

CORN IN EGYPT



WARWICK DEEPING

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Corn in Egypt

Date of first publication: 1941

Author: Warwick Deeping (1877-1950)

Date first posted: Feb. 2, 2022

Date last updated: Feb. 2, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220203

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Warwick Deeping

CORN IN EGYPT



CASSELL
and Company Limited
London, Toronto, Melbourne
and Sydney

First Edition September 1941
Second " " 1941

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LTD., THE
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON
1941

CORN IN EGYPT

I

I WAS a very junior member of a firm of chartered accountants in the City when my Aunt Jennifer died and left me a legacy of some five thousand pounds. Both my father and mother had died when I was a child, and Aunt Jennifer had mothered me with a mixture of natural gentleness and Victorian austerity. She had owned a little house at Pangbourne and there I had spent my holidays. Aunt Jennifer had been a most sedulous gardener, and a disciple of Gertrude Jekyll's. She had insisted upon pruning her own roses and fruit trees, and I can remember the leather gloves she used to wear, and the snip-snip of the shears. Aunt Jennifer must have awakened in me the country spirit which haunted me during those City years, and lured me away into the secret places where birds sing.

I do not say that I loathed my job. It was just dry bread to me without butter, and when Aunt Jennifer's legacy launched me upon my farming adventure, I felt like a kid with a bucket and spade going out to dig on the sands.

Old Rumble, the head of the firm, had me into his private room when I had confessed to my disloyalty. Old Rumble was one of those very capable and hard old devils, who lay great stress upon loyalty—in others. He sat like Jehovah behind his desk, and stared at me.

“So, you are leaving us, Carey?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any reasons?”

“Well, I want to be free.”

He bent his old badger's brows at me.

“Free! And to do what?”

“What I please, sir.”

I realized that he must have thought me an irresponsible ass. Here was I, renouncing a safe billet for nameless adventure.

“Doing what you please is not freedom.”

“No, sir?”

“It’s just—licence. Still, this firm has no great use for passengers. And what, if I may ask, are you going to do?”

“Live, sir.”

He did not understand me.

“Live. And on what?”

“I don’t know yet, sir.”

“Legacies come to an end, young man.”

And so do lectures, but I did not say so.

This is to be a very simple story, without frills or furbelows, and those who desire battle, murder and sudden death need not bore themselves with these records. And yet, I believe there are those who, in these years of anguish and unrest, may find in my journal serenity and solace. Nature transcends the demagogues and the dictators, and the super-scoundrels who arrogantly disclaim all scruples. They will say that Nature has no scruples. I contend that Nature or God leads you up a *scala santa* of scruples, and that when you have climbed those sacred stairs, the peace that passeth understanding may be yours.

My journal is not for the erudite or the sophisticated. The world’s sweet simpletons may read it and inwardly digest it, and call me friend.

I was twenty-seven on that April day when I left my digs in Chelsea and, catching a Green Line bus, took my first country day of freedom. I had my pack with me, and for the sake of symbolism my bourn was the Pilgrim’s Way. Assuredly I was a pilgrim, and in search of what? The unknown? I had no premonitions, no glimpses of the future. I was just a young man set free to wander where I pleased, and to live like a gentleman tramp, if I so willed it, on an income of some two hundred pounds a year. A bed, tobacco, shoe-leather, and a daily glass of beer. My mood that day was a vagrant mood, and perhaps inevitably so, for I was out of my office chair, and a child in Arcady. April was in a gentle mood, with the face of a woman who is tender towards innocent and foolish things, and I felt serene and irresponsible. I would go where and how I pleased, and little did I know that nature was fooling me, and that I was to be no vagrant creature, but one of those simple, steadfast people whose feet become planted in the fruitful soil.

I left the bus near Ripley and started my day's tramp. Pinewoods and heather gave place to a gentler landscape, pastoral and park-land, country that has always appealed to me. I crossed Chillingham Common, and saw the gorse ablaze. The long street of Chillingham village lay behind me. I was coming to the England that I loved, and following a road shaded by tall beeches, a road that always made me think of France. Here were fields of young wheat, and over the Downs ahead of me somewhere near White Hill I could strike the old trackway. Brandon village lay in the valley below, and my idea was to put up for the night at one of the Brandon pubs.

But a whim was to sidetrack me and lead me to my undivined fortune. I came to the mouth of a lane, a lane I had never explored. I hesitated and then took it and found myself going down into a little valley tucked away in a southern dip of the ground. I gathered that the lane would lead me up again to the chalk ridge, but when I was a quarter of a mile down the lane, I came to a deep track branching off on the right, a kind of tunnel shaded by yews and blackthorn, and a smother of wild clematis. A depraved and intoxicated-looking notice-board hung in the hedge. It said,

BLACKTHORN FARM FOR SALE

That notice-board provoked me, and I decided to have a look at Blackthorn Farm. Why should empty houses, especially old houses, challenge one's curiosity? I went up the lane, and though the blackthorn was in flower there was no winter in the day. I looked for primroses, and saw a few pale faces peering at me from the high green bank. In one sunny place where a field-gate opened into a shaggy meadow I saw dog-violets in flower. There were cowslips here, but that was to be discovered later.

I saw a mound of trees, two red chimneypots, a squat and solid-looking chimneystack, and the cocked ear of a gable. The track turned left and died away in a grassy space like a green cushion in the lap of the valley. The house stood back behind a white fence that sagged and swayed in front of a garden that had gone back to nature. I stood and looked at Blackthorn farmhouse, and the house sat and looked at me.

I should call it a case of love at first sight, for one can fall in love with houses and places just as one can fall in love with a face. Blackthorn Farm was like some romantic wood-cut. Nothing was quite straight about it, nothing precise. The tiled roof undulated; one chimneystack was out of the perpendicular, windows were tilted, the gate hung askew. It was a brick and

tile house, long and low, its outlines broken up by pents and lean-tos, and the bulge of an old brick oven. It had all the charming irresponsibility and the unstudied beauty of a house that has grown out of the earth, and not been planted in sections like some bastard bungalow. Its face was full in the sunlight, but behind it and flanking it was a smother of trees, yews, lilacs, laburnums, old apples and pears. A vast old cherry tree glittered with fruit-buds. I saw a mossy flint wall, and rotting thatch and broken tiles, a congeries of shaggy outbuildings, all adding to the desolate loveliness of the place. There was a brick and timber porch with seats in it. An old stone roller stood with its handle propped against a wall, as though it had come to rest there and had ceased from all labour.

The place fascinated me, and though I played with the idea of possessing it, I don't think I was quite such a fool as to think of buying it. At least, not then. I had not walked over the edge of my Simpleton's Cliff into the void which may become the happy idiot's paradise. I was still something of a City bug, accustomed to clicking out figures, a creature of conventional common sense. I might play with the idea of withdrawing from the world into this semi-derelict house but, for the moment, I was a child pretending that I would do this and that, without suspecting that the child's pretending may become the man's philosophy.

The house was so obviously empty, and the fields about it so derelict that I had no qualms about standing upon ceremony. There was no need for me to tramp all the way to Dorking or Guildford and interview the firm of estate agents whose board hung in the hedge. The clasp knife I carried would serve, and I forced back the catch of one of the old sash-windows, pushed up the lower sash and climbed in. If anyone turned up and challenged me I could declare that I was an interested person and a possible purchaser who had no time to waste.

I found myself in Blackthorn parlour and, had I known it, in stepping into that sunny and serene room I had stepped into a goblin world. The room had a queer effect on me; it was as though I had been here before in some child existence; it might have been full of unseen presences. I looked at the worn and pearl-grey boards of the floor, at the walls with a primrose paper bleached almost white, but showing oblong patches of colour where pictures had hung and protected the paper; at the rusty duck's-nest grate, the austere little chimney-breast with panelled cupboards on either side of it. I went and opened one of the cupboards, and saw the stub of a pencil and a faded envelope. Strange relics! I picked up the envelope. The ink had faded, and I

read—"Mr. Christopher Lawless, Blackthorn Farm, near Brandon, Surrey." It looked like the sort of envelope that had contained a bill.

Christopher Lawless. What sort of man had Christopher Lawless been? And had bills driven him out of this old house? I put the envelope back again, but I purloined the pencil. I have it now after all these years.

Then, I explored. I found myself in a stone-paved passage hall. It was cool and dim and very silent. I opened a door and looked into a room that seemed darker than the parlour, a sad room papered and painted green. I followed the passage to the kitchen and its offices. The windows were lattices, and the beams showed in the ceiling. There was a dampness, strange old scents here, scents that seemed of the soil. I found the dairy, shuttered and dim, with shelves of slate, its stone flags faintly patterned. I discovered a cellar, a mysterious place with steps going down, and it still seemed to smell of cheese and herbs and beer.

So on upstairs to bedrooms and attics. The stairs were steep and straight and boxed in with timber, so much so that one wondered how furniture ever reached the upper floors. The front bedrooms were sunny and serene like the parlour, with great cupboards built in, and floors that wavered up and down. The patterns of the wallpaper were faded but flowery, sentimental studies in which pink roses and blue clematis were intermingled though, in one room, the walls suggested chintz, little green wreaths and swags on a white ground. I saw a great damp patch on one ceiling. No doubt that rolling roof had a leak in it.

I opened one of the windows and leaned out. The landscape was mine, without a house to be seen, nothing but weedy fields and wild pasture and great shaggy hedges. The ground dipped south and then climbed to the great chalk ridge. I saw a spinney of larches on the left, and on the further slope a wood of beech trees that in summer would float like a green cloud against the grey green Downs. I could imagine how those trees would blaze in autumn.

I closed the window and went below. As modern man I explored the domestic conveniences of the place, and realized how primitive they were, no taps, no bath, no hygiene as we understand it. Water had to be drawn from a well in the brick-paved court behind the house. A sanitary bucket sat forlorn and empty in a sort of little sentry box. Well, I had seen everything, save the farm buildings which did not interest me at the moment. I reclosed the window, and strolled down across a shaggy meadow to the larch wood whose spires were tinged with green. It was a lovely little wood, and from it

I passed on to the beeches, and sitting down on a great bracket-like root, I looked across the valley at the house. Its windows seemed to blink at me in the sunlight. Empty and desolate it might be, but I had a feeling that the old house wanted to be lived in. Almost I could hear it saying: "I want voices, I want the sound of feet; I want smoke in my chimneys, milk in my dairy. I am good to sleep in, good to eat in. Will not someone come and live in me?"

II

ROOKS were vocal in the high elms of Brandon, rooks who had littered the roadway with the discarded debris of their nest-building. A little breeze was blowing, and the tops of the elms moved ever so slightly, and sunlight and shadow played there.

I walked into the Crown, and found Mr. Ballinger, the licensee, leaning on the bar counter, reading the evening paper. Somewhere a wireless was blaring, and a throaty voice declaimed, "You are my Babe, my little golden girl——" Mr. Ballinger was wearing his spectacles. He glanced at me, pushed his glasses up on to his high bald forehead, and displayed a fine set of artificial teeth.

"Why, it's you, Mr. Carey. Haven't seen you for donkeys' years."

I felt like saying that only donkeys' ears could listen to that infernal crooning.

"My season has only just begun, Mr. Ballinger. Can you put me up?"

Mr. Ballinger was slightly deaf, and he cupped his ear with a hand.

"Say it again, sir."

"I love my Babe," bawled the voice—"my Babe with the bluebell eyes."

Mr. Ballinger displayed irritation. Maybe he had backed a loser.

"Cissie, shut off that damned machine! Can't hear oneself speak."

The crooning ceased, and Mr. Ballinger gave his paper a shake, and looked at me as one man to another.

"Nothing but noise these days. Believe these young things wash to the wireless. Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

"The garden-room for the week-end."

"It's yours, Mr. Carey."

The garden-room, as I had christened it, gave you peaceful slumbers, for you heard neither the traffic on the road, nor the burble of the bar. I suppose I have never loved humanity in the mass sufficiently well to bear with its gabble-houses and its silly laughter, the empty guffaws and giggles of the

empty mind. Moreover, the utter and depressing complacency of the plain English has always repelled me. Everything is just good enough, and everything is known.

I was the only person in the Crown's dining-room that April evening, and Mr. Ballinger himself brought me my beer. He was a man of some parts, and surprising in some of his proclivities, and I think he too was bored with the bathos of the bar. He had left it to Cissie, and he lingered, as though I had other froth on me, and could refresh him with gossip from another world. I had heard him say about his clients, "These fellows know everything, and what they don't know—just isn't."

"Well, how's London, sir?"

I wasn't interested in London; I was escaping from it, and with that strange and solitary house still haunting me, I took a pull at my tankard, and then asked Mr. Ballinger a question.

"Do you happen to know a place named Blackthorn Farm?"

Mr. Ballinger, with his large rump resting on the back of a chair, gave me what I thought was a queer look.

"Should say I do, sir. I sat on the jury when Lawless hanged himself."

I must confess that I was startled.

"Oh! In the house?"

"No, in the barn. Broke, sir, to the world, poor devil. Bills finished him."

I remembered the envelope I had seen in the cupboard.

"Farming?"

"Yes, Mr. Carey. You might call it farming. He was one of those amateur farmers who thought he could make a place pay. Been a schoolmaster, or something. Put all his savings into it, poor mutt."

"How long ago was that?"

"About three years, sir. Yes, I ought to remember it. We had had one of those long dry spells, all sun and drought, and then the weather went dreary and wet on us. Yes, just about harvest. That must have finished poor Lawless."

"Any family?"

“A wife and one kid. Oh yes, everything was sold up, furniture, tackle, stock, such as it was. I attended the sale. Bought that Welsh dresser over there, but I’m afraid it did not help Mrs. Lawless much. The poor devil had gone in too deep.”

Mr. Ballinger eased himself into the chair, and sitting astride it, seemed to set his jaw at fate.

“It always gets me, sir, when a man goes down like that. Near it once myself. Feel your guts turning to water. Excuse me——”

I took another pull at the beer. I liked old Ballinger; he was a human creature with a shrewd eye, and much more sensitiveness than you would expect in a publican. His two passions were pigeons and fruit-growing, and both birds and fruit could be lovely. I had seen him come in with a peach on a vine leaf and display it as though it was some splendid gem from Hindoostan.

“Yes, that’s tragedy. And what happened to the wife and the kid?”

“God knows! Just disappeared. I told Mrs. Lawless she could come to this house and live free for a month, while she looked round.”

“And she didn’t?”

“No, sir. Queer sort of woman. One of those big, proud blondes. Rather like a marble statue with gilded hair. She’d worked herself to the bone, body and soul. I think she’d gone dead, if you know what I mean?”

I nodded.

“So Blackthorn Farm broke them.”

Mr. Ballinger gave me a sudden, protesting glance.

“Oh, no, sir. That’s where we’re all wrong. The land shouldn’t break one. It’s our damned, urban scheme of living. The easy-osy cheap commercial crowd who get grape-fruit and oranges and bananas from all over the earth, and can’t cook a cabbage decently. Cheapness, Mr. Carey. Wrong sense of values. The fellow who punches a bus ticket is supposed to be worth twice as much as a good farm-hand. This country needs a kick in its cheap, reach-me-down pants.”

I was surprised at the man’s passion, though all my sympathies were with him. I myself was inspired by a desire to escape from the purely urban outlook upon life, and though one might hate the Totalitarian idea, the

Germans and the Italians had been wiser than we, in that they believed in the peasant, and had no illusions about the limitations of a City proletariat.

“You are a back-to-the-lander, Mr. Ballinger.”

He gave me a shrewd, ironic look.

“No, sir, not under present conditions. I’m not such a fool. Only if this country goes bust will that sort of life become possible, and not only possible, sir, but grim necessity. A man who’s gone bust can’t buy grapefruit and bananas. He’s got to live on the produce of his own backyard. Excuse me, sir.”

I had finished my meat course, and Mr. Ballinger rose to wait on me. He had come to have for me a sudden dignity, and I pushed my chair back, and made as though to rise.

“Here, I can look after myself.”

“No need, sir. Funny how this country seems to have got the idea that service is shameful. Damned snobs! Bottled fruit, sir, next, cherries, our own bottling. Not tinned apricots. And cream, sir.”

I looked up at Ballinger as he served me.

“You seem to have got the right idea. So, that place has been empty?”

“Yes, ever since, sir.”

“People shy of it?”

“In a way, sir, yes. Don’t blame them. When a fellow has hanged himself
_____”

“A curse.”

“Bad omen, Mr. Carey. And yet——”

“I had a look over the place. The house didn’t strike me as a death house.”

“No, sir. Take plenty of cream. We make it ourselves.”

“Going cheap, I suppose?”

“Dirt cheap. The liquidator tried to auction it, with a reserve of fifteen hundred. Didn’t get a bid.”

“How many acres?”

“About sixty. Not bad land either. Light loam, but enough body in it,” and suddenly he gave me a whimsical, peering look.

“Not thinking of buying, sir?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Ballinger.” But I was.

I wonder how often impulse lands a man in a devil of a mess, or saddles him with some incubus for life? No doubt the sex-impulse can be the most disastrous of all, in that its very duality cannot be made to respond to the increasing purpose of some constructive idea. Yet the strange lure this derelict farm-house had for me, though it might seem the maddest of lusts, had the challenge of permanency. I might say to myself: “Don’t be such a sanguinary fool. You don’t know the very beginnings of farming, though you may have dabbled in agricultural theory. You have been brought up soft. Your hands are not a worker’s hands. Think of that lonely place on a December day, wet and mucky and grey. Think of the sanitary bucket. Think of going to draw water from the well on a freezing January morning. Think of the winter nights, and the darkness, and the wind in the chimney, and the sudden rages of boredom. Think of Kit Lawless’s ghost. Are you going to get any woman to live there? And how are you going to live?” I put my impulse up like a coconut on a stick and shied every common-sense objection at it, and yet the thing stuck there.

I went to bed with this adventure twisting in my belly. I should sleep it out, and wake up in the morning to laugh the thing out of court. But it was not to be. When I woke and heard the birds singing in the Crown garden, I was as full of the nature-urge as they. Even a thrush seemed to be tempting me to do this absurd thing.

“Buy it, buy it,” it sang.

And a voice in me seemed to answer, “I will.”

III

IT was raining, and it seemed that the seriousness of my purpose was to be put to the proof, yet the birds were singing, perhaps because the rain was a warm and gentle rain telling of worms and caterpillars, green leaves and soft grass. I lit my pipe after breakfast, put on an ancient mackintosh that I carried rolled on my pack and started out of Brandon on my second pilgrimage to Blackthorn Farm. I told Mr. Ballinger that I should be back for lunch.

When I came down over the chalk hills and into the lane I saw the house through a gap in a high hedge, and though the sky was grey the place seemed to possess an even more poignant appeal. It had all the bitter-sweetness of an English spring, a suggestion of steadfastness even in the moods of April.

I entered the house as I had entered it yesterday, and turned into the parlour. I closed the door, and then I discovered something that previously I had missed, pencil marks and scribbles on the wall behind the door. I read, written there in a childish hand, "Phillida Jane Lawless, her birthday, born 5 August—1903. Her height 5 August—1913—four feet seven inches." There were other marks and dates above this one, a veritable yearly scale recording the growth of Phillida Jane Lawless. I was conscious of a pang of pity. Had Christopher Lawless marked up his daughter's height year by year, knowing that as she grew upwards, his fortunes grew downwards? Poor devil! Now, in this year of grace, Miss Phillida would be five-and-twenty, and as I stood gazing at the wall, and making this calculation, I found myself wondering about her.

The envelope was, of course, still lying in the cupboard, and I took it, folded it up and put it in my pocket. My mood to-day was not so much for the house alone, as for the farm buildings, the garden and orchard, the woods and fields. The farmyard was a carpet of weeds, the granary and stable locked up, but I was able to open the door of a black barn whose dim and almost religious interior was empty of everything save cobwebs. So here it was that poor Lawless's body had swung and twisted in the semi-darkness. I closed the barn door, feeling that I was closing a door on tragedy, but on this April day with the soft rain falling the sadness seemed to belong to yesterday. Somehow it did not taint the place, and as I passed by an old black pond where willows grew, and turned into the orchard, I saw that the

pear-blossom was out. Nature did not repine, but drove her sap up into the branches, and lived in flower and fruit, though man might sleep under the green sods.

I found shelter in an empty wagon-shed, and sitting down on an old balk of timber that had been left there I lit my pipe. What if our so-called civilization were to travel backwards down the scale? What if some world catastrophe were to leave Europe starving? Land would be the thing. The peasant alone would prosper, and find in life his old inevitableness and self-sufficiency. Supposing that I had to feed myself and others, to mill my own flour, bake my own bread, brew my own beer, feed my fire with timber from the woods? Should I be equal to such a life in wits and strength, like those men of the *Mayflower*, and the pioneers of the covered wagon? Somehow I felt challenged, both in the spirit and in the flesh. If I proposed to be a countryman why should I not do the thing utterly and boldly, dare to live my life in some such place as this, and to throw down my challenge to the peevishness and the petulances that afflict that rather restless and unstable creature modern man?

I took that envelope out of my pocket and gazed at it.

Had Christopher Lawless dreamed of such things, and been broken by the profit obsession?

But why profit?

Could I not eliminate profit, house and feed myself, and perhaps dispose of sufficient produce to pay for my clothes and sundries?

