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A SUMMING UP

SINCE it had grown hot and crowded indoors, since there could be no danger on a night like this of damp, since the Chinese lanterns seemed hung like red and green fruit in the depths of an enchanted forest, Mr. Bertram Pritchard led Mrs. Latham into the garden.

The open air and the sense of being out of doors bewildered Sasha Latham, the tall, handsome, rather indolent looking lady, whose majesty of presence was so great that people never credited her with feeling perfectly inadequate and gauche when she had to say something at a party. But so it was; and she was glad that she was with Bertram, who could be trusted, even out of doors, to talk without stopping. Written down what he said would be incredible—not only was each thing he said in itself insignificant, but there was no connection between the different remarks. Indeed, if one had taken a pencil and written down his very words—and one night of his talk would have filled a whole book—no one could doubt, reading them, that the poor man was intellectually deficient. This was far from the case, for Mr. Pritchard was an esteemed civil servant and a Companion of the Bath; but what was even stranger was that he was almost invariably liked. There was a sound in his voice, some accent or emphasis, some lustre in the incongruity of his ideas, some emanation from his round, chubby brown face and robin redbreast's figure, something immaterial, and unseizable, which existed and flourished and made itself felt independently of his words, indeed, often in opposition to them. Thus Sasha Latham would be thinking while he chattered on about his tour in Devonshire, about inns and landladies, about Eddie and Freddie, about cows and night travelling, about cream and stars, about continental railways and Bradshaw, catching cod, catching cold, influenza, rheumatism and Keats—she was thinking of him in the abstract as a person whose existence was good, creating him as he spoke in the guise that was different from what he said, and was certainly the true Bertram Pritchard, even though one could not prove it. How could one prove that he was a loyal friend and very sympathetic and—but here, as so often happened, talking to Bertram Pritchard, she forgot his existence and began to think of something else.

It was the night she thought of, hitching herself together in some way, taking a look up into the sky. It was the country she smelt suddenly, the sombre stillness of fields under the stars, but here, in Mrs. Dalloway's back garden, in Westminster, the beauty, country born and bred as she was, thrilled her because of the contrast presumably; there the smell of hay in the air and behind her the rooms full of people. She walked with Bertram; she walked rather like a stag, with a little give of the ankles, fanning herself, majestic, silent, with all her senses roused, her ears pricked, snuffing the air, as if she had been some wild, but perfectly controlled creature taking its pleasure by night.

This, she thought, is the greatest of marvels; the supreme achievement of the human race. Where there were osier beds and coracles paddling through a swamp, there is this; and she thought of the dry, thick, well built house, stored with valuables, humming with people coming close to each other, going away from each other, exchanging their views, stimulating each other. And Clarissa Dalloway had made it open in the wastes of the night, had laid paving stones over the bog, and, when they came to the end of the garden (it was in fact extremely small), and she and Bertram sat down on deck chairs, she looked at the house veneratingly, enthusiastically, as if a golden shaft ran through her and tears formed on it and fell in profound thanksgiving. Shy though she was and almost incapable when suddenly presented to someone of saying anything, fundamentally humble, she cherished a profound admiration for other people. To be them would be marvellous, but she was condemned to be herself and could only in this silent enthusiastic way, sitting outside in a garden, applaud the society of humanity from which she was excluded. Tags of poetry in praise of them rose to her lips; they were adorable and good, above all courageous, triumphers over night and fens, the survivors, the company of adventurers who, set about with dangers, sail on.

By some malice of fate she was unable to join, but she could sit and praise while Bertram chattered on, he being among the voyagers, as cabin boy or common seaman—someone who ran up masts, gaily whistling. Thinking thus, the branch of some tree in front of her became soaked and steeped in her admiration for the people of the house; dripped gold; or stood sentinel erect. It was part of the gallant and carousing company—a mast from which the flag streamed. There was a barrel of some kind against the wall, and this, too, she endowed.

Suddenly Bertram, who was restless physically, wanted to explore the grounds, and, jumping on to a heap of bricks he

peered over the garden wall. Sasha peered over too. She saw a bucket or perhaps a boot. In a second the illusion vanished. There was London again; the vast inattentive impersonal world; motor omnibuses; affairs; lights before public houses; and yawning policemen.

Having satisfied his curiosity, and replenished, by a moment's silence, his bubbling fountains of talk, Bertram invited Mr. and Mrs. Somebody to sit with them, pulling up two more chairs. There they sat again, looking at the same house, the same tree, the same barrel; only having looked over the wall and had a glimpse of the bucket, or rather of London going its ways unconcernedly, Sasha could no longer spray over the world that cloud of gold. Bertram talked and the somebodies—for the life of her she could not remember if they were called Wallace or Freeman—answered, and all their words passed through a thin haze of gold and fell into prosaic daylight. She looked at the dry, thick Queen Anne House; she did her best to remember what she had read at school about the Isle of Thorney and men in coracles, oysters, and wild duck and mists, but it seemed to her a logical affair of drains and carpenters, and this party—nothing but people in evening dress.

Then she asked herself, which view is the true one? She could see the bucket and the house half lit up, half unlit.

She asked this question of that somebody whom, in her humble way, she had composed out of the wisdom and power of other people. The answer came often by accident—she had known her old spaniel answer by wagging his tail.

Now the tree, denuded of its gilt and majesty, seemed to supply her with an answer; became a field tree—the only one in a marsh. She had often seen it; seen the red-flushed clouds between its branches, or the moon split up, darting irregular flashes of silver. But what answer? Well that the soul—for she was conscious of a movement in her of some creature beating its way about her and trying to escape which momentarily she called the soul—is by nature unmated, a widow bird; a bird perched aloof on that tree.

But then Bertram, putting his arm through hers in his familiar way, for he had known her all her life, remarked that they were not doing their duty and must go in.

At that moment, in some back street or public house, the usual terrible sexless, inarticulate voice rang out; a shriek, a cry. And the widow bird, startled, flew away, describing wider and wider circles until it became (what she called her soul) remote as a crow which has been startled up into the air by a stone thrown at it.

Transcriber's Notes

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *A Summing Up* by Virginia Woolf]