don’t you find it a little lonely out here?”

“My dear, no one is so interesting as one’s self, except, perhaps, one’s second self. The quest of the good wife! Have you ever realized that the most satisfying and successful person in the world is the good wife? What would the clever little people say to that? Old Mallison has become a jam omelette! And raspberry jam at that! By the way, have you been up to the Achensee yet?”

“No.”

“Let me take you. It’s like pure and unadulterated beauty preserved in ice and brought out to shine in the sun.”

She blushed.

“I’d love to go. It means a drive?”

“Yes.”

“Well—the fact is, I have just enough money left for the bill, the tips and the journey.”

“Won’t you share my car? It’s quite a small car. We’ll have lunch at the

hotel by the lake.”

“I’d love it.”

“To-morrow?”

“Yes.”

“You’re at the Tyrol.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call for you there at half-past ten.”

It was just the day for Achensee, still, blue, tranquil. On the mountain road they passed stout Teutons toiling upwards, with their holiday gear upon their backs, and happily perspiring. The road was dusty, and Marie noticed that Mallison slowed up whenever he passed any of these happy hikers. He did not want to smother them with dust.

“You don’t mind if I’m dumb?”

“No.”

“The road is rather tricky.”

It was, quite perilous in places, but she had no fear, and when they reached that cleft in the mountains she saw it as a little world of exquisite lucidity. Never before had she seen such purity of colour, greens and blues that were not mere surfaces, but colour filled with light. She sat and gazed. She was conscious of strange happiness, infinite peace.

She said, “It’s not like ordinary water. It seems to have something shining below it.”

So she had the inward eyes for such beauty! He drove very slowly to Pertisau, and pulled up by the white hotel.

“It seems rather carnal to talk about lunch, but shall I order it?”

She laughed.

“Even food must be different here.”

He was known at the hotel. A polite head waiter with pencil and notebook listened to his orders and made happy suggestions.

“A table in the loggia, sir?”

“Of course, Fritz, of course.”

They strolled along the lake where the grass was marvellous with flowers.

Her face had a kind of radiance. She looked years younger. Her glances seemed to tremble with tenderness over the flowers.

“The darlings!”

“Do you want to pick them?”

“O, no!”

“Or write a nice little poem about them?”

“No.”

“How refreshing! Isn’t it rather revolting putting beauty into a sausage machine and turning out words, popular pulp? Yes, the word-game can become rather loathsome.”

She looked up at the mountains.

“One asks—only to sit and stare. But then—one has to sell things—to live.”

“Need one?”

“I have to.”

“Not necessarily. Hallo, there’s the steamer. Always makes me think of ‘The White Horse Inn.’ Yes, I saw it when I was in London last year. It amused me. What about lunch?”

“I’m ready, disgracefully ready.”

“That’s splendid. You’re capable of a comfortable greed?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Same here. Nothing like being a couple of gross kids.”

She reproved him.

“Not quite gross.”

“Well, like a couple of birds.”

After their lunch—and it was a very good lunch—they went and sat by the lake, and he smoked a pipe.

He said, “In the winter—it’s almost as marvellous up here. Down there—I feed the birds, hundreds of birds. You should see their footmarks in the snow. I have one chaffinch who comes and sits on the foot of my bed and cheeks me till I get up. Last year I had a blackbird with a white cap on his head. I can’t say that I pine for Piccadilly.”

She said, “Don’t be cruel. I have to go back to a shabby little corner in Camden Town.”

“Am I cruel? You know, Mallison is supposed to be a merciless beast.”

“Who feeds the birds.”

She was silent for a while, and he watched her face.

“Ten thousand pounds, my dear!”

She turned quickly.

“Or a penny?”

“Tell.”

“I was thinking that I have just two more days.”

“Nonsense. You can’t be more than thirty-three. Supposing you were to live to seventy. Thirty-seven more years. I’m fifty-three. That gives me, say, seventeen. Stay and feed the birds.”

She understood. His hand rested upon her shoulder.

“Nothing else?”

“Well—Mallison the egoist ought to say something. The selfish devil needs a good wife. Stay. Chuck your return ticket into the Inn. My dear—I’m not a bad sort of brute.”

“I’ll stay.”

FINIS

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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this book. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Two in a Train and Other Stories* by Warwick Deeping]