Sunday at the Crown Inn was apt to be a noisy day, for Mr. Ballinger had built up a reputation for serving good lunches, and you might find twenty or thirty cars parked in the yard, or on the gravelly space between the road and the white fence, nor did a rainy sabbath make much difference to the Crown's custom. This motoring crowd did not come to look at the country, but to scorch along the roads and to indulge in philandering and little drinks. Mr. Ballinger's crowd was a brassy-headed, lip-sticked, loud community, rather crude in its humour and in its self-indulgences. I found the lounge full of sprawling young women, and young men who were apt to look at you with ironic insolence. It was a sports-model world. Maybe my hiking, wind-on-the-heath-brother simplicity amused them. I was the earnest fellow, and I felt myself being quizzed and stared at as I passed through. Cissie had been reinforced by Gladys, to deal with the drinks, and Mr. Ballinger himself was

helping in the dining-room, wearing an alpaca coat, and looking like a professional ex-butler.

“I have kept your table, sir.”

He had, and I was grateful, nor was it an easy thing to restrain this gate-crashing crowd. Mr. Ballinger presented me with the menu, and I thanked him, and heard him advise me.

“The steak and kidney pie is very good, sir.”

The two waitresses were bustling about, and glancing up at Mr. Ballinger’s face I was struck by its expression of suave austerity. Did this innkeeper despise the crowd he catered for? My impression was that he did. There was a Cromwellian quality about John Ballinger.

“I’ll take the pie. By the way——But you are too busy to-day.”

Mr. Ballinger was surveying the room with thin-lipped and critical attention. He took the menu card from me, tucked it into his waistcoat, and smiled.

“Oh, no, sir, not too busy, if you know what I mean. One has to——Yes. In the cause of commerce.”

I did know what he meant. He might give meat and drink to these people, and a dry courtesy, but that was all. Modernity may insist upon our doing certain things, but it cannot compel us to do them with pleasure.

“I am going to buy Blackthorn Farm.”

Mr. Ballinger gave me a sharp look. Did he think me a consummate fool. Apparently he did not, which surprised me.

“Is that so, sir. Well, well, that’s reality, not face-powder, if you know what I mean.”

A large party led by a fat man in a sky blue suit came into the room, and Mr. Ballinger said, “Excuse me, sir,” and went to meet his new guests. Tables were growing scarce, and the fat man in blue did not appear to consider any of these tables worthy of him, nor was John Ballinger sufficiently servile. In fact, Mr. Ballinger was strangely and suddenly curt with the gentleman, as though his secret scorns had risen and refused to play Agag in the cause of commerce. Or had my confession and its mad sanity provoked my friend to an equal and catholic candour.

“Sorry. It is a busy day, sir.”

The fat man looked about him.

“Any of these people finishing soon?”

“Do you expect me to hurry them, sir?”

I saw the fat man’s eyes grow angry. He ignored old Ballinger.

“Come on, peoples. A one-horse show. Let’s go on to the Bridge at Mole.”

I did not see John Ballinger again until the evening. The sky had cleared and I had gone up on to the Downs, and bought a shilling tea at Newlands Corner. It was after dinner, when the London crowd had gone, that Ballinger came into the lounge where I was reading Cobbett’s *Rides*, and smiling at me with peculiar benignity, suggested that I should join him in a drink.

“Let me, Mr. Ballinger——”

“No, sir. It is on the house. Come into the snugery.”

I went, carrying my book, and walking beside me, he glanced at it.

“Old Cobbett. Still very evidential, sir. You’ll find he passed through Brandon. If you are Cobbett-minded——”

He touched my arm, almost like a father.

“Take that chair, it’s a good ’un.”

I took it and smiled at him.

“I suppose you think me mad.”

“Hardly that, sir. I’m sorry I told you about poor Lawless.”

“Oh, that hasn’t hurt the old house. Seems to have given it meaning, humanity. It’s living I want, Mr. Ballinger, not the dead hand of profit.”

“Well, sir, that’s all in the future. What may I give you? I’ve got some good old Scotch.”

“Let it be good old Scotch.”

We lit our pipes and sat on either side of the snugery fire and talked, for the Crown kept its fires burning until the end of April, and often through those first ten cold days in May. Mr. Ballinger was a countryman, and I felt apologetic as I told him about my plan, agriculture and self-education walking hand in hand like a couple of sweet innocents up a garden path. I

said that I had some book-knowledge of farming, and that I knew that such knowledge amounted to nothing at all, but here Mr. Ballinger took his pipe out of his mouth and interrupted me.

“Excuse me, sir, but that’s not quite true. I’ve learnt a lot about fruit-growing from books. There’s one proviso, the fellow who wrote the book must have done the job himself.”

“So there are books and books?”

“Ever read Loudon, sir? It was my grandfather’s textbook. Yes, he was a farmer.”

“No.”

“Well, read old Loudon, and then go on to some of the moderns. Those old farmers did know their job. Besides, it’s history, change and discovery, and when you read such history it makes one curious.”

“Or should do.”

Mr. Ballinger prodded the air with the stem of his pipe.

“Sort of Robinson Crusoe idea, Mr. Carey, is that it?”

“Absolutely.”

“I wonder more people don’t try it. Going to make an offer?”

“You said the reserve price was fifteen hundred?”

“It was. Offer ’em a thousand.”

“Will they take it?”

“Most likely. You see, Blackthorn isn’t the sort of place some City gentleman would fall for. Excuse me, sir. Not developmental. None of the conveniences. Asks you to live simple and hard.”

“Are the agents all right?”

“So-so.”

“I’ll go and see them to-morrow.”

“Be a bit casual, sir, not too keen, if you know what I mean.”

IV

BLACKTHORN FARM became mine for the sum of one thousand and fifty pounds.

No objection was taken to my moving in directly I had signed the contract and paid a deposit, for I think the agents had begun to despair of getting rid of the place.

I moved in on one bright and chilly day in May—7th May, as I noted in my diary—bringing with me the camping equipment I happened to possess, a camp-bed and sleeping-bag, a canvas bath, washstand and bucket, a collapsible table and chair, a small canteen and a Primus stove, a box of stores and two trunks full of my earthly possessions. I travelled by train to Brandon and Mr. Ballinger, who owned a car licensed for hire, had me and my baggage transported to the farm.

I set up my table and chair in the parlour, and I must admit they looked a little forlorn in that bare room. My camp-bed, etc., I arranged in the bedroom over the parlour. It was half-past three, and I had lunched at the Crown, and I began to unpack my stores and to prepare for tea. The Lawless cupboard nearest the window, the one in which I had found the old envelope and pencil, served me as a store-cupboard.

I got my stove going, put the kettle on, laid my table, and set out butter and jam, tea, sugar and milk. Mr. Ballinger had supplied me with a loaf of bread and six bottles of beer. I had not forgotten a tin-opener, but I had forgotten other things, dish-cloths and glass-cloths. Well, a towel or a handkerchief would have to serve until I had done my serious shopping.

I enjoyed that tea. It was very much my own tea, in my own homestead, in my own bit of England.

After tea, I went out to survey the ground. The garden in front of the house had gone completely wild, though I could distinguish in the shaggy grass two mounds which had been flower-beds. That tangle of grass and weeds did not discourage me; I could tackle it when I had dug up two rods or so of soil and rushed in some food crops. I pushed my way round the house, and it was a case of pushing, for two old Portugal laurels had possessed themselves of the path, and the tunnel that had been was a smother of foliage. I came to what had been the vegetable garden, and

beyond it lay the orchard, with twenty or thirty old apple trees still in flower. It was so lovely that I stood and stared.

A rotting gate in a low wall led into the vegetable garden and I saw it as a kind of jungle, with the rampant growth of last year's weeds mocking me in their decay, docks, thistles, nettles, chervil, ragwort. I'll confess that I was a little sobered by the reality. All that tangle of decay would have to be cut and burnt before I could put a spade in the soil. I waded into the jungle, and in one corner I discovered a plantation of bush fruit, gooseberries and currants that had survived the struggle, if somewhat scraggily so, and their presence cheered me. The gooseberries were in flower. I could count on a gooseberry tart!

The orchard was less wild than the garden. In fact it looked as though it had been grazed recently, for the turf was sweet and short, and contemplating it I realized that it would be easier for me to open up my food-patch here, and leave the vegetable garden till later. In my innocence I did not yet suspect how I, a City creature, would sweat and ache and blister.

Next, I went over the buildings, stable, granary, odd sheds, and among them I came upon a poultry-house on wheels. Of course I ought to keep a few hens. I admit that I avoided entering the black barn on this my first evening. I was always to think of it as the Black Barn. I found a pile of faggots and cord-wood behind the wagon-shed, fuel for fire, though the faggots were so brittle that they broke when you touched them.

I don't suppose I shall forget my first night in that lonely old house. I went to bed by candlelight, with the candle stuck on the top of a tin. There were no curtains or blinds, but that did not trouble me, for I wanted the sun to wake me early. I lay a while in my camp-bed before blowing out the candle. I was conscious of the supreme silence of the place, and of the dim window, and of a few stars showing in the blackness above the open upper sash. What peace! No traffic, no human blather, no blaring wireless-set in a neighbouring flat. Even the silence seemed mine. And then, as I lay, soaking myself in the silence, I became aware of sounds, minute sounds that would not have been audible in a city. There were faint creakings, rustlings, sounds like stealthy breathing. They came both from within and without the house. A light and inconstant breeze was blowing. It came and went, and the old house seemed to respond to it like a dark rock in a gentle sea. Timber creaked; windows vibrated, chimneys whispered, and this strange chorus that seemed to grow from nothing out of the night, kept me listening and

wondering for a while. I heard an owl hoot, and some wild thing utter a shrill cry of terror. I could imagine the ghost-weeds in the garden rustling their dry shrouds as the night wind passed. It was all very strange and mysterious.

I woke in the greyness of the dawn to hear the birds break into their morning song. A blackbird began it, and suddenly the little secret valley was vibrant with that chorus. I lay and listened, and watched the window fill with the laughter of light and of song. This indeed was God's world, lovely in its cunning and its inevitableness, not a land of lorries and of jangling milk-cans and of petrol fumes. What was the time? I had placed one of my trunks beside the bed to form a table and laid my watch upon it, but when I reached for the watch and read the dial I found that I had forgotten to wind the thing, and it had stopped. Was this an omen and an inspiration? Did I need a time-piece in a little world such as mine was to be? The sun could be my clock, and my stomach and my muscles pointers.

My canvas bath and a bucket of water were ready for me. I had spread a ground-sheet under the bath to save possible leakages and accidents to the parlour ceiling, and I bathed rather like a bird in a bird-bath. I put on shorts, a vest and a pullover, and went below to open up my house, and as I passed the round-headed landing window I saw that English landscape by the light of the rising sun, and both house and country seemed to welcome me. "Come, youth, be with us, toil, eat, sleep and sing."

My Primus gave me shaving water. I opened a tin of sardines for breakfast, then washed up and cleared away. Did not domestics use soda for washing up, especially when a plate was greasy? Could I ask Mr. Ballinger that? I took a chair into the garden, sat down, re-read my shopping list and amended it. A cock blackbird, pottering about upon the grass, eyed me suspiciously. No doubt I was a strange and an interloping beast to him.

I had finished my pipe and my list when something made me prick my ears. I heard voices in the distance. They seemed to come from beyond the house and from the direction of the orchard. I remembered that a gate opened from the orchard into the farm lane, and I got up and walked round the house to investigate. Had prospective labourers come to call on me at this early hour, or was I to receive a visit from some vagrants? I arrived at the garden gate and stood staring. Assuredly I had not expected an invasion such as this.

The orchard gate was open, and a green caravan drawn by two ponies was swinging into the orchard, with a gipsy fellow in control. I saw another caravan waiting in the lane. Damn it, had Blackthorn been a camping ground for pikies, and did that explain the grazed grass? I went quickly through that gate and into the orchard.

“Excuse me, one moment.”

The fellow at the ponies’ heads jerked round and saw me. He was an unpleasant-looking brute, with shifty, angry eyes. I said, “I’m afraid you’ll have to take that van out again and down my lane. This is private property.”

A couple of swarthy women and some children came crowding into the gateway. I stood there with my hands in my pockets and smiled upon them.

“Sorry, but you can’t camp here.”

One of the women said something in a strange lingo to the man with the unpleasant face, and my impression was that she was inciting him to flout me. Now, I happen to be rather a big person, embarrassingly big in some ways, and in the sixth at school irreverent friends used to call me John Ridd. The unpleasant fellow took stock of me, and he must have decided that I might prove an ugly customer, for he became polite.

He spoke in English.

“Sorry, gov’nor. Didn’t know the place was let.”

“It isn’t,” said I. “I own it, and I live here. I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to go elsewhere.”

I was smiling, but I did not like the fellow or his women, and I was not going to take any lip from him.

“See here, gov’nor, the perlice have been chivvying us. Be a sport and let us doss down for a night.”

“Sorry,” said I, “nothing doing. There’s a place down in the Shere valley, you know, where you people camp. Good morning.”

He gave me an evil look and turned his ponies. The women cursed me, and the children pulled faces, but they went out of my orchard and down my lane. I followed them, my hands in my pockets, and made sure of their going. I decided to put up a board marked “Private” at the end of the lane.

I found Mr. Ballinger in his fruit-house; he was an expert at growing fruit trees in pots, and when I asked him again for the loan of his car he told me that he was driving into Dorking and would take me. Moreover, he gave me the name and address of a man in Brandon who owned a light lorry, and would do my carting for me. It was Ballinger who advised me where to shop in Dorking, and he took me in and introduced me, and then left me to my labours. I was to meet him at the King's Head at twelve. I had my list with me and a formidable list it was, and the old gentleman in the furniture shop smiled over it benignly. He owned some antiques and I bought some of them, one of them an oak hutch which he told me had come from Blackthorn Farm.

"A coincidence, sir. Going home again."

I did my biggest business at a local ironmonger. In fact I had an assistant trailing round with me for three-quarters of an hour. Next, I bought seeds and seed potatoes; then a collection of groceries. I needed sheets and towels. It was close on twelve o'clock when I had come to the end of my list, and I rushed off to the King's Head. I had arranged with the shops for my lorryman to collect the goods next day.

Mr. Ballinger was drinking a sherry, and gossiping with some acquaintance. I ordered a sherry and insisted upon paying for Mr. Ballinger's drink and my own. His crony had faded away.

"You look hot, Mr. Carey."

I laughed.

"Concentrated furnishing."

"Bet you have forgotten half a dozen items."

"I'm not taking that bet. It's a certainty."

"Sleep well?"

"Never better."

We finished our sherries, and got into his car. It was a very old car, like this English valley country, and we nearly stalled on the steep hill going up to Wootton. Mr. Ballinger spoke paternally to the car.

"Now, now, Methuselah, I've never been a Jehu."

I lunched at the Crown and then started homewards for Blackthorn, feeling that I had done a good morning's work. Mr. Ballinger had offered to charter my lorry for me. The one thing I had brought with me from Dorking

was a spade, and I marched with it over my shoulder, for I could say that a spade was to be my symbol.

V

I T was.

As a squatter in this wild place, and proposing to be somewhat self-supporting, I did realize that the soil was my elemental property. Food was to be my pre-occupation. I was not going to live a tinned life, a sardine and pineapple existence. Butcher's meat I might have to buy, butter and milk, tea and sugar, but I could produce my own vegetables, fruit and eggs. I dreamed further than that. I would keep a cow, churn my own butter, raise my own poultry, perhaps keep pigs. In my innocent strength and enthusiasm I did not realize how much I had to learn, and how I would have to labour.

I planned out my day, and drew up a time-table.

I would give one hour to house-work, washing-up, bed-making, sanitation, and general cleaning.

I would work ten hours on the land.

I would go to bed at half-past nine, and rise at half-past five or six.

After tea I carried my spade out into the orchard. I knew how to bastard-trench a plot of ground, and I had cut the first stretch of sods when my innocence was challenged by the absence of a barrow. I had to move the first strip of sods and soil to the other end of the plot, and my barrow would not arrive until the morrow. I smiled at Aloysius Grant Carey, the simpleton. But was I to be choused? I decided to move the turfs by hand and, piling them like sandwiches, I carried them to the far end of my new vegetable garden. The evening was chilly, and I decided to try a fire in the duck's-nest grate, and going out I collected an armful of rotten faggoting, and soon had a blaze. The chimney drew well, too well, and my game of fire-making soon consumed my bundle of wood. No matter, I had had my fire and my fun, tested the grate, and divined the blaze I could enjoy on winter nights. The long light evening called me, and I went out on patrol, and this beating of the bounds was to reveal to me enemies more sinister than marauding gipsies. I saw at least a dozen rabbits feeding in the orchard. They sat up, and scampered off with white scuts showing when I disturbed them.

Here was a problem. I needed a gun. I should have to dig wire in round my vegetables. I found that the bank of the hedge between the lane and the

orchard was a veritable warren. No doubt the gipsies had snared many a supper there. I should have to exterminate these pests, shoot, trap and ferret.

I was breakfasting next morning when I saw a figure pass the window. The porch-bell jangled in the passage, and I went to the door to find a clean-cut, tall, fair young man standing there. He looked like a guardsman in mufti. It was my carter and haulier, Will Wightman, who had driven over early with his light lorry to make sure of the job and to get my authority.

We were back at Blackthorn by eleven, loaded up with a very mixed cargo, and for the time being I decided to dump everything save my parlour furniture into the empty room across the passage. I could sort it all out later. As a loader Will Wightman had shown himself something of a genius, and one journey sufficed. I had remembered to bring back with me two fifty-yard rolls of rabbit-wire, and three dozen light galvanized standards.

I was busy all the rest of that day putting my house in order. I turned one of the parlour cupboards into a store-cupboard, and converted an old brick lodge in the yard into a tool shed. I hung my pots and pans up in the kitchen. I had arranged with Wightman to deliver me a ton of coal, and after tea and a pipe I took my new barrow and spade and spent two hours wheeling soil and digging. It was a serene spring evening when I returned to the house, washed my hands, and prepared my supper. I opened a small tin of tongue and a bottle of beer, and with bread and cheese made my solitary meal. And then I was attacked by my first spasm of loneliness. It came upon me quite suddenly, but so acute and disturbing was it that I had to go out and walk down the farm track to the lane and up it to the Downs. The loveliness of England lay before me, all those exquisite green contrasts, but in this lonely mood it seemed to me that Nature was anonymous and cold. It wanted some warm, live, animal thing to give it meaning.

Twilight was falling when I returned to the house. The gate creaked as I shut it, and suddenly I was afraid of the house. It seemed to me infinitely sad and empty. Its face was darkened. I went in and stood in the doorway of my parlour, and though but a few hours ago I had taken pleasure in dressing it, putting the old bureau in one corner, the oak hutch in another, and in spreading a Persian rug under the gate-legged table, the room seemed cold and empty. Did presences remain, and some poor, ghostly Lawless, the

intangible relics of a personality, persist in the physical pattern? If the room felt chilly, so did I, and I went out and collected an armful of dead wood and, with my new saw, cut a few logs from the stack of cord-wood, and made a blaze.

I sat in my new-old arm-chair in front of the fire and warmed my hands, but the physical warmth would not spread to the spiritual part of me. I felt the uncurtained windows and the black night at my back, for I had not bothered yet about curtains. So strong was my feeling that the invisible eyes of an invisible presence were watching me through the unscreened glass that I routed out one of my new blankets, and finding two brass brackets still in place, I blanketed the nearest window.

For seven days I slaved at my digging. Strong I might be, but I got blistered hands and an aching back. I was still soft and urban. I planted my potato crop, sowed lettuces, peas, carrots, beetroot, runner-beans, and the seeds of winter greens. I had a seedsman's catalogue to guide me, and I knew that some of my sowings were late. I dug in my rabbit-wire. I resisted the temptation to walk in to Brandon and make touch with my fellows. This defeatism had to be fought. I went to bed dead tired and slept like the dead, but there was something in me that would not be satisfied. Almost I think I came near both hating the place and fearing it.

For the one reality that confronted me was that I had sunk nearly twelve hundred pounds of my five thousand in buying the farm and garnishing it, and that if as a squatter I proved a man of straw, my capital expenditure might be sacrificed, and yet, though I had this piece of financial realism before me, I do not think it was this that drove me to fight. There was some other urge in me which said, "You have made your choice. Are you so little of a pioneer, that you become fed up in a week. Stick it, my lad, stick it." So, maybe I sweated the harder, and sought in my very weariness a drug. I refused to surrender to my vagrant impulses. I would not drift into Brandon, even after the day's work was done. I would give myself a full dose of my own poison, and prove that I could bear it. I went out and dug even after supper.

The jobs I got through in those first fourteen days were multifarious and heavy. I recovered the front garden, sowed nasturtium seeds in the two round beds, repaired gates and fences in an amateurish way, cut over the stragglng shrubs and creepers, felled dead larch trees in my wood for fencing posts, collected stacks of weeds and rubbish. It is amazing how

much rubbish can accumulate upon a farm. I was my own laundryman and cook, and my cooking and my lonely meals began to give me indigestion. That did not improve my temper. I must have developed the savage petulance of an overtired man, and one evening my temper showed its ugly face. It was a Saturday, and I surprised two tramps, a man and woman, preparing to doss down on some ancient straw in an open cattle-shed in the corner of a field. I suppose they had used the place before. They were an unprepossessing couple, the man black bearded, with a mouth that was like an ugly red gash in his hairy face.

I flared.

“Hello, what are you doing on my land. Get out.”

The man gave me a smirk that was half a smile and half a snarl, and his teeth showed like the teeth of some savage creature. He too looked me over as the gipsy man had done, and probably decided that I was not a person to be trifled with.

“All right, my dear sir, we are not offending against nature.”

His voice astonished me, and I saw him as some poor seedy devil, a man of education whom drink or some moral instability had reduced to this vagabondage, but he had an evil face, and the sarcastic and sneering insolence of him angered me.

“We won’t argue about it. Get out.”

The man looked at the woman. She was older than he was, and prematurely haggish, and I wondered how he could drift about with such a creature.

“Arise, Magdalene, God orders us off the earth.”

They had a battered old pram with them, and a sack lay between them. The man gathered the sack and himself, and rose. I saw his deplorable boots. He collected an old black hat from the pram, crammed it on his head, and extended a dirty hand to the woman.

“Arise, oh, Cinderella. The gentleman does not wish us to decorate Arcady.”

He pulled the woman up, and then he turned to me and raised his hat.

“Many thanks for your great courtesy, sir. If you are a farmer may I suggest that you are kinder to your cattle.” I was mute, and yet my anger did not grow any the less. I shadowed them across the field, and watched the

pram pushed by that old drab bump its way through a gate into the lane. The man closed the gate with meticulous care. Again he raised his hat to me.

“Property. Private property, sir. Cherish it. Good day. Those who are vermin salute you.”

Somehow I felt a beast, but an angry beast, for turning those two wretches off my land. What had brought them together? Drink, and a common vagrant irresponsibility? What had the fellow’s history been? I stogged back to the house, and the sneering, seedy sarcasm of his ex-schoolmaster’s voice rubbed me on the raw. I could hear him saying to some small boy, “Smith Minor, is it essential that you should sniff? Handkerchiefs are provided by fond parents.”

There was one curious detail about the old house which I have forgotten to describe. The door of the cupboard in the parlour which I had turned into a store-cupboard had a square of mirror-glass let into it on the inside. Its purpose had puzzled me, but when I entered the house that evening after my clash with those two vagrants, and went to the cupboard to take out a tin of corned beef for my supper, I saw my own face in the mirror. It shocked me. It did not seem to be my face as I knew it, young and smooth and easy with health. It was an older face, almost an evil face, angry and drawn and harsh. I stared at it as though I had been confronted by some other sinister self. Was this what I had become after so many days of sweat and toil and loneliness? Where was the sweet sanity of the soil? What had become of my inspiration?

I grabbed the tin and closed the cupboard door, but that revelation remained with me. I sat down with it to my solitary meal. My anger had died away. There was something wrong somewhere. Either I was not made of the stuff for a life such as this, or I had forgotten some essential part of it. The house seemed a dead house, and I had garnished it with dead things and thought to give it life. It needed some other thing, some live creature who was not I, some other entity who would provoke in me—just what? Comradeship, a sense of being responsible for something?

A woman? I smiled rather grimly over that, and told myself not to be silly. Robinson Crusoe had had to do without petticoats. A Goodman Friday? No, I did not want some other man creature in the house, some yokel in whose presence I should be dumb. I lit my pipe and went out into the garden and watched the sun set. The sky looked a wet sky, a south-west sky with rain in the offing. A red sunset should be a shepherd’s delight, but I

seemed to smell the coming rain, yet, silly fool that I was, I did not glimpse the fact that a shepherd's friend may be his dog.

VI

ASSUREDLY, it rained that Sunday. So heavy was it that I had to find an indoor job. I had bought some distemper, whitewash, and a brush, for the kitchen, larder and dairy badly needed attention. I spent the morning rubbing down the walls, and it was a depressing job, for the walls seemed to be covered with the crusted accumulation of years, and one never got to the bottom of things. The more I used my scrubbing-brush, the more old powder the walls produced, but at long-last I did get down to honest brickwork, though the floor was like a flour-bin. The job was going to take longer than I thought, and I was almost sorry that I had tackled it, and not paid someone else to do the work, but I was determined to conserve capital and to be as self-supporting as possible even in the matter of repairs, but after lunch I felt lazy and I had a nap in my arm-chair, and when I woke the rain had stopped.

My urge was to stretch my legs before tea. I would go back to the job later. I went out into the farm track and down it to the lane. It was a wet and glistening world, washed and lovely and smelling sweet. I turned to the left towards the high road, and a sudden apparition surprised me.

I did remember afterwards that I had heard some sort of sound, and had attached no meaning to it. I suppose I was in a mood of concentrated self-absorption, but the apparition in the lane brought me slap-up against reality. I saw a man with a bloody face. He came staggering towards me like a man fuddled with drink. His feet fumbled. There was blood in his eyes, and I remember how he mopped at it with both hands like a child blinded by tears. I stood still. He was within three yards of me before he saw me. He stopped, swayed, blurred.

“There’s been an accident. Help.”

That seemed pretty obvious.

“Where?”

“Just round the corner up at the cross-roads. I hadn’t a chance. They just blinded into me.”

He spat blood and mopped.

“For God’s sake, go up there. I feel——”

He swayed about and I saw that he was all in, and I caught him, and helping him to the side of the lane, put him in the ditch with his back against the bank.

“You stay there. I’ll go.”

He was being sick into the long grass when I left him, and I wondered why he had come blundering down the lane instead of keeping to the road, but I imagine he was in such a state of daze and shock that he did not quite know what he was doing. He had spoken of the cross-roads, but it was merely a lonely spot where two by-roads crossed, high-hedged and dangerous to anyone who was strange to the place or who chanced it. I suppose it took me less than a minute to run up the hill to the cross-roads. There was no doubt about the thoroughness of the smash. I saw one car, a blue two-seater lying on its back in a ditch, and sprawling on top of it with its bonnet cocked in the air, a big, black, American four-seater. There was smashed glass all over the place. I scrambled up to the wreckage and got a glimpse of a man in the black car lying crumpled over the steering wheel with his head all blood. The wind-screen was smashed. I had more than a feeling that the man was dead. Had he been alone? The nose of the car had smashed through the hedge, and I pushed through and saw a sight I shall never forget, a girl lying among the young wheat, a fair-haired girl in a flowery frock. But I won’t describe it. She too appeared to be dead. I climbed back and looked into the other car and saw that it was empty. My friend in the lane must have been in that one. I felt shocked and helpless. Should I try and get that fellow out of the car? And then God sent along a helpful member of the official world, a country constable patrolling on a bike. He was big and blond and capable. He took one look at the smash and its victims, recovered his bicycle and wheeled it back into the road.

“I’ll go and phone, sir. Not much to be done by the look of it. You’ll be about?”

I told him that there was an injured man in the ditch down yonder, and that I would look after him.

“Righto, sir. I’ll phone a doctor and the ambulance, and the nearest garage.”

I walked back to look at my friend in the ditch, and found him lying there in a dazed state. The bleeding seemed to have ceased from the gash he had on his forehead, and I decided to leave well alone. I told him that a doctor was on the way, and he asked me in a sort of whisper what had happened to the people in the other car, and not wishing to harrow him I did

not tell him that I thought both of them were dead. But he was nursing a grievance against the driver of the black car.

“Didn’t give me a chance. Came blinding across. Criminal carelessness. Ought to be in prison.”

I knew that the poor devil was somewhere else, and I left my friend in the ditch and went back to the cross-roads. They were still deserted, and I supposed that the wet morning had discouraged the Sabbath crowd, though these ways were little used by people who hogged it along the Portsmouth road. I walked up and down. And then I saw something brown lying in the long grass of the bank sloping to the right-hand ditch. I went to look, and found a little dog lying there, a russet-brown Cairn. The poor little beast was trembling. It lay with its chin on its fore-paws and looked at me and, but for its trembling, it lay utterly still as though paralysed. I was conscious of a sudden pang of pity. I knelt down and examined the dog, speaking to it gently. Its eyes looked up into mine. It gave a whimper, and licked one of my hands.

That caress touched me, and profoundly so. I supposed that the dog had been flung out of one of the cars. Was it injured. I put my hands gently under it and raised it.

“Can you stand, old lad?”

I judged it to be quite a young dog, and suddenly it smiled at me with strangely bright eyes and wagged its little hairy posterior. It seemed able to stand. There was no blood on its coat. It was wearing a collar, and on the silver collar-bar was engraved the name “Prince Charlie”.

I took the dog in my arms and stood hesitant. Then, a sudden impulse moved me. I walked back to the lane and my friend in the ditch.

“Is this dog yours?”

“No. Must have been in the other car.”

I walked on and up the track to Blackthorn. I carried the dog into the parlour and placed him in my arm-chair. I knelt down and stroked his head and spoke to him, and his brown eyes looked straight into mine. The little beast had beautiful eyes, and I know that from the first moment I loved him.

“You stay there, old chap. Be back soon.”

When I reached the cross-roads again succour had arrived. A man whom I presumed to be a doctor was bending over the girl in the field. An ambulance stood parked near, and two men were getting the dead body out

of the black car. The police constable was scribbling in a little note-book, and I did not force myself upon his attention. For, suddenly, I was tempted to say nothing about the dog. If both his master and mistress were dead, should I be sinning against anyone if I gave the little thing a home?

The constable put away his book and, seeing me, asked a question.

“You weren’t a witness, sir?”

“No.”

“So you can’t throw any light on the accident?”

“Only what the other driver told me. By the way, he’s still sitting in the ditch down yonder, waiting for the doctor.”

“We’d better send the doctor along, sir. I gather there’s nothing to be done for those two.”

“Both dead?”

“Yes. What did the other driver say about it?”

“Oh, that he was going slowly, and that the other car took the crossing blindly and at speed and crashed into him.”

“Looks like it. Young and reckless, poor young beggars. Perhaps you will show the doctor, sir——”

“Yes, of course, with pleasure.”

Dr. Gibson came from Brandon. He was a shortish, thickset man with the face of a cheeky boy, but his eyes had grown wise and kind. He came out into the road, and he collected a black bag from his own car.

“Bad business this.”

He looked at me as though he wondered who I might be, and I introduced myself and he smiled. The man’s face changed when he smiled. It explained what I was to learn later, that though Dr. Sam Gibson had been a broth of a boy in his youth, he had become Brandon’s beloved physician.

“Oh, you are Carey.”

I confessed that I was Carey, the idiot who had bought Blackthorn, though I did not use those words.

“Mr. Ballinger told me about you.”

“Ballinger’s a good sort, but——”

“As a matter of fact there are no buts about Ballinger. He is completely a good sort.”

There was a humorous abruptness about Dr. Gibson, and I liked it. Meanwhile, we had come to my friend in the ditch, who was squatting there holding his head in his hands. Apparently, he was a stranger to Gibson, but Gibson treated him with friendly familiarity, as though he had known him all his life.

“Well, my lad, let’s have a look at you. Pain anywhere?”

“My head’s cracking, Doctor.”

“We’ll soon put that right.”

Gibson got down into the ditch, and handed me his bag, and I stood and watched his capable hands at work, going over the man’s head and body. He examined the gash on the forehead, and was cheerful and consoling.

“The bleeding has stopped. We’ll deal with that in a better place. I’ll bring my car down here, and take you along to my surgery.”

I hung about until Gibson and the injured man had departed, and then I hurried back to the farm, for I was afraid that the little creature might feel frightened left alone in a strange house. Also, I supposed that an animal, especially a sensitive animal, could suffer shock from such an accident. Almost I expected to hear the dog howling, but there was not a sound from the house. I had closed both the porch and the parlour doors, and when I opened the parlour door I saw the dog sitting in the chair.

“Hallo, Charlie.”

Dogs can laugh and smile, but Charlie’s smile was wistful, and questioning. He looked so small and alone. He did not move from the chair but sat and gazed at me as though I could tell him what had happened to his world. I squatted down and put my hand on his head, and so we surveyed each other in curious silence.

I said, “It’s all right, my dear. If you’ll stay with me I’ll try to make it up to you for the loss of those others.”

His little eyes had a strained look, and suddenly he put out a tongue and licked the tip of my nose.

I was most strangely moved by the little beast’s kiss. I took him in my arms, sat down in the chair and cuddled him, and I heard him give a sigh of profound contentment. Did a dog know, and had Charlie accepted the

assuagement of my pity? Who can say? He lay across my knees, and I stroked his head, and both of us were silent.

Presently I realized that the dog would have to be fed. What could I give him for supper? Some of my corned beef minced up? I should have to buy dog-biscuits.

“Well, Charles, what about some food?”

I set him down on the floor, and he looked up at me appealingly and wagged a tail. He was a sturdy little creature with a lion’s mane, but he looked very small and helpless, and it was obvious that he was grateful for a stranger’s kindness, and that now he wanted to go home? I was conscious of a pang of regret.

I spoke to him.

“I’m very sorry, Charles, but you can’t go to them any more. What can I do?”

We gazed at each other. He whimpered and waggled his posterior. I went and opened the door.

“Want to go out, my lad?”

He faced about, and standing on his little sturdy legs, whimpered and waggled. I was posed. I had to learn his language, and he mine.

“What is it? Hungry, or homesick?”

His brown eyes gazed up into mine.

“Thirsty?”

I walked down the passage to the kitchen, and he followed me. I filled a saucer from a pail, set it on the floor, and instantly he lapped at it. He finished the saucerful, looked up and wagged. So now I knew.

I took him back to the parlour and lifted him into the chair, and he curled up there, watching me. I had jobs to do, and I left him, but coming back to the door ten minutes later I heard him sobbing as though his heart would break. Did he want to go back to those two? I opened the door and saw him standing in the middle of the room.

“What’s the matter, old man.”

He trotted up to me.

“Want to go home? I’m sorry, but——”

He looked up and whimpered.

“Or is it that you don’t like being alone?”

His brown eyes seemed to brighten.

I was getting tea ready, so I called him into the kitchen, and he came and watched me, and followed me up and down the passage. Had we become necessary to each other? I was conscious of a feeling of tenderness and of being comforted. I would try to keep this little creature, for he was the live thing I needed. I seemed to realize his complete helplessness, a dog’s utter dependence upon man. I had to give him water, food, open doors for him, yes and open other and more significant doors.

He lay beside my chair while I had tea. I offered him a crumb of cake in my palm and he nuzzled it out of my hand. He sat up and blinked at me as though expecting something else. I tried him with another crumb, and he took it, and there I stopped, and like a gentleman he lay down and did not ask for more. I was to find this dog the most ungreedy little creature, save in the matter of comradeship and affection, and of those he gave more than he was given.

His little dog’s soul must have been puzzled. I took him round the fields after tea, and though he went with me as far as the larchwood I could persuade him no further. My feeling was that courtesy had been served, and that he wanted to go home, not my home, but to those others who were dead. I had to take him back to the house, but he was restless and troubled. He kept coming to me and making little dog-noises, queer conversational sounds that moved me to pity. I liked the creature all the more for being loyal to those two.

But what could I do? Should I give him his chance to go out into the world and leave me? I opened the door, and spoke to him.

“I understand, old man, but they are not here any more. I couldn’t take you to them if I would.”

My heart hurt me. I left him standing in the porch, and went back to the parlour and sat down and tried to read. If the dog left me, it would be an omen, even though he was in strange country and had nowhere to go, poor beast. I tried to concentrate on my book. Presently, I felt something cold touch my hand which was hanging over the arm of the chair. He had crept

back to me. He gave a little sob, and jumped up on to my knees. I put my book aside and caressed him.

Night.

I decided that the dog should sleep in my room. I routed out an old suit-case and stuffed a blanket into it, and put it at the foot of my bed. He stood there, solemnly, looking at me. Was some particular ritual required? I lifted him into the suit-case, patted his head, and turned a corner of the blanket over him. He gave a sigh, and settled down.

I was in bed and had blown out the candle, when I felt him jump on to my legs. He crawled over me until his head was on my shoulder. Gently I put an arm round him, and so—we went to sleep.

VII

I AM afraid I have been left with few illusions as to labour on the land or elsewhere. Man is essentially a lazy beast, far less industrious, I think, than woman, and the work of the world is carried on by the urgent few, while the otiose mass trails conversationally and somewhat unwillingly behind. Moreover, I always had a feeling that this good country of ours needed a shock and that, when it came, our population would be stimulated largely by fear and cash-bribes stirred up with a sentimental stick called patriotism. That is one of the things I taught myself at Blackthorn Farm, what a strong and eager man could do in a day. Not that I expected a wage-earner to give to my land what I could give; that would be Utopian; but the thing that always exasperated me was the sly slowing down on the job, the silly assumption that the employer of labour is a fool. I suppose that ownership is the seal of virtue, and I am one of those who would favour a free and propertied peasantry carefully selected and bred, and purged of politics and urban chatter. The Germans and the Italians have been wiser than we in this respect, which is a pity.

I remember waking up that morning and finding the dog curled up beside me. He was awake and watching me. He wagged his tail when our eyes met.

“Hallo, Charles.”

I put my hand on his head, feeling that with this little creature to keep me company, life and my temper would be different. We looked at each other, and I knew that candour should compel me to declare the dog to the police, but I was tempted to do otherwise. I fell. Why let the official world interfere in a matter that did not concern it? Those people were dead, and the dog might as well remain with me as go to casual relatives.

I patted Charles’s head.

“Going to stay, Charlie? Not a bad place this.”

He wagged and smiled at me, and then jumped off the bed.

“Time to get up,” said he.

He went and stood by the door, and looked at me appealingly. His little business might be urgent, and I let him out and down the stairs and went to open the porch door. The rain had passed and the day was lovely, and I paddled in the wet grass with naked feet while Charles went about his business. He disappeared round the corner of the house, and I followed. He trotted along the garden fence and into the farmyard and, finding the appointed place, settled his affair, proceeded upon the dawn patrol, round by the pond, into the paddock and back to the front gate of the garden. I was to find him a little creature of habit, and every morning he made that same round, as though inspecting the property to make sure that it had not been interfered with.

I had a good day. The work seemed to go differently, and the dog assisted, rummaging about in the grass, or investigating interesting odours, or lying curled up on my coat. We exchanged fragments of gossip, dog or baby talk. Everywhere I went he had to go. I remember him sitting outside the door of the closet while I relieved nature within. I have often wondered what went on inside his small head during those early days of our life together, and whether, being a child among dogs, he found it easier to forget his other world and to adapt himself to mine. Or are animals wiser than we know? Had he understood that disaster and death had taken his former master and mistress away from him, and that in cleaving to me he was making a new friend? Who can say?

My ignorance might be abysmal, and my craftsmanship amateurish to begin with, but I had Hands, and there is nothing so educative as practice under the whip of necessity. Even digging is a professional job, both in speed and finish, and before I had dug my first ten rods the business had become somewhat automatic and far less tiring, and the surface my spade left was not a thing of blobs and hollows, but serenely level. I can always see beauty, the beauty of craftsmanship, in a well dug or straightly ploughed piece of land, in a neatly plashed hedge or in a corn crop standing straight and true with no weeds or bald patches in it. I had a passion for thoroughness, and maybe my cult of figures had taught me that. A badly hung gate bothered me, or a foul meadow, or a wood full of dead and fungoid timber. I don't think I ever asked for or expected quick and easy results, for I soon discovered what I was up against in nature.

Let me get the pattern of my plan set out upon paper, for plan there was, though the pattern of it evolved as I laboured at it. I think that even in those early days I had a flair for the catastrophic changes that might overtake our

topheavy ship of commerce. War, revolution or evolution, vast commercial crashes, the civilized world, so called, in the chaos of rebirth or of barbarism. I suppose I had imagination, a quality which so few of our political prophets seem to possess, and it piqued me to forecast what might happen to an over-industrialized country like England, and to use my wits in countering the catastrophe. The cash values of life might fall to zero; the use-value of things rise. Stocks and shares would be of no account, and the realities of the soil, food, knowledge, implements, special ability become the things that mattered.

I have called my first year at Blackthorn my “Year of Digging In”.

I saw the house, buildings, garden and orchard as a strong point, trenched and wired against the assaults of circumstance. About it lay a No Man’s Land of derelict fields which in good time I would attack and recover.

Meanwhile, I acted as though I had to withstand a siege. I put money into wire-netting, timber, six poultry houses, an incubator, and a foster-mother. I wired the whole of the old orchard against rabbits, and also two acres of the home paddock. Half my new ground was to be for poultry, the other half for new fruit trees. I asked Mr. Ballinger to advise me on the trees to buy, and he came over, looked at the ground and approved. It was sunny and sheltered and not a frost-hole.

On Ballinger’s advice I bought four-year-old bush-trees on No. 9 Stock. They would bear early, and be easy to prune, spray and pick. Mr. Ballinger himself gave me practical lessons in pruning. He advised me to eschew cherries and pears, unless I planted fan-cherries and caged them. As for pears they were too temperamental both in fruiting and in ripening.

Here is Ballinger’s list.

Worcester Pearmain.

Ellison’s Orange.

Laxton’s Superb.

Monarch.

Golden Spire.

Bramley’s Seedling.

Cox’s Orange.

Lane’s Prince Albert.

Also, I planted six Victoria Plums, and a few Early Rivers, Merryweather Damson, Giant Prune, and old Greengage. I did allow myself two standard cherries and six pears, Conference and Fertility, partly for æsthetic reasons, and also that I might learn the habits of the creatures.

I marked out and wired eight poultry runs, and put up four houses on wheels. I dug in six-foot wire as a defence against foxes. I arranged to buy from a local breeder of repute two dozen Rhode Island March-raised pullets, and two cocks of the same breed from another firm. I sat up at night with Charles in my lap and read up poultry feeding, and incubation and rearing, tree-spraying, and manuring, and seed-sowing. I made elaborate notes in a ledger that was to become my bible.

This year of Digging In had its thrills, its excitements and its exasperations.

I watched my first lettuces like a fond mother.

I counted and weighed my first root of early potatoes.

I cursed and shot at the jays who came to ravage my rows of peas. The jay is a beast of a bird, greedy, sly and raucous. They fooled me time after time. I managed to shoot three of them, and I hung them up on the pea-sticks, but their persistent relations were not to be scared off by corpses. My gooseberry bushes were attacked by the gooseberry moth, my young cabbages by the green grub of the white butterfly. My old apple trees had set an abundance of fruit, but much of it had been spoilt by the codlin moth. I bought a sixpenny book on Garden Pests, studied it, and dealt out death to the enemy.

As a cook I was improving. I could scramble eggs and fry sausages and bacon. In fact I became quite a King of the Frying Pan, but the farm-house oven was too much for me both in its prevarications and its temper. I did try my hand at pastry, but with most discouraging results, and the resultant mess was like putty, so I stewed my fruit, or ate it uncooked with cream or milk. Cheese was a great standby, and I never tired of it. Cheese, pickled onions and beer! Charles might be a Prince, but he never questioned my vulgar tastes, nor seemed to find my breath plebeian.

Also, on wet days there were household jobs to keep me busy. I bought an Elsan closet and fitted it. The water supply did not please me, and I rigged up a storage tank in the dairy, and piped the water from it to a tap over the sink. I bought a rotary pump, and fitted it myself, with a delivery-pipe to the tank in the dairy. I dare say my joints were none too good, but

there was little pressure, and the water stood high enough in the well for my pump to lift it. I pulled down a semi-derelict shed and re-erected it as a well-house, and I was to be glad of its protection and of my plumbing when the winter came. Bucketing water from a well at eight o'clock on a January morning, with the temperature ten degrees below freezing point is no pleasant job, even when one's ideal is to be hardy. I protected my pump with sheaves of bracken, and my tank with timber and felt.

I found a baker who would deliver me bread, and a neighbouring farmer who ran a milk-round, though I cannot see that I was much profit to them, but I tipped the roundsmen, and they did not seem to mind coming up my lane. In the country the job remains the job. I did my shopping, such as it was, on Saturday afternoons, either in Brandon or Dorking, carrying an old brown kitbag that must have made me look even more like a tramp. I am ashamed to say that there were days when I did not shave, and I allowed myself one hot bath a week, heating the water up in the copper, and taking my bath in the kitchen. Charles used to lie on a rug and watch the ritual with sober solemnity. While I was towelling myself he would come and lick my toes. I had to leave him behind me on my shopping expeditions, for the distance was too great for his short legs, but he became wise as to the business. I would carry him upstairs and park him on my bed, lock the porch door, and leave him to sleep.

I would whistle when I came near the gate, and I would hear his sharp, eager barks in the house. He would be waiting for me inside the door, and would rush into the parlour, jump on a chair, and I would kneel down, and he would put his paws on my shoulders and kiss me. Never did a man have a more loving welcome from any creature upon earth.

Finance and The Exchequer.

There is a fascination in figures, and though I had spent years of my life dealing with the duller phases of them, they had retained a mystery for me. I had a feeling for the Sacred Seven. It was always cropping up in my world, and when I wished to placate Fortune I chose seven as my symbol. I had bought an old oak bureau, and at night I would sit down and scribble figures, and draw out hypothetical balance sheets. I loved to play at making lists and estimates.

Take £5000 0s. 0d.

I had spent £1050 0s. 0d. on the purchase of Blackthorn.

” ” £150 0s. 0d. on furniture, stores, and my first equipment.

£3800 0s. 0d. in hand.

I decided to retain £3000 0s. 0d. as invested capital. It would bring me in about £150 0s. 0d. a year. My domestic budget was proving a very economical affair, a matter of 30/- a week all told. Clothes were not worrying me. I should have to pay Income Tax on both schedules, but no tithe or rates. Lawless in his expansive days had capitalized the tithe. I did not contemplate incurring doctor's bills, and I might visit a dentist twice a year. I judged, that so long as I employed no labour, I could live on my £150 0s. 0d. a year.

The remaining £800 0s. 0d. I would use on improvements and equipment and on the land, as I became more familiar with my job.

I made a list of the machines, etc., that I might buy. I had joined the Country Gentlemen's Association, and their catalogue became a kind of bible to me.

I would purchase:

A motor-cultivator, with additional equipment.

A second-hand motor-bike and side-car.

More poultry appliances.

More fruit trees.

A knapsack sprayer.

Corn-bins.

A hand-truck.

Reserve wire-netting.

Barbed wire.

1 cwt. of Mixed nails.

Buckets and cans.

Reserve tools, and what not.

It was a very incomplete list in those early days, and I had not the experience to prompt me as to how my ultimate plan would shape, and the equipment that it would require. I still had the outlook of an amateur gardener, and not that of a farmer. Critics might have accused me of being the complete egoist, but I was a happy egoist, thanks to the affection Charlie and I shared. Moreover, those rather sterile and negative people, the critics, are very ready to damn any creative person as an unsocial creature, not realizing perhaps that your enthusiast must be absorbed in his labour. Such

self-centred apartness may be necessary, inevitable even. One may begin as an egoist, but as one conception of life enlarges itself with the work it performs, so, one may transcend one's egoism. The house that you have built may not be for yourself alone. The book that you have written may be a guide and an inspiration to scores of others who have been groping towards the same end.

May I repeat that I was at work on a scheme of living. My urge was to prove its value and its validity by living it, and living is an art, though one may not shave every day or cultivate a dinner-jacket.

VIII

EARLY in the autumn I realized that I had too much work on my hands, and that if I was to get my scheme going by the spring, I needed additional, if casual labour. Now genuine and skilled labour was growing scarce in the country, as education, so called, produced a more exacting generation which was more easily bored. I am not blaming the young men. I was merely reversing the process, partly because I am a separative person, and I had had my fill of City life. I walked into Brandon and asked Mr. Ballinger if he knew of a man who could give me three days a week during the winter.

Mr. Ballinger pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead, and rubbed his chin.

“Now, you have asked me something, Mr. Carey.”

He was flummoxed, or appeared to be so, but when I expressed my surprise at the lack of labour, he explained that the labour was not lacking, but it was the quality of it that was dubious.

“Oh, yes, we have our casuals, Mr. Carey; every village has, but I don’t know that I would care to put one on to you, the go-easies, the born treads. No guts and no pride.”

“Then there is one——?”

“There’s Snipe, a chap who jobs all over the place. The chap’s not bad as a worker.”

“Then what’s bad about him?”

Mr. Ballinger grinned at me.

“Too damned clever, or thinks he is. People can’t stick him. He did keep one place for five years, with poor old Mrs. Munday who had had a stroke. Snipe bullied her.”

I laughed.

“I’d take that risk for six months. Is Snipe free?”

“Don’t know, sir. I could find out. Last thing I heard of him was that he had a job at a nursery in Chillingham. Six months is generally his limit. Shall I make inquiries?”

“If you would. I dare say I could stand his sniping for three days a week through the winter.”

Mr. Ballinger lowered his spectacles.

“All right, sir. But if I were you, sir, I’d not look at him or listen to him. Treat him like a robot.”

“Sounds rather inhuman.”

“Well, you’ll see.”

I did see. I had turned my barn into a carpenter’s shop, and since it had occurred to me that I could build additional poultry houses myself and save money, I had set out to copy one of those I had bought. I had nearly completed it, and was fitting the dropping-board when Charles set up a furious barking and rushed out to admonish somebody. I heard a voice addressing Charles in an attempt at casual mateyness, but Charles was not to be propitiated, and he continued to bark.

I turned and saw a tall, lanky fellow with a stoop, dressed in his Sunday clothes, and somehow suggesting the lay-preacher. He was round-faced and sallow, with very pale blue eyes, and a nose—a quite indescribable nose—that seemed to push out of his face like a shoehorn, a nose that sniffed and went blue at the tip in winter. The man had a hard, thin-lipped mouth, and an air of soapy smugness.

“Mr. Snipe? Quiet, Charles.”

He gave me a cold little smirk, and stood with his hands in his pockets.

“Ballinger told me you wanted a man.”

I had mistered him, but he did not mister Ballinger or sir me. And Charles continued to bark, standing about a yard away from the fellow’s feet.

“That’s so. Three days a week.”

Mr. Snipe was eyeing my poultry house. He looked at it superciliously. Never have I seen a face that could suggest a silent and scornful snigger such as Snipe’s did. I was to discover that he sniggered at everything in which he had had no hand.

“Three days ain’t much use to me.”

“Didn’t Mr. Ballinger tell you that?”

“He did.”

“Then why bother to come here?”

I was to find that a certain brutal candour was necessary in dealing with the world’s Sydney Snipes. There were occasions when I shouted at him, and like many very complacent critics he was a coward when cornered.

“What’s the pay?”

“Nine shillings a day.”

“I’ve been getting ten.”

I happened to know that this was untrue.

“Nine is my figure.”

He slouched forward, and poking his head into my poultry house, was silent for nearly half a minute while he examined my work.

“Forgot the perches, ’aven’t you?”

He sniggered. He went on to say that he did not approve of the system of ventilation, and I snubbed him.

“Oh, well, if you know more about it than the professionals who designed that type of house, you’re welcome. It’s a copy.”

“Couldn’t design it yourself, could you?”

There are various forms of rustic candour, and some brands are to be respected, but the Snipe brand irritated me.

“That’s not the point. Do you want three days’ work?”

He slouched towards the barn door.

“I’ll think it over, and let yer know. I don’t want favours.”

“You’ll get none,” I said sharply. “And see here, a moment, do you know anything about planting trees?”

He gave me a cold, supercilious leer.

“More than you do, I reckon.”

“Possibly. And you’ll let me know by to-morrow. You understand?”

“Sure.”

He mooched off, and Charles went after him, growling and barking. The dog liked Mr. Snipe no more than I did, nor did he ever lose his dislike of the man, or ever make friends with him. But I did realize that Snipe might

serve a purpose, and that an unlovely exterior often conceals good craftsmanship. Also, I understood those words of Ballinger's, "Don't look at or listen to the fellow," and most certainly I wished to do neither.

I decided to regard the purchasing of extra labour as part of my capital expenditure, for it would be spent upon improving the value of the land. Snipe turned up next day, and said he would work for me, and that he had managed to get another job that would fill up his week. I had seventy fruit trees due in November, and the ground had to be got ready for them. Also, I intended increasing my vegetable acreage. There were fences to be repaired, rough hedges to be cut in, dead trees felled, ditches cleaned. I am bound to say that Snipe was a good worker, but his sneering self-complacency and his know-all smugness were very trying.

I remember taking him to look at the new orchard on his first day. I told him I wanted it trenched.

"When d'yer trees come?"

"The first week in November."

He sniggered.

"Well, you won't have no place for 'em. Take three months to straight dig that ground."

"Oh," I said. "Well what do you suggest?"

"Planting pits, with the turf dug in. I don't hold with grass orchards, but beggars ain't choosers."

Offensive he might be, but I suspected that he was right.

"What about ploughing?"

"You wouldn't get anyone to muck about with a team on a little bit o' ground like that."

"Very well," I said, "we'll dig pits."

"How many trees are you getting?"

"Seventy to begin with, bush trees on dwarf stocks. No. 9 Stock."

I gather that he had never heard of Malling or of the various new stocks, but what Snipe did not know did not exist. Yet, he was wise as to many things of which I was still ignorant, for he was a countryman, and I was only beginning to be that. The trouble with him lay in his vanity, and in a static complacency that had grown pot-bound in the little world in which he lived.

Snipe never read anything save his leftish daily rag. His contempt for book-knowledge was utter and arrogant. Any advance in technique or in mechanization was “New-fangled rubbish”. I never found him reacting to any experimental suggestion. He would snigger over it, and discover some instant objection. So static and smug and English was he that when I decided to do a thing, I gave Snipe orders and ignored his sneers.

I had worked myself into pretty tough condition, and I joined the man in digging those planting pits, four feet across and two feet deep. We turned the turf into the bottom of each pit, and I had the satisfaction of licking Snipe at the job. I am afraid there was temper in my digging, when I dug three pits to his two, but even then he had an answer to my efforts.

“Ah, that’s a gentleman’s game, that be. No use tearing your guts out at a job like this. It’s steady as does it.”

No doubt he was right. A man who works on the land has to develop rhythm, and consider the conservation of energy, but the more right Snipe was the more I disliked him. Nor did diffidence pass with the fellow. You had to swagger to crush his complacency.

“Well, you see, I’m pretty hefty.”

“Ah, gentleman’s strength,” said he, and sniffed, and was sure that he could outlast me.

As I have said before, Prince Charles, who was a little aristocrat, would not go within a yard of Sydney Snipe, and in spite of blandishments, would stand off and growl at him. The dog’s unfriendliness seemed to provoke the man to try to win Charles over, for I suppose his vanity was piqued by the dog’s plain prejudice, but nothing Snipe could do or say made any difference to the Cairn. He did not like either the smell or the soul of Snipe, and I sometimes wondered whether the fellow had used his boot on the dog when I was not about.

Meanwhile, the work went on not too badly, though Snipe indulged in that sort of silent snigger over everything I suggested. He was an awkward brute, and a most abominable bore. He would tell you things you had known from childhood, as though imparting original information, and he would repeat a thing three times. That was his idea of emphasis. He crabbed my fruit trees when they arrived. He crabbed my Rhode Island pullets, even though they were laying quite well. He crabbed my system of feeding, though it was a system recommended by the expert from whom I had bought

the birds. When Mr. Ballinger came up to give me a lesson in pruning my newly-planted trees, Snipe sniggered over it. He hinted afterwards that Ballinger knew as little about trees as I did. When I got out my knapsack sprayer to give the orchard a winter-wash on a mild, still day, Snipe sniggered. He didn't hold with that sort of silliness. And he didn't hold with summer pruning, though when I catechized him on the process, I discovered that he did not know how to summer prune a tree. He did not hold with fertilizers. "Poisoning the ground," he called, it, and his knowledge of agricultural chemistry was nil. I am afraid there were occasions when I talked amateur highbrow stuff to the fellow, and spoke of soil bacteriology, though my knowledge was all bookish. I talked about the alkalinity of the soil, and how liming affected it, and how the beneficent bacteria preferred an alkaline medium to work in, and Snipe sniggered. I found him broadcasting lime on a freshly spread dung, and cursed him for it.

"You're wasting ammonia. Haven't you been taught that?"

If he was wasting ammonia, I was wasting words on this completely complacent rustic.

But the winter work went on pretty well, for I think I provoked in Snipe a competitive cussedness. He worked, not because he loved me, but because his dislike of me was a sort of irritant and stimulus. We trimmed hedges, repaired fences, cleared some of the ditches, sawed logs on wet days, dug two acres of ground, grubbed up brambles and young birch trees that had taken possession of some of the land. I turned some of the birch twigs into brooms, and even that seemed to amuse Snipe. I had been buying in some well rotted cow manure from a neighbouring farmer, and though Snipe could not crab the dung, he instilled a dose of venom into the transaction by hinting that the farmer had done me over the size of the loads and the price.

I happened to have a sore finger and a temper that was a little frayed, and I fell upon him.

"Shut up, you fool. Don't be such a misery."

I don't think he forgave me those words, though he went on working for me. I would catch him slipping me evil glances. Strange that two human beings should work together for six months and remain hostile. But, perhaps it is not so strange.

As for my old house I was loving it. On wet days and Sundays I would do a little amateur decorating. Painting I could manage, but paper-hanging

beat me when I tried it, so I kept to distemper. I left the parlour walls as they were, but I tinted my bedroom and the other sitting-room a soft primrose. I bought some flowery cretonne in blue, rose, green and purple, and made curtains, while Charles lay with his nose on his paws and watched me. I stained floors, and painted the window-sashes and the front door, and put up book-shelves. In the month of January I bought a second-hand motor-bike and side-car, for I was finding some sort of transport necessary, but let me confess the truth, I did not like leaving the dog behind when I went abroad. We had become inseparable. The side-car was fitted with a talc screen, and Charles travelled in the side-car, with a cushion and rug of his own. Once a week I allowed myself a human interlude. Charles and I would drive to Dorking, Guildford or Brandon and do our shopping, and have tea together, usually in the warm, firelit Crown lounge. Charles and Mr. Ballinger were quickly friends.

I remember on a February afternoon Mr. Ballinger coming in to put two logs upon the fire. Charles was lying on the rug at my feet after his usual two fragments of cake. Mr. Ballinger remained to gossip, straddling with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him.

“Well, sir, how’s the superior Snipe?”

We were alone in the lounge, and I confessed that I could not stomach the fellow. Mr. Ballinger looked amused.

“Yes, the chap’s an emetic. Everybody spews him out sooner or later. Good worker, though.”

“To a point. But he’s an awkward, sneering brute.”

“If you’re feeling that way, get rid of him, Mr. Carey. That sort of chap is bad for the digestion.”

I laughed and agreed with Mr. Ballinger, but I did not foresee how imminent was Snipe’s exit.

IX

I T was in February that I discovered that the orchard of Blackthorn was full of Lent lilies. Their pale green-gold heads came spearing through the grass. I suppose I should have noticed their dead heads and fading foliage among the tangle of rough weeds and grasses when I first saw the place, but these spring flowers came as a delightful surprise to me. I was to have other surprises. I had warned Snipe that I could not keep him on after the end of March, and though labour might prove a problem, I was sick of the fellow.

He slid me a sly and soapy smirk. He said, "That's all right with me. I've got a better job coming."

I had been trying my hand at setting rabbit-snares in the orchard hedge, and I had had some luck with one or two rabbits. Snipe knocked off work at five, and at that time I usually went in to my tea. After tea I smoked a pipe, and then spent half an hour on such odd jobs as pumping water or cutting logs and kindling. I remember noticing vaguely on that March evening that Snipe had remained on late to finish a piece of digging. Charles would rummage around on his own while I was busy, and that evening I missed the dog, or was curiously conscious of his absence.

I had a piece of cord-wood on the sawing-stool, and I paused to listen. I called the dog, but when he did not come to my call I became restless. I put the saw down and went out into the yard, and suddenly I heard a kind of strangled yelping. It seemed to come from the orchard. Now, had I not done an unexpected thing, and taken to the lane instead of going through the vegetable garden, I might never have surprised the evil thing in its devilry. As I broke into the lane I saw in the dusk a crouching figure slip out of the hedge and make off. I recognized the Snipe slouch. I heard yet another strangled, smothering yelp. It came from beyond the hedge. Had the dog got caught in a snare? I vaulted the gate, and ran, and then I saw a thing that both agonized me and filled me with a wild anger, a little brown body twitching and struggling on the ground. I was down on my knees over the dog. The wire was tight round his throat. One could not get one's fingers under it, but the need was desperate. I had a jack-knife in my pocket, and I slipped the blade under the wire and managed to saw it through.

God, in time! The dog's eyes were bulging, and his tongue hanging out, but he was alive and breathing. He lay with heaving flanks and looked at

me, and then he gave a little wag of the tail. It said, "All right, master; you were not too late." I picked him up and carried him into the house. He licked one of my hands. I put him on a cushion in front of the fire, and watched him for half a minute, while I gently stroked his head. He was breathing easily now, and his eyes had become liquid and gentle.

But there was that other rage in me. I left him and ran. Had Snipe forced the dog into that snare, or had he just seen him in it, and done nothing? Did it matter? I knew the way the fellow took, and I caught him just beyond the cross-roads where the steep track plunges down White Beam Hill.

"Stop, you!"

He turned and glared at me, but his face was dead white.

"What's wrong?"

Apparently he did not know that I had seen him slip out of the hedge-bottom.

"You know, you beast. Did you put the dog's head in that snare?"

He snarled.

"What are you talkin' about? I don't know what you mean?"

"You lying brute."

And then I smashed my fist in his face. Coward he might be, but he must have hated me pretty badly, for he made a fight of it, and I was glad. His yokel's toughness was a boon to my fury. I don't know how often I hit him; he went down twice, only to get up and come at me again, but my last blow caught him on the point of the jaw and he crumpled up in the ditch. I dragged him out by the collar, and tumbled him into the lane. My rage was still at full blast and I'm afraid I used my boot on him, ribs, buttocks and belly. He squirmed helplessly, and I saw his terrified eyes in a face that was all blood.

At last my fury was satisfied. I stood over him, panting.

"You swine," I said; "that will teach you to do that to a dog."

He snarled at me.

"I'll have the law on you."

"Get up and go to hell and the police, and tell them I thrashed you for trying to murder my dog."

“That’s a lie.”

“Say that again and I’ll thrash you some more.”

I think he was utterly scared of me by now, and he must have known that I was wiser than he had guessed. He got up slowly, cringing away from me, and his evil face was furtive.

“You blighter.”

“By God,” said I. “If you——”

But he was up and floundering down the lane and before he disappeared in the dusk I saw him turn his head and look at me over his shoulder. He was like a frightened, vicious animal, cowed, yet showing bared teeth. I heard his clumsy, scuffling feet go down the hill, and that was the end of Snipe so far as I was concerned. He did nothing about it. The story he might have to tell was not tellable, even by Snipe.

I went back to the house and the dog. I had slammed the front door after me, and when I reached the gate I heard a hoarse barking. Charles was there to welcome me though his throat was sore. I picked him up and held his head against my face, and his fore-paws went round my neck.

“No more Snipe, Charles,” I said. “I wish you could tell me whether he forced that wire over your head.”

The dog licked my face, and the anger died down in me. I went and sat by the fire with the dog on my knees; he gazed up into my face and every now and again wagged his tail.

Charles’s throat had been badly bruised, and for a day or two he could not manage biscuits. I fed him on bread and milk and minced meat, and before putting his nose into the dish he would give my hand a kiss. No wonder I loved the little creature.

I was glad to be alone again on my land. Spring was in the air, and the brown soil waiting for the seed. At such a time the countryman’s heart seems to swell in him. Life, that mysterious essence, is surging upwards like the sap. I was one of those impatient enthusiasts who would hurry up nature, quicken her rhythm, see her in flower a month before her season. How much I had to learn! One’s impetuous labour may be wasted. Frosts will chasten man’s forwardness. That spring taught me much. My early potatoes were frosted. My lettuce seedlings were pulled to pieces by the birds who welcomed this early salading. My broad beans and peas came up patchily.

But all this set me cogitating and contriving and resisting. I was reading a good deal, and digesting it and reflecting upon what I read. I came across a monograph on old Dutch market-gardening, and another on French cloche-culture. Trapping the sunlight! I was ready to experiment on my own, the more so perhaps because I had not come to the job clogged with rustic dogma.

But I had to christen that spring and summer my “Battle With Weeds”. I don’t suppose that any townsman realizes what weeds can do and mean. He is a mere creature of pavements and of tarmac, and his contact with nature may be limited to pottering about a suburban back-garden. Nor did I foresee the fight that lay before me on land that had been allowed to go native and to scatter its wild harvest upon the soil. Even the orchard turf that we had dug in seemed to have preserved millions of dormant seeds. I had now three acres of arable to keep clean, and there were times when the business frightened me. I saw myself and my crops being overwhelmed by this green flood. These weeds seemed to come up like mustard and cress, every sort of weed, nettle, dock, thistle, dandelion, cat’s-ear, sorrel, ox-eyed daisy, chickweed, ragwort, fat-hen, dead-nettle, shepherds-purse, pimpernel, the various grasses. I hoed like hell, but I was not yet expert with the hoe, and I scuffled some weeds in instead of leaving them with their roots exposed to the sun. I tried to cover too much ground. I was not always wise as to the weather, or perhaps, the luck of the year was against me. I would seize what promised to be a fine day, and get my hoe out for the slaughter, and by the afternoon the sky would change and rain refresh the wilting plague. The vitality of the weed-world amazed me. It was both frightening and exasperating. The wretched things would lie there, and somehow insinuate their roots back into the soil. I found fat-hen the most damnable weed of all; even a day’s hot sunlight failed to settle it. I had so much to learn in my proddings and hackings. I was to discover that a day’s work with the hoe when the beastly things were in the two-leaf phase would save one immense toil and frustration. Weeds in the spring seem to have more vitality than the July progeny. Hack their little heads off in May, and the crop is discouraged. Be sure of your weather. Wait for a week of drought and wind and hot sun, and then go for the beasts like blazes.

I was a mere mechanism of flesh and blood, but I was a mechanism that could tire and ache and lose its temper. Where did the brain come in? Surely, man’s ingenuity should have circumvented this eternal toil? I had read in my book about horse-hoeing, but I had no horse, and I did not want to add to my labour as yet by having a horse to care for. I discovered that the Americans manufactured a small motor-cultivator, but it cost money, and I did not know

whether the thing was reliable. So, I hoed and hoed. I had my birds to feed and water, houses to clean, and the first hatch from my incubator had been lucky, and the youngsters were with the foster-mother in the Blackthorn front garden. I was discovering how various were the jobs for which I was responsible, and that one could not go slack on them. Eternal attention to detail. If you did not turn your eggs and look to your lamps three weeks of work were wasted and ended in disaster. The more tired I became, the more furiously I fussed. I was short of temper. I even lost my temper once with poor Charles because he loitered on his last prowl when I wanted to go to bed.

I cursed him, and gave him a shove with my toe.

He growled at me in protest; his dignity had been hurt.

I shall never forget his apologies. He was in a state of emotion. He stood on the stairs and argle-bargled, and wept. I could understand now what he was trying to tell me, and my heart was touched.

“Don’t be harsh with me, master. A dog has his business and his duties. I’m not a silly fool dog. I’m hurt.”

I was full of remorse for my loss of temper. I had to pick him up and cuddle him, and he wept, and kissed me.

“I’m sorry I growled.”

I said, “I’m sorry I was a rough lout. Forget it.”

So, we went to bed reconciled, and he lay for a while with his chin on my shoulder, making little loving noises, happy and satisfied sighs.

I know now that I was very near breaking during those months of spring and early summer. I lost weight, and was fine drawn and tense. I had the needle. I even dropped my day-book, for it would have been full of grumbles and grouses. I think the dog’s sweet nature helped to keep me going, though even he could not lighten my labour. His little needs added to it. I often wonder whether I should have cracked, and banged the door on my experiment, but for the coming of that extraordinary creature—Will.

We were having a June heat-wave, and I had been cutting the long grass in the orchard. In my wilfulness I was insisting upon teaching myself to scythe, but the scythe belongs to another and quieter age and generation, though the blade still has its uses in odd corners. But I could not master the tool, nor get that easy swing from the hips, or sharpen the blade as it should

be sharpened. I kept digging the point into the ground. What with the heat and overwork, I lost my temper. I heaved the thing away. It landed on its blade, bounced in the air, and then subsided into the long, uncut grass. I took out a crumpled handkerchief and wiped my face. It was then that I discovered that I was not alone. I saw a figure leaning upon the field-gate leading into the lane, a figure that looked all brown. So, that exhibition of temper and of futility had been observed, and I was angry.

“Hallo, what do you want here?”

I walked towards the gate, but about five yards from it I paused and stood still, I saw a large, loose-limbed, hairy creature who might have been a tramp. He wore a battered old hat, and he had a sack slung over one shoulder. His face looked all tawny grizzled hair. But it was the man’s eyes that sobered me. They were like a dog’s eyes, blue and gentle, and a little puzzled, and somehow profoundly sad. He looked lost and tired. For some seconds we just stared at each other, and I was conscious of feeling touched by the indefinable sadness of the fellow.

I said, “Sorry. It’s all right. On the road?”

He answered with a slow movement of the head. I don’t know why but I liked the man’s hairy, dog-like face, and those sad and steadfast eyes.

“Want a place for the night?”

His eyes stared.

“A bit of hay in a barn would do me.”

“Had anything to eat?”

He unslung his sack.

“I’ve a bit of bread and cheese, master.”

“We can do better than that.”

He looked at me fixedly, and rather like a dog who has been welcomed, and had expected other things.

“I can do a job for it.”

“Country, aren’t you?”

“Sure-ly. Been on a farm all my life.”

That puzzled me, and I wondered why he was on the road, for countrymen stay put.

“Well, come on in. It’s about tea-time. I can manage you some eggs, and bread and cheese.”

He climbed over the gate, and stood straight and head in air. His eyes were steady, and I seemed to gauge the strength and the toughness of his tall, lean body.

“Thank ’e, ssir. I’ll be glad to get off the road.”

We walked together towards the house, and I saw him looking about him with a countryman’s eyes. Charles had been asleep in the garden. Maybe he had sensed my chafed temper, and had thought it best to leave me alone. He was up with his sharp, challenging bark. He came trotting towards us. The man stopped, stooped and put out a hand.

Nothing was said. Charles looked, smiled, waggled his rump, and then licked the big man’s hand.

That was an omen. I took the stranger into the kitchen, and sat him down, and put the kettle on the stove. He sat for a minute watching me, and waiting as though he expected something in petticoats to appear. I went into the dairy for eggs, butter and cheese.

“Like them boiled or fried?”

Suddenly he stood up.

“Be you all alone, ssir?”

“Yes. I and the dog.”

“Maybe I can help ’ee.”

“Maybe you can.”

He asked me if he could have a wash before touching the food, and I pointed him to the basin in the sink, and while he washed and I fried eggs, we talked. I asked him his name and where he came from. His name was Will Lavender, and he had come out of Sussex, but not directly so. His feet had carried him as far as Devon and up through Somerset and Gloucester to the Welsh Marches. He said that he had worked for two months on a Welsh farm, but he had felt too much of a stranger there. And all the while I was wondering what had pulled him up by the roots and sent him wandering.

“There you are, Will.”

I placed the eggs before him, and he sat staring at them like a man saying a silent grace.

“You should not be waiting on me, ssir.”

“Why not? I’m host. I’ll leave you to it, after I’ve had a fill from your teapot.”

He looked hungry, and I felt that he would be happier eating by himself, and I had got my own tray ready. I filled my very large cup from the communal teapot, and carried the tray into the parlour. Charles went with me. I shut the door. I was interested in this sad, shaggy creature in his funny old clothes. I divined a tragedy somewhere. Had Will been in prison, and cut himself off from his own little world? Perhaps? I did not hurry my tea. I was tired. I lit a pipe, and let myself relax in my chair. I wondered what he had thought about my tantrums over the scythe. Presently it did occur to me that he would like some cake or a fill of tobacco. I got up, opened the door, and walked down the passage into the kitchen. It was empty.

My first thought was that the fellow had eaten my food and then done a bunk, perhaps with——But that was a mean bit of suspicion. I saw his sack hanging over the back of the chair. Maybe he had tobacco of his own, and was smoking a pipe and looking over the place. I went out and called to him.

“Lavender.”

There was no response and I walked out of the yard to the vegetable garden and orchard. And then I saw him. He had his coat off and his sleeves turned up, and he was scything the grass where I had left it. I drew near and stood and watched him, and saw how beautifully he swung the scythe. It seemed so douce and easy, but what moved me more than his skill at the job was his tackling of it, the goodwill of the deed, the pride that wished to pay for services rendered.

His back was towards me, and he did not hear me as I crossed the orchard, and the only sound to be heard was the swish-swish of the sweeping blade. Will seemed utterly sunk in his labour, as though he loved it, and was happy in it, and was soothed by the familiar sounds and movements. He had an old pipe stuck in his mouth, and I saw that the pipe was smokeless.

“That’s not the first time you’ve handled a scythe, Will.”

He finished the stroke, turned, took his pipe out of his mouth, and smiled at me.

“I was a nipper o’ fifteen when my fayther taught me.”

“It’s a lovely craft.”

“It be that, ssir, but terrifyin’ to the loins if you be raw to it.”

“Like me. Could you teach me to scythe?”

“Surely, ssir. Practice makes perfect.”

I pulled my pouch out of my pocket.

“Have a fill.”

“Thankee, ssir, but I don’t hold with smoking when I be working.”

“Never mind. There’s no hurry. Fill up. We’ll talk a bit, and then you can give me a lesson.”

He accepted my pouch, and I watched his fingers fill the old pipe lovingly. I began to feel that this man could be a restful creature.

X

WE sat on cushions of mown grass, smoked our pipes, and stared at everything and at nothing in particular. Charles was lying at my feet, nibbling the green bents my scythe had brushed and failed to cut. I was wanting to ask Will why he was on the road, but I felt shy of probing a possible tragedy. Moreover, this large, shaggy creature was no Sydney Snipe, but as sensitive and proud and reticent as some countrymen can be.

I said, "I'm afraid it will have to be the barn for you, Will, to-night. There's only one bed in the house as yet."

His answer was laconic.

"I've slep' in ditches, ssir, so a truss o' straw be as good as a feather-bed."

"Been on the road?"

He looked at me suddenly, and I paused. He looked away again, and bit hard on his pipe.

"I'll tell 'ee for why."

"No need, Will, unless——"

"Maybe I'd like 'ee to know. I lost my missus and my kid, all in one week, two years ago come Michaelmas. Sort of broke me up, ssir. Bin in the same cottage fifteen years. Couldn't stomach it, somehow. Always listening like for them, as would never come back. So, I pulls up the roots and goes walking. Many hundreds of miles I've walked, and found nothing to settle my empty belly. A homeless man, that be my trouble. Seems I be not meant for bodgering around. But there weren't no place that wanted me or made me feel at home."

It was a long speech for him, and he sat and drew at his pipe, and I felt touched by his simple confession.

"Bad luck, Will. I know what loneliness means. I think I should have gone off my nut, but for Charles there."

The dog turned his head and wagged a tail.

"Yes, a dog's a damned good friend. What are you going to do about it, Will?"

“Don’t know, ssir. Maybe, I’ll find a corner.”

“Want to stay put?”

“I sort of belong to the land, ssir. It be in my guts somehow. Now, I’d better be giving ’ee your lesson.”

He began by showing me how I should stand, with my feet well apart and my loins as a pivot for my swinging shoulders. I had not straddled the earth sufficiently and had kept my feet too near together. Will was like a golf-pro teaching a pupil the stance and the swing, but he was much gentler and less bumptious than any golf professional I have ever met. It was swing that did it; your body went with the stroke, and one should not snatch with one’s arms. He took the scythe and demonstrated the art to me, and it looked supremely easy. I was to cut a proper swathe, and not try to take too much with a stroke. Then, he sharpened the blade for me, and I watched the easy flick of the wrist.

“Getting t’edge be half the battle, ssir.”

There was no exhibitionism, no conceit in his mastery, and I was challenged by the dignity of the man. He was a bearded, homespun figure of Time giving to some other man of his strength and his knowledge. I saw the creases in his sun-tanned neck, and the deliberate movements of his sinewy hands.

“Now ’ee try, ssir.”

Strangely enough I did not feel shy before Will, and I did not mind him watching me. I got on better; I swung into the work, and my arms became struts between the scythe and my shoulders. Will was relighting his pipe.

“That be better, ssir.”

“I’ve got the feel of it, Will.”

“When ’ee’ve got that, ssir, you’ll forget you be doin’ it.”

“That’s art, the thing behind all doing.”

“Sure,” said he, “it be.”

Later I showed Will the barn, and said that I could find him a blanket, but somehow I did not like putting him in the barn. He could have one of the spare bedrooms, or the harness-room if he preferred it, and he could doss down there, but he chose the barn. Maybe, it was to him like some familiar sanctuary, smelling of country things, and permeated by the spirit of harvest. Here the sheaves had been piled, and on the threshing-floor the flails had

played. Men had laboured here. He hung his sack on a nail, and looked about him contentedly. I did not tell him how poor Lawless had died here.

“If you care to stay a day or two, Will, we could do better than this.”

“Maybe I could give ’ee a hand, ssir.”

“I’d be glad of it. You see, I’m still a bit new to the game.”

The strangest thing about the whole business was the casual way in which it settled itself. Neither I nor Will ever spoke deliberately of a permanent relationship. We just drifted into it. He came like Charles into my life, to remain in it, and to sweeten it, for this large shaggy creature had a most sweet temper, and if Charles was a Cairn, Will was more like a St. Bernard.

He was up before I was next day, and at work in the orchard. What was I going to do with the hay, if we made hay? I felt ashamed when I said that I had no use for it, or that we might give it away to Farmer Ballard who supplied us with milk. Will looked bothered. Almost I could feel him thinking that Blackthorn should possess a cow or a pony, and that the balance of my economy was wrong.

I left him scything and went in to get breakfast ready. Why should we not breakfast together for once? It would save time and labour. I put rashers and eggs into the frying-pan and filled the kettle, and laid the kitchen table. When the meal was ready I went out and called Will.

That was a strange meal. Will said grace for himself and for me, and I felt that I was breaking my fast with a bearded apostle. But there was a shy dumbness about him to begin with until I took courage and told him in the simplest language what my ideas were, and how I hoped to carry them out.

“One ought to live off the land, Will, like the old people did.”

“Surely, ssir.”

“After all, sugar and tea are about the only items one can’t produce for oneself.”

“And baccy,” said Will.

“And baccy. And boots, for that matter. But it ought to be a good life, and I am trying to learn it.”

“It be a good life, ssir,” said Will.

He was munching slowly, and staring, blue-eyed, out of the window. I had a feeling that I had infected him with my inspiration, or rather that it was instinct in him, and only needed expressing.

“You ought to keep a cow, ssir.”

“I might. But I can’t milk.”

“I could teach ’ee that.”

“Could we drink all the milk?”

“We could make butter, ssir. And the skim be good for pigs. You ought to keep a pig or two, ssir. There be four good sties. A little patching would put they in order.”

So absorbed did we become in the discussion that we lit our pipes and went for a stroll round the buildings and the estate. I was quite frank with Will. I told him the state of my finances, that I had not much margin for sudden adventures, and that my plan was to expand gradually. He appeared to know much more about farm finance than I should have expected, and when I confessed that labour was the problem he agreed with me.

And there we left theory for a while, and concentrated on practice. Will had a look at the fields. He seemed able to gauge their acreage by vision, without pacing out the boundaries. He eyed the weeds, and grubbed up some of the surface soil and fingered it, squeezing it in his palm.

“I guess it might grow wheat, ssir. Barley and oats for certain. And roots, and spuds. Good for poultry too. And down by t’ brook that there grass should be good grazing, specially with a dose o’ slag. It be a pretty place, sir, but dirty.”

I laughed.

“Some job getting it back into condition.”

“Just muck and sweat, ssir. That’s where a little stock be useful. Pig dung be good for lightish land. I guess two hard-working chaps who were willing t’ live hard could make it pay.”

“It’s life, not profit, Will. After all——”

He looked hard at me.

“I reckon you ben’t no fool, ssir, but God wise. I tell ’ee, often have I felt like that. But then, you see, a chap like me ’asn’t the chance.”

We worked all that day at haymaking, Will scything, and I turning the swathes to dry, and cutting odd corners with a fagging hook. We had no transport save my wheelbarrow, so Will suggested that we should build our stack in a corner of the orchard, when the crop was ready to carry. I had a few spare sheets of corrugated iron, and we could use them instead of thatching. Will could thatch, but I had no straw. So, three days passed, and the weather held good, and we built our stack. Will said I might sell the hay if I had no use for it. I found him turning to on all sorts of jobs; he pumped the water, cut firewood, cleaned out the poultry houses, hoed my implacable enemies, the weeds. On the Saturday I took Charles and the combination into Dorking, and bought extra stores, a cheap iron bedstead and mattress and pillows, sheets and blankets, etc. I pretended to myself that I might just as well furnish a spare room.

A week passed, and Will was still with us. He mealed in the kitchen, I in the parlour, but he was such a quiet creature that you would not have known that he was in the house. On the evening of the seventh day, I called him into the parlour and offered him my pouch.

“What do I owe you, Will?”

“Nowt, ssir.”

“Oh, come, that’s nonsense.”

But he would not take a sixpence from me. He said that he had had bed and board and company. He stood there filling his pipe with an air of complete serenity.

“Look here, Will,” said I; “a labourer’s worthy of his hire, and if——”

We looked at each other.

“Five bob a week and my keep would do me, ssir. Money ben’t the end of everything.”

“Well, you’ll have to get out of the barn.”

“For why, ssir?”

“Into something better. You can have one of the back rooms, or that little place over the harness-room. As a matter of fact I’ve bought some extra furniture.”

He smiled at me in his slow, deliberate way, a smile that was so unlike Snipe’s smirk.

“Thank ’ee, ssir. Somehow this place o’ yours begins to feel like home.”

Will chose the room over the harness-room and I understood his choice. It would feel more like his own than a room in the house. I gave him some paint and distemper, curtains and an old rug, and the new furniture, and the contents of his sack, all his worldly possessions, came to rest here. When the little room was cleaned and garnished he showed it to me with pride, and upon the deal table I saw a photograph and a Bible. So this big, shaggy, simple creature read his Bible! Will, seeing that I was looking at his table, took the photograph in his big, work-hardened hands, and passed it to me. He spoke not a word, and all that I said was after I had gazed at the faces of the woman and the child, "Hard fortune, Will. She had a gentle, happy face."

"Ah, ssir," said he, "she was a good woman was my Ruth, not chapel-good, but sweet and wholesome."

As to finance, our agreement did not end here. I told Will that he must take his worker's wage, and that as the enterprise progressed I would raise it weekly until he was drawing the proper rate of pay. He was helping me move one of the poultry houses into a new grass-run, and as he swung the end of the house round towards the opening in the wire his shaggy face peered at me round the corner of it.

"Maybe I ben't after money, ssir."

"But, Will——"

"Didn't I hear 'ee say that living came before profits?"

"Yes, but——"

Will gave the house a heave.

"What does my Book say? Lay up your treasure in heaven——What does it profit a man, ssir? Maybe I too put living before filthy lucre. And I'll tell 'ee for why. There ben't no one for me to save for now. I've got a roof and a bed and food, and a job to spend myself on."

He gave the house another heave.

"Aye, and more than that, ssir; you've been a friend to me. You wait till we've got the job going. Maybe I'll take a bit more then for clothes, boots and baccy."

I looked hard at him.

"Do you mean that, Will?"

“Sure-ly.”

“Then it’s a gentleman’s bargain. And let me tell you you won’t lose by it.”

The coming of Will Lavender gave me just that strong help and feeling of comradeship that I had needed. I had a shipmate on the raft, and the signal of distress could be taken down. If I infected Will with my enthusiasm, he prompted me to lay out more capital for, with his wise hands to help me, things would not go amiss. If I was David, he was God’s prophet. We made more hay, and though it was on the rough side, it would serve, and we stored it in the barn, and whenever I entered that black building the sweet smell of the dried grasses seemed to sweeten its dark and sad interior. We dug up more ground, and sowed swedes and turnips for winter feed.

I bought a short-horn cow who was in milk, or rather, I should say that Will made the bargain and cast his professional eye over Daisy’s udder and escutcheon, and I wrote the cheque.

I bought a small hand-churn, milk pans, a butter board, cans, “Scotch Hands” and scoops.

We had our own milk. I was to hear the flip-flop of the churn as either I or Will turned it.

My first milking lesson was rather a disaster. I must have been heavy in hand, and Daisy sent me and the stool flying.

And Will laughed.

“I’ll show ’ee, ssir, agen.”

Daisy was as meek as milk with him, and the teats purred their milk into the pail. He told me to slip in and slide into his place, but Daisy turned her head to look, and Will had to snatch the pail away, for Daisy was not fooled so easily, but in the course of two or three weeks, and after much courting of the lady I did manage to learn the job.

Will said that we must have a cat.

This bothered me. What about Charlie?

Will said that it was up to a farmyard cat to deal with mice and rats.

I compromised, and bought a kitten in Brandon, and we named her Fluff. As for Charles, he accepted the creature, and in a short time they were friends, so much so that when Fluff became woman she would lie and lick Charles's head. He liked this tongue-grooming, and all was peace between them.

I knew that Will was itching for a plough. He seized every spare hour he could, and taking his scythe, strode out into the Five Acre and cut down the jungle growth of weeds. I bought a second scythe and joined him. We piled the weeds into cocks and burned them, and spread the ashes over the field.

“Ah,” said Will, “it would be ripe for ploughing in September.”

I was drawing out an estate map, giving my evenings to it, and I was renaming the fields and woods. Will would join me, and together we pored over the plan. There was the “Five Acre”, “Brook Bottom”, “Ploughman’s Pride”, “Orchard Close”, “Beechhanger”, “The Paddock”. We had about twenty-five acres of grass, and thirty of potential arable. There was a fascination in casting up acres and yields. I drew out a table of possible yields, and how we could play with our crops.

Potatoes.....	7	tons	per	acre.
Wheat.....	17	cwts.	„	„
Barley.....	15	„	„	„
Oats.....	14	„	„	„
Field Beans.....	17	„	„	„
Field Peas.....	15	„	„	„
Turnips and Swedes.....	13	„	„	„
Cabbage.....	30	„	„	„
Mangel.....	25	„	„	„

These were average figures as passed by Will. I worked out how much grain was needed per year for my poultry-flock, and how much ground would be absorbed in growing it. Also, how much food Daisy would consume. How much we should need for ourselves. I went into food values, proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins. Will boggled a bit over the biochemical side of the problem, but I think he approved of my thoroughness.

But the problem was the plough.

One horse could draw a light plough. A horse would give us dung, but more work to do. Even Daisy was teaching me how livestock can lie heavy

on your hands.

I talked to Will of a tractor. The initial expense would be heavy; also, as Will pointed out, our acreage was not sufficiently large to justify the outlay. I said we could hire out the machine to other farmers.

“Yes,” said Will, “and they would be fussing for it when we wanted it ourselves.”

My C.G.A. catalogue was listing a machine called the Multi-Culto, built by an English firm, and when I wrote and made inquiries of the C.G.A. they said that the machine was somewhat experimental and more suited for market-gardening than farming, but they had tested one out and proved its value. The Multi-Culto would plough light soil. It had a reaping outfit that could be attached and would mow hay and standing crops. It would take out potato drills and earth them up, hoe, cultivate, scuffle. The engine was of 2½ h.p. or 5 h.p. and economical in the matter of petrol and oil.

Will and I pored over the picture of this machine like two boys coveting a model-engine in a shop window. It was I who suggested that we should write and ask for a field-demonstration. It need not commit us to anything.

“I should want to see she do everything,” said Will.

“Plough, and reap and hoe.”

“Sure-ly. Maybe just a new-fangled toy, sort of thing they spill on Town gentlemen.”

“Like me, Will!”

He looked shocked.

“Oh, no, ssir. You be, already, a man o’ your hands.”

“Thanks, Will. Well, let’s have a demonstration. I see this thing is rather like a motor-bike with side wheels and plough-stilts. Ever driven a motor-bike?”

“No, ssir.”

“I’d better give you some lessons on mine. Tit for tat, Will. I’ve got you there.”

He smiled his slow smile.

“That be right, ssir. I should want to handle she myself afore deciding.”

So, I wrote to the firm, telling them I was a member of the Country Gentlemen's Association, and asking them to demonstrate the Multi-Culto to us. I received a polite reply, offering to bring a machine and show off its paces on any day we cared to choose. I chose a Wednesday, the seventh day of the month. It could not be the seventh month, for that was behind us.

XI

THE machine arrived in a lorry, attended by a mechanic and a very polite young salesman. The machine was all red and green, fresh and new, with aluminium engine-cover, and yellow stilts. A couple of stout planks served for the unloading of the beast, and Will and I stood and studied it.

“What would you like me to show you, sir?”

I looked at Will, who fixed his blue eyes on the polite young man.

“All she can do, beginning with ploughing.”

The polite young man was for it, but being an enthusiast he welcomed thoroughness and perspicacity. The gear was unloaded from the lorry, with Charles sniffing about at all these strange objects.

“Where is your ploughland, sir?”

“Over there.”

“I see. Well, we’ll trundle the machine over, and fix the plough there. I’ll show you how to start her. The main thing, when you give her the load, is to be gentle with the clutch.”

After several turns of the handle “Bonzo” came to life with sharp detonations. His barking challenged Charles, whose hair and ears went up. I can still see the red and green machine trundling towards the Five Acre, with Charles chasing it and barking furiously close to the polite young gentleman’s legs.

The plough was attached, and the demonstrator placed himself between the stilts. The mechanic started the engine, and our amateur ploughman let in the clutch, speeded up, and drove the share into the weedy soil. I was squatting and holding the indignant Charles lest he should rush too near the machine and get hurt, but Will stalked along beside the Multi-Culto, watching it with a professional eye. The polite young man was an amateur ploughman, and the pull of the stilts shook his shoulders, and his furrow was none too straight, but the plough sliced the soil neatly enough.

They turned and came back towards us, and it was obvious that the young man was not troubling about crown-furrows. He just took out another trough, throttled back, smiled at me, and stopped.

“Like to try, sir?”

Will was examining the work. He dug a hand into the turned soil.

“She ought to plough deeper than that.”

“She will. You see——”

Will came over, and put himself between the stilts.

“Maybe I can handle she.”

I must say I was astonished by the way Will took charge of the machine. I had given him three lessons on my motor-bike, and he set off with Bonzo as though born to it. There was no shudder about his shoulders. He and the machine seemed one, and the furrow he ploughed was straight, and deeper than the showman’s. He turned and came back, banking the second slice against the first, but two furrows did not satisfy him. He went on ploughing for ten minutes, while we stood and watched.

“She’ll do ’t, ssir.”

But that was only the beginning of things. The plough was removed, and the tool-table attached, and Will tried out the cultivators and the skim-hoes, and when he had satisfied himself that these functioned efficiently, he demanded a demonstration of the reaper-attachment. This took some little time to fit, and I could see Will looking for a trial patch where his scythe had not been busy. He chose a corner of the Brook Bottom, and Bonzo rattled down there with the knife lashed up. The young gentleman demonstrated, and I could tell by Will’s face that he was not wholly satisfied with the result.

“She don’t cut close enough, ssir.”

He rubbed the point into the demonstrator, who was really a very decent lad, and receptive of ideas.

“That’s what I’ve been telling our people. We are always glad of practical criticism. I think one could work out a lower setting.”

Will stroked his blond beard. We looked at each other, and I waited upon Will.

“I wouldn’t be taking that there contraption, ssir.”

“You mean the machine?”

“No. The reaper. I’d be waiting for some’at better.”

We looked at each other questioningly. Did Will approve of the Multi-Culto as a practical proposition?

I said, "I'd like to talk things over with my foreman. Any guarantee?"

"A year, sir, in reason of course. My firm is out to make this machine go big. I assure you we'll meet you in every way."

And there the matter rested for the moment, and I asked the salesman in to drink a mug of beer. I could see that he was loth to have Bonzo reloaded on to the lorry. He hoped to leave him with us. So Charles and I and the showman walked up to the house, leaving Will with Bonzo and the mechanic, nor did it occur to me that there may be a different code of honour between working-men when mere business is out of the picture. Both Will and the mechanic happened to be enthusiasts, each in his own way, and Will had remained behind to pump the other fellow and unearth possible defects.

I drew the salesman a mug of beer, and asked him how long the Multi-Culto had been on the market.

"Three years, sir. Well, here's hoping!"

I laughed. He was a pleasant lad. I filled a pipe and he lit a cigarette.

He said, "We tested the machine out for two years before putting it on the market. Oh, yes, we found a lot of snags. There is a good deal of vibration. Our first product shook herself to pieces. But I assure you, sir, it is a sound job, and we are out to make good any defects free of charge."

"That sounds very fair. Now, what's the total cost, machine and equipment?"

"Without the reaper?"

"Yes."

He produced a trade list and a pen, and jotted down the items on the back of an envelope I provided. The sum came to about sixty-five pounds. It seemed a large slice cut out of my capital, and I was sucking my pipe and reflecting upon it when Will appeared at the window.

"Can I have a word with 'ee, ssir?"

I went out to him, and he led me to the far corner of the house.

"It beun't a swindle, ssir. I've pumped that there chap. He's helped to make they machines, and he be——"

Will hesitated.

“He’s got a worker’s conscience, Will?”

“Yes, ssir.”

“I think we’ll buy. It’s a big item, but——”

Will’s face lit up.

“Why, ssir, she’ll save us time and backache. I reckon she’ll do more hoeing in an afternoon than a chap could do in four days. You’ll be able to seize the weather. She ought to last us for years.”

“Find out any snags, Will?”

“One or two, ssir, but they be wise to ’em, and that chap, he says his firm be honest.”

“Well, we’ll buy, Will.”

So, Bonzo stayed with us.

We were both to bless Bonzo and to curse him, but the blessings far outweighed the curses, for this machine was to save us time and labour, and without it we could not have done the things we did. Bonzo had his bad days. He shook his petrol-tank loose; the magneto was apt to slip its timing-gear, and after a particularly heavy bit of ploughing we found that the axle-shaft had developed a twist. But the firm kept the promises the salesman had made to me. They issued us with stouter brackets for the petrol-tank, and presented us with a new main axle free of charge. They had a service-round, and a traveling mechanic fitted the new shaft for us, and incidentally Will picked his brains.

I was astonished at the way Will tackled the machine and made himself familiar with its intricacies, and when I congratulated him, he gave me his slow, apostolic smile. He explained that in his time he had had to keep farm machinery in going order, that he had run an oil-engine and a circular saw, a grinding mill, and a thresher. There seemed to be nothing that Will did not know about in labour on the land, and I could bless the chance that had brought him to my gate.

Yet, Will had his limitations. He could not initiate, and by that I mean that he was a master of practice and routine, but he could not cast about for new ideas. Somehow, he had not realized that to make an economic success of growing things you must be two weeks ahead of the other fellow, and five

years ahead of him in your imaginative take-off. Now, Bonzo had set me thinking. Bonzo was a symbol. He represented new ideas, not only in the matter of equipment, but in the uses of that equipment. It seemed to me that one had to specialize, and through it create one's market. What of the Wise Virgins? Even a glance into greengrocers' shops challenged you with what was obvious. When were crops luxury crops, and when did they pay? When you had lettuces and tomatoes and new potatoes and strawberries to sell when the other fellow hadn't. How did one get such early crops? Glass-houses, heat. But the financing of a glass-house business was beyond me. I had been reading in my old books about cloches, and cloches were coming in again. Glass, trapped sunlight, protection from damp and frosts. A part of me began to think in terms of glass.

But, primarily, I kept to my plan for self-sufficiency. I know that self-sufficiency in national economy has been scoffed at, especially so in England whose food supply depends upon the manufactured goods she exports, and yet I had a feeling that some day Wise Virgins in England would be fortunate people. There was a fascination for me in the nice balance of self-security. My motto was "Fill your own larder before you sell."

So, casting up my account of self-produced commodities, I could, that September, boast of a useful list.

We had our own

Eggs.

Milk.

Butter.

Eating Cockerels.

Rabbits.

Apples.

Potatoes.

Green vegetables.

Kindling and logs for the fire.

Hay, roots and kale for Daisy.

We had to buy

Bread.x Corn and meal for the poultry.x

Flour.x

Butchers' Meat.x

Jam.x

Tea.

Coffee.

Sugar.

Coal.

Clothes.

Boots.

Tobacco.

Beer.x

As I compared the lists I put a cross against the commodities for which it was possible for us to be self-sufficient. It left me with my mystic number seven, products we could not hope to create. But on the positive side the number was fifteen. I am afraid I did not include soap, baking-powder, condiments and petrol in my negative catalogue!

I showed the lists to Will and asked him if he did not agree that a piece of land could make you almost self-supporting. He did agree. The idea piqued him. And then his blue eyes twinkled at me, but he was dumb.

“What’s the joke, Will?”

“I reckon we’d be beat over bread, and jam and beer, ssir.”

“How?”

“It’s a woman’s job,” and the implication was obvious.

But I did begin to realize that we could do much more towards making ourselves self-sufficient if we possessed the necessary equipment, and as my final plan began to shape itself I drew out a list of the things that would be needed. It behoved us to grow our own wheat, oats and barley, and the following spring I sowed experimental plots with these cereals, and with field peas and beans. Will did not crab the experiment, as well he might have done.

Our plots did well. It delighted me to see the oats and wheat spearing up, putting forth their ears, and changing colour. I was evolving ideas for dealing with these trial crops. I thought that I could create some contraption to knock or rub the grain out, and I put together some weird gadgets. I tried

my hand at a small winnowing machine, and Will was kind to me by being dumb. God knows what sniggers of supercilious scorn my efforts would have roused in Sydney Snipe, but Will was not a Snipe.

Our crops ripened and we harvested them. I found that I could knock out the oats and the peas with a flexible rod, but then came the cleaning. My winnower did not work. I tried a large hand-fan with a paddle of ply-board. It fanned some of the chaff away, but the labour involved was utterly wasteful.

As for the wheat it refused utterly to come cleanly out of the ear when I whacked at it.

I felt both exasperated and humbled.

“I’ve made rather a mess of this, Will.”

He did not gloat over my failure as Snipe would have done. I think he understood that I was learning.

“Don’t ’ee fret, ssir. I’ll flail out that there wheat.”

He made a flail of ash and leather, and beat out the wheat on the barn floor. We set both doors open when a high wind was blowing, and the draught carried off much of the chaff. But it was not a clean sample, and when I began to think in acres instead of in rods, I gauged the nature of the problem, and the labour that was involved.

“We need a thresher, Will.”

He pointed out to me that our crops could be threshed for us, but that for the amount we might grow the process would not be an economic proposition. I was becoming a fanatic about my plan. Was there not a machine on the market that would serve the needs of a small-holder? I wrote to the C.G.A. There was such a machine. The firm of Garvie of Aberdeen turned out threshers of all sizes.

Well, supposing I bought a threshing-machine and we could thresh our wheat and oats and barley, what then?

We should have grain for our poultry, but no meal, and no flour for ourselves.

Moreover, what was going to work the thresher?

We needed power, a prime-mover.

We needed a grinding mill.

I went into the question of power. It appeared that a 5 h.p. oil-engine would give us the power necessary for most of our activities. It would drive a small thresher, a mill, a circular saw. It might also be used to drive a dynamo and give us light.

I had nearly seven hundred pounds of my floating capital left, and after writing to the various firms for figures I dotted down the outlay.

A Lister 5 h.p. Oil-Engine.....	£45	0	0
A Crushing and Grinding Mill.....	13	16	0
A Circular Saw Bench.....	12	6	6
A Garvie Threshing Machine.....	65	0	0

One hundred and thirty-six pounds, two shillings and sixpence! It was a large slice of my liquid capital, but could money be better spent upon an equipment that would make my scheme practicable and render us independent of outside help?

I put it to Will, and in his deliberate way he considered the problem. I was getting to know my Will. When he was excited about anything his eyes became more blue, and stood out on stalks.

“Sure, ssir, we shouldn’t have to go to nobody for nothing.”

“Cock snooks at the whole world.”

“I’d be sure the engine had enough power, ssir.”

“Rather, Will, or we should look fools.”

“What ’ud the oil cost, ssir?”

“I’ll find that out.”

“And where’d we put it?”

“Why not in the barn? We could fix the engine, and the mill and the thresher on the old threshing floor, and have our crops ready to hand. We could barrow the grain to the granary.”

“Take some fixing, ssir. Have to bed the engine and mill down.”

“Well, we could do it ourselves, concrete and bolts.”

“Surely.”

“And we could put the thresher on wheels, and trundle her up to belt up to the engine. Let’s go and look.”

We went and looked.

I dare say there are people who would accuse me of complete selfishness. My inspiration was for self-sufficiency, security. Very good, but might not such a concern as ours prove a little rock in a sea of chaos. What if war came? What if our supplies of grain and meal and cake were cut off or catastrophically reduced? Would the sentimentalists still sneer at me? I think the land teaches one a certain ruthlessness, the efficient fore-thinking hardihood which our easy-asy, sentimental country was in danger of losing. What of scientific self-reliance in a crisis? We had been so accustomed to turning taps and pressing buttons and getting tinned food at the grocers that we did not realize how parasitic we had become. We would give the world radio-sets or something, and the world would always feed us.

I suppose some form of collectivism is inevitable in the future, but being an individualist I did not welcome it, and even my farming was individual. Moreover, I believed that in rural England collectivism might be based upon a system of small units, and in fact become a glorified market-garden, but without the hideousness of mere cabbage culture. The country mind is individual and would remain so. At least I hoped so. And the country mind and its steadfastness and its products would be all the more necessary, both psychologically and in economies, even if the world-state developed. And that would be a long way off. Before it arrived I postulated a period of violence and chaos, hunger and penury, with the soil and its products of more value than gold-dust. Useful tools, useful machines, fruitful earth, strong hands, wise heads, courage and enterprise would be real riches. Even my so-called selfish planning might be not only of supreme value to its creator, but to others. We should be Corn in Egypt. People would crowd to such as us for our wheat, milk, eggs, fruit, vegetables. All the Unwise Virgins would be on our doorstep. They might even come as plundering furies, and one might have to protect one's produce with a gun.

“Fools!”

Sometimes my separative self exulted a little over the world's silliness.

Sometimes I saw myself and Will as pioneers in a new social scheme, not clerkly people, sitters on chairs, scribblers, but as husbandmen, strong, shrewd in our knowledge, peasant-folk who would survive and succour others when a prostituted Paris became a city of starved rats.

XII

WE bought our Lister engine, thresher, circular saw bench, and mill, and how we gloated over them and caressed them. We would bullock our way through the day's work, and hurry to the barn and our new treasures. Even Charles became a little jealous of these machines, and I would find him poking his nose against my leg and whickering, "What about me, master? What about my evening patrol?" Somehow, I never could resist the dog, and I would take him off for a twenty-minutes' ramble round the farm. When we set out he would bark and laugh all over his face, and playfully nip my leg.

"Yes, you've got a way with you, you little beggar!"

Charles would be satisfied, and would return to the barn with me and lie down on a sack with his hind legs stretched out, and watch our activities.

Our first job was to bed down the engine and build a brick base for the cooling tank. I collected bricks, cement and sand in the side-car. I forget what the engine weighed, but Will and I managed to lift it on to its concrete bed, for we were both strong men. We made another bed to take either the saw-bench or the mill; with four sets of bolts they could be interchangeable, and the same belt would serve. The mill was painted a Cambridge blue with red edges, and it reminded me somehow of a box of soldiers I had had as a kid. It was a gay machine. The thresher we parked on the other side. Messrs. Garvie had turned out a lovely job; the timber was pitch pine, varnished, and almost the colour of wheat. The pulley wheels were painted red. Will was all over that machine, investigating the adjustment of the concave, and poking his head into the mysterious places where the sieves and blower functioned. The saw-bench was a grimmer beast. It was fitted with guard and striking gear.

How well I remember that evening when we were ready to try out our new plant. It had been raining, but the sun had broken through. We had set the doors of the barn wide open, and the black frame held a sky of wet gold. Which machine should we try out first? We decided on the mill. I fetched half a bucket of wheat from the corn-bin, and Will belted the pulleys. We had turned all the greasers and filled up the oil-leads. Will swung the fly-wheel while I held up the half-pressure valve, but we had to crank for nearly

half a minute before she fired. Then off she went, with the belt trundling on the idling pulley.

“Have ’ee set t’ mill, ssir?”

“No. Shall we try a medium grind to begin with?”

Will nodded, and I set the gauge half way, poured wheat into the hopper, and then Will grinned at me.

“Where be the meal to go, ssir?”

I had forgotten to hang a sack over the delivery trough, and I grabbed a box and planked it beside the machine.

“O.K., Will, let her go.”

Will shot over the striking-gear; the belt took up the work, and the mill began to sing. What glorious fun it was. We watched the grain sink in the hopper, and the meal came spouting from the machine. Will caught some in the palm of a big brown hand, examined it and smelt it. It was a whitish powder mixed with little branlike flakes.

“Screw her up, ssir. Let’s see how fine she’ll grind.”

I tightened the adjusting screw; the sound changed, the engine laboured for a moment, and then regained its rhythm. A fine powder spilled out of the machine, whole-meal flour, bread in the making.

“She’ll do ’t, ssir.”

Will’s eyes were blue and shining.

“Try her right up.”

I tried it, but the mill clogged and stopped the engine. We took off the belt, cleaned the mill by hand, set the gauge back, belted up and tried again. This time she took it. One had to know one’s machine, but she would give us flour and meal. We were exultant.

Next, the thresher. I had two or three sheaves of wheat left over from my experiment, and we unhitched the driving-belt from the mill, and ran the thresher into position. We had fitted wheels to it, and we chocked the wheels when the belting was just right. Will said he would feed, if I would hand up the sheaves, and see that she was delivering her straw properly. Will climbed up on the platform, and I started the engine, handed him a sheaf, and shot the striking-gear. The big yellow beast hummed, while the engine beat its drum. I watched the sheaf disappear, and heard the concave whirling it, and

the rattle of the trays. I rushed round to see the grain pouring on to the flat box we had placed to receive our first sample.

“It’s coming, Will.”

“Sure-ly. She’d worrit out anything. How’s the straw, ssir?”

“Coming out all right. What do I do with it?”

“Bundle it into yon corner, and give I another sheaf.”

When we had come to the end of our sheaves I stopped the engine, and Will climbed down in an atmosphere of sudden and expectant silence. We bent over the box. The pale yellow grain lay there clean and bright, and we smiled upon it.

“Corn in Egypt, Will.”

“Corn at Blackthorn Farm, ssir.”

Will was tackling Ploughman’s Pride, and as I saw the brown furrows grow in that September weather, I became aware of other things. Maybe it was a windy day that seemed to bulge out Will’s shirt and breeches; it blew his hat off into a furrow. Will had a wondrous head of hair; it was becoming more than apostolic, in fact, Will needed his hair cutting. Moreover I saw a rent in his wind-bellied shirt, and when he bent down over the Multi-Culto to make some adjustment to the coulter I saw that shirt where it should not be seen. Will had a hole in the seat of his poor old trousers, and that rabbit-scut of his reproached me.

“Don’t often get wind like this in September, Will.”

“No, ssir,” said he.

I wanted to be tactful.

“I say, Will, you ought to have a new outfit.”

“For why, ssir?”

“Oh, well, to be frank, you’re getting a little thin in the pants.”

He put his hand to the place, felt the tuft of extruded shirt-tail and smiled at me.

“Breeches ben’t what they were, ssir. I had a pair o’ corduroys once.”

“Why not again, Will? Something has got to be done about it.”

I was bigger than Will, but I routed out an old pair of flannel bags and gave them to him, and though they hung loose on him they served in an

emergency. But I could not let Will go about like this, for his tattered pride reproached me, and I fished a £5 note out of my cash-box and gave it to him. He looked at it with interest. Never before had he seen such a piece of paper. He said he would accept it as an advance of pay.

“Damn it, man,” said I, “if I can clothe a farm, I can fit out my foreman in breeches and shirts and a jacket. We’ll call it equipment. Besides, the winter’s coming on. Got an overcoat?”

“No, ssir, but I’ve an old mackintosh. A sack’d serve me in wet weather.”

“Fudge,” said I, “you’ll get an overcoat.”

“I can buy that, ssir. I’ve a pound or two put away.”

“Well, the need is urgent.”

I packed Will into the side-car that afternoon and took him into Guildford, and waited while he did his shopping, and I left the choice of the shop to him. He came back with a big brown parcel under his arm, and the air of a large and gentle dog proud of a new collar.

“Forgive me, Will, but why not get your hair cut?”

“For why, ssir?”

“Well, you look like John the Baptist.”

He smiled at me, deposited the parcel in the side-car, and went off meekly to be barbered.

When I saw the autumn beechwoods beginning to burn I was conscious of a sadness, of a lack of something, I knew not what. The year was passing, and it had been a wonderful year, and in the country there is no beginning and no ending, save when you are born or lie down to rest in some village churchyard. No idle season this, and yet as I stood at my gate and looked at those flaming trees, my trees, I wished that one could hold back the leaf-fall. So much in man is part of nature, when he lives a natural life, that his moods may be of the wind and the weather. There were dead days when even Will’s eyes looked less blue, and a kind of lost silence descended upon him.

Winter was upon us. But winter too has its urgent, stout-hearted moods. We had sown our winter wheat. We had more ploughing to do, logs to cut and split, trees to prune. Repairs were needed here and there, new gates, new posts, leaky roofs to be mended. Our pig-sties needed reconditioning. The

byre fence was threatening to blow down. We cut some of our own timber, improvised a sledge and dragged the logs to the barn where the circular saw cut for us posts, battens and rough palings. Will was an expert at the saw-bench, but silence was insisted on. He said that he had known gossip and inattention lose a man his fingers. One touch from that whirling blade, and the damage was done.

I discovered how differently wood behaved on the bench. Oak and Scotch fir let the saw run clean, but larch pinched and clogged it. Beech, too, was easy, but a larch log had to have a wedge rammed into it, or the saw became bound and stopped the engine.

We made new gates, cut new posts. We patched bad places in the barn, re-fenced the pig-sties, cut our logs for the fires. I made Will meal and sit in the kitchen, for his little room over the yard was cold. We had lamps to clean and fill, and lamps made me long for the day when I could afford some other form of lighting. They were smelly, temperamental things. We had our potatoes stored in a corner of the granary, packed in dry bracken, and on wet days we looked them over. Carrots and beet were clamped, as was our small root crop. Will or I took turns at milking, but Will operated the churn. He seemed to love it. We made lovely butter, and were pigs about it. I found a market for the surplus. Mr. Ballinger took it at the Crown.

I used to deliver butter and eggs once a week, driving down with Charles in the side-car, and I would allow myself the luxury of taking tea in the Crown lounge. I had gone down one Saturday in November, and had handed in my merchandise with a joke over the office counter when I had that vague feeling that someone was staring at me. I turned and glanced round the lounge. Charles, who was a creature of habit and who took the Crown hospitality for granted, had jumped up into one of the lounge chairs.

I saw a long, thin, pallid person stretched out in a lounge chair, and the face and the nickname leaped to my mind—"Harold Fishface." I recognized the immaculately pressed trousers, the pike-like nose, the cold eyes, the wet pink mouth, the thin pastry-coloured hair. The face addressed me.

"Why, it's Carey!"

I echoed the salutation, "Why, it's Sleer!"

I cannot say that I was pleased. Mr. Harold Sleer had been Partner Secundus in my old firm, a pawky, supercilious devil, one of those fellows who are always in the know, and suggest a rather smeary cleverness. Sleer was clever enough, in fact he had the reputation of being about the astutest

figure-monger within a mile of Lombard Street, a protégé of ingenious financiers, a little genius at making balance-sheets look pretty. Even the man's hands were the hands of a manipulator, with their long, effeminate, spatulate fingers. He was smiling at me, and none of us had felt quite comfortable when Mr. Harold Sleer had smiled.

“What dost thou here, Carey?”

“Farming,” said I curtly.

His wet, pink mouth made me think of a fish, and I could guess that Sleer regarded farming as an idiot profession. His scheme of values was utterly urban and commercial, and I have no doubt that he was sincere in thinking that the present world was obsolete. Everything was a financial enterprise to Sleer, and had he troubled to deal in agriculture it would have been as the deft manipulator of other men's activities. Cobbett would have loathed him for, if old Cobbett was a British bull, Sleer was a cold-blooded cod.

“Sit down, my son,” said he.

He was only about five years older than I was, and his patronizing affability piqued me.

“What are you doing here?”

“Building,” said he.

“Building? What?”

“A thing commonly called a house.”

He should have said mansion. I knew that Brandon was being developed by certain gentlemen from the City. A syndicate had purchased a semi-bankrupt estate, pulled down the old house, and split up the park into plots. That sort of plotting was becoming universal. Meanwhile, Sleer was snapping his fingers at Charles, and telling the dog to come and pay court to the man of affairs, but Charles lay in his chair and stared at him. He did not like Sleer any more than I did.

“Coming to live here?”

“Obviously. Putting up here at week-ends till we move in. My wife will be down in a moment. Sit down, my son, and have tea with us.”

I sat down in Charles's chair, with the dog cuddled beside me. The trousers of my old lounge suit could not compete with Sleer's. They were like tin plate. No kneeling to the rustic gods here, no stout arms and bent

back. In fact Sleer was like his trousers, a tinplate product, not oak like Will, and as I sat and looked at him I did wonder how such a man would shape in a world crisis when mobs were howling for bread, and balance-sheets were less than dust. Financial manipulations could not double a country's food-supply when money had become waste-paper. I found myself gloating over the picture of a futile Sleer posed on a city pavement, and finding nothing but stone under his feet.

He asked me a question, cocking one thin leg over the other.

"Making it pay, Carey?"

"What?"

"Farming."

I ought to have expected that question. I tickled Charles's neck, and was casual.

"I live. That's something, you know, when it is the sort of life you want."

"Not all muck and misery, then?"

His tone was ironic, and I laughed. I wanted to say to him, "You ape, I could break your back as easily as I could snap a hazel bough."

Something very decorative drifted into the lounge. It became full of a perfume and a presence. I found myself standing up and being introduced to Mrs. Sleer. She was blonde, very, had a B.B.C. Music-hall voice, and wore black and much lipstick. She was very gracious to me, even when her husband explained me, and I could see her becoming more and more gracious as they prospered and Harold drew nearer to Knighthood and the gold chains of civic splendour.

"Farming? How nice and elemental. Do sit down, Mr. Carey. Oh, is that your dog? What a darling!"

Charles was less of a poodle than I was, and perhaps more of a gentleman. He descended from his chair and paid his respects to the lady.

Sleer looked on with bland, fishy benevolence. He preferred cats to dogs, and said so. Also, he told his wife to ring the bell.

"Ting-a-ling, Irene. Carey is having tea with us, and I expect he has to get back and milk the cows."

His wife rang the bell.

"Do you really milk the cows, Mr. Carey?"

“I share one cow with my man.”

She opened her wide, blank eyes at me, and her plucked eyebrows made her forehead look more bald and stupid.

“Half a cow! How very quaint.”

“Which end do you function at, Carey?” asked her husband.

They were playful people to whom a kind of vapid facetiousness passed for wit. Gladys came into the lounge and took the order for tea. Charles lay down on the hearthrug and licked his paws, a thing he did when he was bored. Mrs. Sleer subsided on the club-fender and posed herself. She was a very vain woman who could not help exerting suburban fascination.

“I’d simply love to see your farm, Mr. Carey. Do ask me.”

Feeling bored like Charles I was farouchely frank.

“I’m afraid it’s rather primitive, a bachelor show, you know.”

“Reely?”

“Yes, no feminine touches.”

“How very refreshing.”

She put her head on one side and ogled me as though I was a hundred per cent he-man, which, I suspect, Harold was not.

Sleer butted in. He did not want to talk about my affairs, but his own.

“Ask Carey to see the house.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Carey, you must see the house. It is going to be unique.”

“Neo-Georgian,” said her husband, “I bought the best site in the park.”

They both began to talk about “The House”, and they talked in chorus and all through tea. It was to have a billiard-room, and a lounge, thirty feet by twenty, with a gallery round it, and a dance-room, and every bedroom was to have its bathroom. There was to be a swimming-pool, with a garden-house. Two tennis-courts, one hard and one grass would make the game possible in all weather. As for glass Sleer spoke of his vinery and peach-house, and he might even build an orchid-house. In fact, the whole show was Suburbia in Excelsis, and I gathered that Sleer must have been very much in the know over various City transactions, and that profits had been considerable. But I was feeling submerged and bored by all this material snobbery, and I wanted to get back to Blackthorn and Will and wheat and

reality. As for Charles, he came and stood in front of me and whimpered. He too wanted to go home.

“Do you play tennis, Mr. Carey?”

I said that I had played tennis of a sort, but that life on the land did not leave one much leisure.

“Milking half that cow, my son!” said the facetious Fishface.

“Oh, but you must come and try our new court.”

“Got a car, Carey? My garage is going to hold three.”

I looked at the whimpering, homesick Charles, and said that I owned a motor-bike and side-car.

“And you must come and dance,” said the lady. “We shall throw a party to celebrate our moving in. You do dance, don’t you?”

“I did.”

“Don’t be too hobnail, my son,” said Fishface.

I stood up, and Charles gave a yelp of relief and scampered towards the door. I was feeling like Charles.

“Thanks so much for tea, Mrs. Sleur.”

“I may come and see your farm, mayn’t I?”

“Oh, certainly.”

“What’s the name, Carey?”

“Blackthorn. Rather difficult to find.”

“We’ll come and see you milk the cow one day.”

Charles and I got out of the lounge and into and on to our machine. Charles wagged his behind and smiled all over his little hairy face.

“What funny people, Master!”

XIII

THESE is much to be said for the winter, when you are young and strong, even in a farm-house where the snow comes down the chimneys, and doors do not shut too well, but Blackthorn was a stout house, and snug in its valley, and not like one of those little modern refrigerators built of breeze-block and cheap bricks. I could suppose that Fishface's new aquarium had its water central-heated. We had our wood fires, great logs in the kitchen where Will would sit in the evening and toast his toes. My first job in the morning was to saw logs, and in the freezing half-light my hands thawed themselves and ached. But what appetites we had, three fried eggs each plus bacon for breakfast, our own eggs. Will's face was looking less starved and more ruddy. We dug like devils, and when we could not dig we felled trees and sawed them into planks and posts. I had ordered a forty-gallon drum of oil, and we found the Lister extraordinarily easy on oil.

The long dark evenings were heavy on me to begin with, until I rigged up an empty back bedroom as a workshop, and slung up a big lamp. Will and I made a carpenter's bench and there at night we sawed and chiselled and nailed. We built two cupboards, two poultry houses, a Sussex ark, coops, portable wire-runs for the chickens, bins, a kitchen table, a chest of drawers. I became quite a capable carpenter. I loved the smell of clean timber and sawdust. And in the barn we built a truck to trail behind our Multi-Culto, mounting it on the front axle and wheels of a derelict car, which cost me five shillings.

I had become a believer in maps and plans. I kept an egg return and a milk chart, and as for our estate-map we plotted out the acreage and the cropping. I was budgeting for feeding two hundred birds, and allowing them three ounces each per day on a free run, and I had to produce for them about six or seven tons of food, wheat, oats, barley, and potato chats. I made notes of how much seed corn would be required per acre, and what the yields should be. We had Daisy's roots and hay to remember, and oil-cake if I could afford it. I read up about ensilage. Small timber silos could be built, and in a wet season that would save one loss and worry, and I was ready to sink money in molasses. Our planting and cropping plan became a work of art, blocked in in coloured crayons, each plot or field listed with the manure it had received, if any, for dung was short at present, and we were treating

some of the land as virgin soil. Our potatoes would have to grow without artificial stimulus. We cherished our chicken-manure and our wood ash and our rubbish, piling it up to rot. Will was in his practice as thorough as I was in my enthusiasms. We never clashed. I followed his practical advice when he gave it, and he did not give it when it was not needed. As an amateur I might have attempted all sorts of impossible things, but Will was there to father me.

As yet we had not suffered from any official interference. No fussy little fool had come to tell us that we must not drink the water which generations of English folk had used. I had been given to understand that the keeping of one cow did not subject me to a host of regulations, and I did not bother. We kept our byre and our cow-house and our hands clean. We were to get our official interference later, when we were more noticeable people, capable of arousing jealousy, and provoking prejudice with our success. It has been my experience that the Official World leaves the rogue and the slacker alone, and descends upon the person who is trying to create good value and who has pride in his own show. I suppose collectivism, an incomplete collectivism, does not look with favour upon an individual who has enterprise and ideas, whereas the only form of collectivism that is worth while, should, in my experience, study to cultivate every individual, and value courage and knowledge, instead of lumping mankind into a state hotch-potch.

We were to get our bureaucratic interference later, and to learn to counter it, but for those first years we were free men, proud of our work, and stout in heart and body. We did not need to be treated like nitwits or weaklings. And we were happy. We had no iniquitous tithe to pay. I had a certain amount of trouble with the Inland Revenue, who appear to look upon all men as liars, but that, I suppose, is inevitable.

It was a bright and frosty day in December when a particular invasion surprised us. As a matter of fact we were moving muck from the byre and barrowing it to our vegetable garden in the orchard. I was wearing gumboots and an old golf-jerkin, and Will was in corduroys and a dirty old jacket. Charles gave the alarm. The Cairn was amazingly quick of hearing, and he awoke to the assault sooner than we did.

Charles rushed barking towards the lane, and I paused with a wad of muck on my fork, and looked at Will.

“What’s that? A car?”

“Corn merchant’s van, I reckon.”

“Oh, yes, poultry food.”

But it was not poultry food, but Harold Sleer, Esq. and wife, in a brand new Bentley. What the Bentley thought of our lane I cannot say, but the Sleers left it outside the gate, and Charles’s barking and gradual and unfriendly retreat in our direction betrayed us. I would not have minded a Royal Personage surprising me forking muck, but the Sleers were not royal personages. Charles led them to the yard gate and the stage was set for snobbery.

There was a little snicker on Sleer’s codface.

“Hallo, my son, afraid we’re inopportune.”

I planted the fork in the half-filled barrow and walked towards the gate. I was feeling contumacious.

“Not in the least. Quiet, Charles, be quiet.”

I let them see my dirty hands, and I was proud of my mucky boots. I glanced at the lady whose thin nose was looking pinched. The odour was rich and strong, but not Coty.

“Care to look round?”

For Sleer was looking round as though ours was a pauper show.

“Yes, Carey, we should.”

His wife gave me the impression of sniffing. She may have wanted to escape from the disgusting odour.

“My shoes, darling!”

I looked at her silly, useless feet.

“May I suggest that you go round to the front. I can manage you tea.”

I was aware of the lady glancing at my hands. I might be a large he-man, but could she stomach food that had been touched by my manurial paws? She could not.

“I’d love to look round. But we must not bother Mr. Carey. Besides, the Fortescues may be in for tea and Bridge.”

I smiled.

“I’ll show you round.”

I did. I was feeling mischievous. I took the lady over the frozen turf and made her look at my hens. I introduced her to Daisy, and the two pigs we had just purchased. They grunted and eyed her with cunning acumen. This lady was swell, not swill. I showed them our equipment in the barn, and realized that Sleer was both ignorant and bored. I took them into the house and offered them cigarettes, but the lady produced a case of her own. Mine might be camel-dung, and the air needed fumigating. They did not loiter. The noble Fortescues were more worth while and an excuse.

I walked with them to the Bentley. I was not going to be impressed. I did not even look intelligently at the car. It might have been a trade-van so far as I was concerned. I opened the door for Irene Sleer.

“Must get back to the job, I’m afraid.”

“Quite,” said she, with an air of conscious refinement.

Sleer slinked into the driver’s seat.

“Not much room to reverse, Carey.”

“I’ll open the gate.”

I did so, but he was a bad driver, and he backed the tail of the Bentley into the hedge. His wife, as though to cover the lapse, let down the window and gave me a queenly dip of the head.

“Perhaps you can supply us with eggs, Mr. Carey.”

“I’m afraid I’m booked up. Later perhaps.” ’

They departed down the lane.

You know, it was not poise on my part, but I thought it a rather rotten sort of world in which a man like Sleer could be regarded as the super-citizen. He originated nothing; he created nothing but ingenious and ambiguous balance-sheets. He knew just how to skim over the thin ice of fraud. He was a manipulator, and our cash-complex world crowns the manipulator with the laurels snatched from those who labour. All this may be clap-trap, but to me in my mucky boots it was very real. Irene Sleer had come and looked and sniffed and decided with peeved refinement that I was just a person from whom one purchased eggs. What sickening tosh is suburbia’s social smugness! And yet I could picture the Sleers sniggering together over my foul rusticity.

“My dear, did you see his boots!”

“And his hands!”

“Fancy eating in a house like that!”

“The man must be a bit odd. I suppose the firm had to get rid of him?”

That, I imagine, is how they spoke of me, as a quaint and oafish creature who preferred mud and muck to New Bond Street and the Bemmerton Hotel. I did so prefer it. To me my soil was cleaner than Sleer’s cleverness. I went back to Will, and plucked my fork from the barrow, and dug it into the byre’s belly.

“City folk, ssir,” said Will.

“Quite,” said I, echoing Irene.

“Friends o’ yourn, ssir?”

“God forbid!” said I.

Will stood over his barrow before getting a grip of the handles.

“Mean looking sort o’ tyke, ssir. They pasty-faced people fair terrify me. And what had t’ lady done t’ her mouth?”

“Done to it, Will? Oh, just coloured it up.”

“Like a kid who’s been sucking a tomater. What do she do it for?”

“Fascination, Will.”

Will spat.

“Well, even if I were a gen’leman, ssir, I wouldn’t want to have a smack at a messy mouth like that.”

Will and I kept Christmas almost in the old-fashioned way. The big hollies in the orchard hedge were brilliantly berried, and Will took a short ladder, a home-made ladder by the way, and cut an armful of evergreen. Maybe he was decorating happier memories, or just keeping a rustic festival as scores of his forebears had done, but he stuck the holly about the house by the light of a solitary candle. The one thing we did not need was mistletoe! But we dined together and dined well. Between us we managed to roast some beef, and to boil up a Christmas pudding bought in a tin. We tapped a new barrel of beer in the cellar, and Charles had two Christmas parcels, from me a rubber cat that squeaked, and a new collar from Will.

We feasted, almost as the Saxons feasted before Senlac. It was Will who proposed the toast.

“Here be to t’ farm, ssir.”

We drank it, and presently we lit our pipes and felt sleepy. In fact, I went to sleep in the arm-chair.

When I woke up I was alone, and the winter sun was shining in upon a particular strip of wall. Almost, it was an indication. I got up and looked at the pencilled scale which recorded Phillida Jane Lawless's height and eyes. A fanciful thought struck me. I still carried that little stubby piece of pencil in my pocket, and I felt for it, and scribbled up the date above the last one that had been recorded.

Phillida Jane Lawless—Christmas Day—19——.

Should I add something to her height? I did so. I added two inches. That would make Phillida five feet-nine. Rather tall for a woman! But then, Ballinger had told me that Christopher had been a six foot person, and her mother something of a Brunhilda. Phillida might well be a comely, strapping wench. And where was she on this Christmas Day, and how had life treated her?

XIV

THE earth was stirring. I had planted a few winter aconites, snowdrops and crocus in the front garden, and when the aconites put on their little green collars and golden crowns I felt that I and the soil were alive together. That great creature Will was a lover of flowers. He kept an old jam-jar in his bedroom filled with snowdrops, and later with Lent lilies. We had raised a few wallflowers and planted the round beds with them, and the memory of that spring is always associated with gillyflower scent.

In these latter days I read how A. G. Street tells of his going up to look at a field where the winter wheat was slow in breaking, and how an old labourer reproved him. His daily visits worried the old man. So, in those days I was always strolling across to the Five Acre to see how the wheat was showing, and looking for yellow patches, but Will did not reprove me. He did say, as though for comfort, "A watched crop be just like a watched kettle, ssir," and I could suppose that it was so.

For, I was still raw as to some of nature's manifestations, and I had not Will's experience and wise eyes. I was worried about that wheat. I thought it looked too thin. We had broadcast the seed, for we had no seed-drill as yet, and Will had warned me against some of the nice little hand-drills that were advertised. They were swindles. They looked pretty, but were useless. Will kept reassuring me about the wheat.

"It's going to be a good crop, ssir."

We had been bothered with rooks, and I had shot a couple and hung them up. But Will was right about that wheat. It bushed up, and speared into a splendid crop, and I felt like crowning myself with wheat-ears.

I was telling myself that this year was to be a testing year for, if I was to keep Will and pay him as I was determined to do, I had to make some money. Crusoe had no market open to him, and he had not to pay Goodman Friday, but I had a market to consider as well as the balanced economies of living off the land. Moreover, I was always having to buy in some tool or other, nor could my ideas on developing our show justify themselves unless they brought in a reasonable return. I will not call it profit, but the justifiable fruits of enterprise and hard work. We were willing to live hard and work hard, and we had no casual labour, and how casual it can be, to spoil our simple success. My laying hens were doing well. I appeared to have struck a

good strain, and the land was warm and dry and sheltered. Ballinger, who also found his business as an innkeeper enlarging itself with the growth of the motor habit, was building a new wing and doubling the accommodation of his dining-room. He contemplated advertising Saturday night dances. Ballinger needed more eggs, more vegetables, more salading, cucumbers, tomatoes, soft fruit, milk, and he wanted these things fresh. He had neither the time nor the ground to grow them himself, and Brandon's one market-garden was a haphazard affair. He came up to see me one afternoon, and after looking round and judging how our world was shaping, he suggested our supplying him with additional eggs, high grade vegetables, fruit, and table birds.

Ballinger was making money, and why should I not share it? We liked each other, and liking oils a bargain, but I was afraid of letting the old man down, and said so.

"Nonsense, Mr. Carey," said he. "If you can grow me the bulk of the stuff, I can always supplement it in a crisis. Besides, if we understand each other, if you know what I mean, I shall have someone to rely on. Shop-soiled, tired stuff is no use to me. People are becoming more exacting, and I'm setting a high standard. It isn't easy-osy as does it, but that last bit of polish on the silver and the plate, just that something, style, taste, which the take-it-or-leave-it fellow won't bother to produce."

I asked him how much of things he would need each week, and he sat down on my home-made garden seat and jotted down the figures in the rough. They astonished me.

"Do you mean to say people eat all this?"

"They do, sir. We're full up each week-end, and are serving up to twenty casual lunches."

I saw my opportunity here, an immediate and sure market, and though I might supply the eggs and table-birds, my apple trees were young. I had planted more soft fruits, gooseberries, black currants, raspberries, and we could expand our vegetable culture, especially if I concentrated on glass.

I was honest with John Ballinger. I showed him my stuff, and told him that though I might manage the eggs, I could not guarantee vegetables until next year, and soft fruit in bulk in two years' time.

He rubbed his chin and smiled at me.

"Plenty of time between now and the autumn. I want spinach, lettuces, winter greens, potatoes, leeks, mustard and cress, endive, and tomatoes. You

can ripen green tomatoes in sawdust, and you've got plenty of that, Mr. Carey. If I may say so this is going to be a good show."

"I've got a damned good man in Will."

"And some ideas of your own, what?"

He gave me a sly and paternal pat.

"And hands. Growing your own poultry-food. That's an idea. Why don't others do it?"

"It's the equipment."

"Absolutely. You've come new to the land, sir, and you've brought a fresh mind to it. Foresight. Not just growing cabbages, and doing the things your father did. I'd go ahead, sir, on eggs, birds, high grade vegetables and fruit."

I told him my ideas on glass and cloche culture.

"That's the notion, Mr. Carey, selling a lettuce when it's worth sixpence. But about fruit."

"Yes."

"Birds, you know. Those larches and beeches won't harbour many of the feathered folk, but I'd keep your hedges cut hard, save when you want a wind-break. And I'd take the blackbirds' nests out of 'em."

I nodded.

"Utility sometimes overrides æsthetics."

"Well, sir, when all's said and done, beautiful fruit isn't just jam."

This talk with old Ballinger clarified my mind, and prompted me to further capital outlay. I bought in a number of cloches, and when Will had had a look at them, he suggested that we could manufacture our own. Some stout galvanized wire and a case or two of horticultural glass would provide us with our raw material. I bought Will some stout straining-wire and let him try his hand at twisting it into the required pattern, and sure enough he accomplished it, and I realized that we could turn out our home-made cloches. I experimented on my own, and after a little practice and some deformed and wasted strips of wire I got the hang of it.

The season had gone too far for us to increase our small tomato crop, our leeks, onions and winter greens, but we straightway concentrated upon winter lettuces, endive, carrot, spring cabbage and cauliflower, and autumn-

sown onions. We chose a sunny, sheltered spot under a high-banked hedge, with a slight slope to the south. We trenched and dunged it, and gave it lime six weeks after the dung. I had read up the subject. The time of sowing was most important. If you sowed too early in August your lettuces might bolt; if you sowed too late they would not heart up properly before the frosts.

I planned for more fruit and ventured more capital in it, a gross of gooseberries—Careless, Leveller, Bedford Red, Bedford Yellow and Green Gem; 500 raspberry canes; four dozen loganberries; a gross of black currants, Boskoop Giant, Seacrook, Daniel's September. Also, we proposed putting in a number of rhubarb stools for forcing, also seakale. I asked Ballinger about asparagus, and he said that he could take as much as we could cut. Asparagus beds are planted in April, so we had to wait till next year.

I had been pretty successful with my incubation, and I had nearly three hundred young chicks. I lost only about a dozen of them, and Ballinger would take the cockerels as table birds. I bought and put up more wire. I should need about ten tons of food for my birds, and I watched the wheat, barley and oats with greedy eyes.

Shall I ever forget that harvest. The crops looked lovely, and the weather was kind.

We cut our oats at the end of July, and threshed out the grain at once. I was tremendously excited over the yield, as I watched the sack bulging under the delivery spout. I had bought an old weighing-machine, and turned out a home-made bushel measure. The thresher throbbed; Will fed, and I dealt with the straw and the sacks.

“How do you think it is going, Will?”

“Terrifyingly good, ssir.”

It was.

Our yield worked out at twenty cwt. to the acre, five above the average. We had some five tons of oats.

Then came the wheat. I had watched the ears turn to gold, and from gold to the colour of pale sand. I would pull off an ear and rub it in my palms, and try the grain with a thumbnail. I waited upon Will's verdict and the weather. We had ten acres of wheat. We cut in late August in the middle of a heat wave, and I worked stripped to the waist like a German peasant. I think Will was a little shocked, and shy of looking at me, and if I did not blush, I

developed a bad patch of sunburn. I went red as a lobster, and peeled like a scarlet fever case.

We threshed our wheat. The lovely grain was a shower of gold. I had got the knack of lifting and carrying a sack without staggering about or looking overloaded. Hard work had toughened me, and I was very strong, and before we had finished I could carry a sack under each arm. The yield mounted and mounted. We were well above the average of 18 cwt. per acre. It worked out at about twenty. Ten tons of wheat in the granary. We had enough feed for our poultry in wheat alone.

Will and I knocked off at seven, sweating and dusty, and smothered with chaff. I was exultant.

“Beer, Will, I think. Much beer!”

Charles, who had been nosing about in the straw most of the day, led the procession back to the house. I took the largest jug I had and went down into the cool, dim cellar. Gosh, how good that beer smelt! I collected the glasses, and carried jug and glasses out into the front garden. I filled our glasses.

“Here’s to Ceres, Will.”

Will popped his blue eyes at me. He had never heard of the lady.

“What be that, ssir?”

“The corn goddess. Pagan I’m afraid. Well, here’s luck.”

We drank, and there was froth in Will’s beard.

“That be the stuff, ssir. I must have sweated a jug-ful.”

Between us we emptied that jug.

Our barley did not yield so heavily, but it was sound and dry, and every morning I poked my head into the granary to take a look at all that grain. This was a good building, hard old brick with a cement floor, well ventilated, dry and rat-proof. We were having some trouble with rats, but Fluff was turning out to be a fierce beast as a huntress, a veritable Amazon, and I thought that a few young Fluffs might be welcome. I suggested to the lady that she took a mate, but the suggestion proved superfluous. Where the Tom came from I do not know, but Fluff produced four kittens. We kept two and drowned the others.

I remember that disastrous night when I forgot to shut up one of the fowl houses, and a fox scabbled his way under the wire, and slaughtered nine out of twelve of my breeding hens. I felt guilty and furious. I wanted vengeance upon that destructive beast, the pet of idle sport. Will was quieter than I was about it. He said that the murderer might return, and that something should be done about it. We had to cleanse and re-lime that sanguinary hut, and I waited in it during the dusk, ready with my gun. I had no luck; the fox did not put in an appearance. Will took the gun to bed with him. He must have got up before it was light, crept out stealthily and squatted in the empty house with door and windows open. The sound of the shots and Charles barking woke me. I jumped out of bed and went to the window.

“That you, Will?”

A grey light was spreading, and Will’s voice came back to me.

“Yes, ssir.”

“Any luck?”

“Got he.”

He had. He had given the brute both barrels, and Monsieur Reynard’s head was pulp.

I am afraid I am Cobbett-minded in my dislike of potatoes as a crop, but when I analyse my prejudice I suspect it to be due to backache and boredom.

We had put down an acre of Majestic and King Edward. We had no blight, and the crop was an average one, or a little below it, just short of seven tons. I came to the conclusion that digging up a potato crop was a boring business, forking the tubers, sorting them, throwing the chats aside, and bagging ware when they were dry. You had a bent back all the time, and I had a long way to bend. In order to save clamping we had decided to sell off the bulk of the crop, keeping the chats for our poultry and pigs, and about six cwt. for ourselves. Will was a great potato eater, but when they had ceased to be earlies my taste for them flagged.

I said that an acre was too much. It was a laborious crop, getting out the drills, planting, covering, earthing up, digging and bagging. Our Multi-Culto helped us greatly in the planting and the earthing up, but I preferred corn, the beauty of it, the play of the sun and wind on it, the reaping and the garnering. A lump of potatoes has never moved me as a glistening pile of grain has done.

“We ought to concentrate on earlies, Will. Sell by the pound instead of by the ton.”

“How do we get they, ssir? I mean, before t’other fellow has ’em?”

“Glass.”

Will stared at me.

“Cloching a rood, ssir, would be some business.”

“I know. But glass doesn’t wear out. It may be worth it. Ballinger would take every pound we grew, about twelve quid a cwt. instead of four or five a ton.”

“We’d have to sell in bulk, ssir.”

“Well, even then the margin’s pretty good. I’ll work out how much glass we should want.”

I bought more glass, and on wet days we manufactured cloches. The vegetable garden was becoming a sea of cloches.

I spent two nights upon finance. I had got through my eight hundred pounds of floating capital, and sold out two hundred pounds’ worth of stock. My rentier income was down to £140 a year, but what did that matter? The capital was in production. We were beginning to get money back in sales, and the process would be cumulative. The £1,000 I had sunk in equipment, stock, etc. should soon be earning more than a mere five per cent. Will was still refusing to take full wages, but I was banking money for him privately. Our living was cheap, and beer, boots, tea, sugar, and tobacco were our main items. I must admit that my clothes were getting pretty shabby, and my one decent suit was shiny as to the sitting part of it, but such shabbiness did not worry me. I was not Sleer. I had no overdraft, and nice little cash returns were coming in.

Our cloche culture began to pay. We sold Ballinger and one of the Guildford shops hundreds of lettuces that winter, endive, and scores of bundles of carrots.

I began to see the light through glass, and beyond it early vegetables and fruit, eggs, table-birds, and waving in the sunlight acres of corn.

I have never labelled myself Socialist or Communist, differing shades of the same colour, but my life on the land, creating and producing, seemed to be giving me vision. There was no secret venom in my soul. I was no shopman gloating over the prospect of seeing breed and bearing down in the gutter, and excusing the poison under a cloak of philosophy. I suppose I should christen myself Humanist. Why not Humanist, a more reasonable, beneficent, and ungreedy form of living? But I think I was realizing that the profit business was wearing very thin, and that the world was skating on thin ice. A mere token order might dissolve in chaos, the pound note be no more than waste-paper, and knowledge, implements, and the produce of the soil, and the mine and the workshop, prove the only realities.

We might revert to a period of barter.

I admit that I was prejudiced against the Sleer world, and when Sleer turned up one day and asked me to make up a four at tennis I accepted. Irene was away, and Sleer had a cock-party, and though I warned him that I had not played the game for three years, he said that it would be a rabbits' show.

“Besides, you can see the place, my son. I'll show you a thing or two.”

That was the inwardness of the invitation. Sleer wanted to show off before other men, and showing off is perhaps man's most unsocial and childish sin. How slowly we learn to transcend the urchin mind. Sleer was one of those fellows who could not exhibit a plant, or a car, or a cigar without telling you how much it had cost him. I felt mischievous towards Harold Sleer, and that, and the absence of Irene, moved me to say yes.

When I hunted out my flannels I found that moth had been in the trousers, but not too seriously so. Sleer had offered to lend me a racquet. I cleaned up a pair of old shoes, left Charles with Will, and motor-biked down to Brandon. Sleer's house was called “Cedars”, and it possessed two of the cedars of the old mansion, and some of the old grass. The house itself was quite beautiful, modern Georgian at its best, finely proportioned and carried out in softly-coloured brick and free-stone. The drive led round the cedars to an Ionic portico, and here two cars were parked, luxurious cars, and I parked my shabby old combination beside them. I was wondering about the Sleer house, I was quite sure that Fishface had not conceived it. The thing was the work of an artist.

I rang the bell and was met by a manservant. He led me through a pine-panelled hall paved with octagonal cream and slate blue tiles to a french window opening on the garden. There was a spacious loggia here, and Sleer and his two friends were waiting for me. One was a little cock-sparrow of a

man who looked like a lawyer, and was one. The other was of the bull-headed, heavy jowled, predatory order, who fixed you with bulbous blue eyes, and threw at you aggressive decretals. He was a fact-monger, a human trench-mortar who lobbed platitudinous bombs at you.

Sleer rose languidly.

“Ha, Carey, meet Messrs. Smart and Bascombe.”

Smart was the lawyer, Bascombe a stock-jobber.

We remained in our chairs for a while and surveyed the garden, as we were meant to survey it. There was a lovely herbaceous border running down one side of it, and Sleer told us that Shields had planted it, and that it had cost him the best part of sixty pounds. There was some desultory conversation, mostly club-gossip, and I could never stomach club-gossip. Also, the contemporary matters these men discussed smelt of the City, and I had become a yokel. Moreover, I had a feeling that they regarded me as such, an eccentric fool who farmed, almost as alien and useless as a fellow who painted or wrote books.

So, we went to tennis. The court had been laid beyond a bank of old flowering shrubs, and Sleer’s garden architect had planted a hedge of thuyas round the court. Beyond it lay a garden-house with a swimming-pool below it. I was partnered with the bull-headed Bascombe, and I have to confess that I played abominably, and became more and more conscious of my partner’s patronage and pity. Sleer played a slimy game, cutting all his shots, and smirking when a twist diddled you. Smart was a confounded little expert, pottering about on busy little feet with a nimble and efficient racquet that volleyed crisply, and he was so damned complacent about it that when he passed you you felt peeved. They were a love set against us, and Bascombe reproached me.

“Come on, partner, let’s see if we can do better.”

We did no better, though Bascombe crowded me into a third of the court, and rushed about and sweated, and fell flat in trying to volley a return of service. I felt that his pity for me had become angry scorn. He did not like being beaten by Fishface and Cockrobin, though his partner might be a dud. He kept shouting at me “Leave it”, and I grew tired of his sergeant-major tactics, and going for the same ball we crashed. It was then that I realized the flabbiness of the man. He was big, but I was bigger than he was, and labour had made me tough. He staggered aside and fell, and little Smart twittered.

“Bad luck, Basc. Your partner ought to be playing rucker.”

I smiled at Smart. I knew that I could have wrung the little creature's neck.

We adjourned for tea, and Bascombe sulked. When another set was suggested, he said that he had strained a knee; a cartilage was apt to go.

“Prefer a dip, if you don't mind.”

“Why not change partners?” said Sleer.

“There'd be a hole in the net. You and Smart can play singles.”

I realized that I had been tried and found wanting; nor did I wish to go on playing. Smart agreed to bathe, and Sleer, in spite of his fish face, did not appear to be a cold water enthusiast. He said he would show me round the place.

He did, and before we had finished, I had been presented with a complete price-list. I realized that Sleer must have spent about fifteen thousand on “Cedars”. Yes, Carson had been his architect. I saw the orchid-house, and I knew nothing about orchids, and I loathed them.

I got away as soon as I could, pleading work. I could hear Bascombe and Smart splashing in the pool. Sleer walked with me to the front of the house, and saw me mount my dirty old bike.

“Good milking, son.”

His facetious fancy envisaged a sneer.

XV

THE marketing of his produce has always been the farmer's problem, and I, coming fresh and innocent to the game, and being something of a gentleman, was posed and challenged by it. Will had much to say on the subject of the middle-man, the dealer, the auctioneer, the butcher, the corn-merchant, the greengrocer. I think Will would have recreated the old mediæval guilds, and banned all cornering and price-cutting and re-selling at a series of profits. The grower was at the bottom of the ladder, and above him on each rung, and between him and the consumer stood the exploiters. I pointed out to Will that exploitation was a hard word, that the other fellow took risks and performed a service, but Will was Cromwellian in his prejudices.

“They'll cut 'ee to t'bone, ssir, if they can.”

I admit that I was sensitive about selling things, and that I was not a born salesman. To go touting one's wares, and haggling seemed mean and unseemly, and I never grew to like the commercial side of the business, but various experiences served to harden me. I found that unless I stood up for myself I should be exploited and regarded as a flabby creature who could not stand out for a fair price. I should be popular, but my popularity would be coloured with mild contempt.

“Oh, Carey! He's easy.”

I had to learn not to be easy. I taught myself to adopt a certain pose, a rather bluff, cheery, John Bull attitude. “Oh, come, Mr. So and So, that's not good enough, you know. We can do better than that.” I never lost my temper, or showed petulance. I learnt to smile in the face of a hard bargainer, and go on smiling while I played the commercial game with him. When I had made up my mind on the price I was going to ask, I kept to it, even though I lost a sale, and I found that to be the soundest policy. I let it be known that I had capital behind me, and that I was no weakling to be elbowed into the ditch.

All this may sound cynical, but buying and selling has been the world's greatest game, after war, and it can be played with a wink and a smile, and with a certain mutual tolerance and respect. The other fellow wants his slice of the cake, and naturally so. One should allow him the slice, but refuse to allow him to be greedy. I tried to play the game as a gentleman. I gave my word and it stood, and after a while I found the business becoming easier.

These other men came to know that when I said a thing I meant it, that my price was final, and that haggling or bluffing would not move me. In such a game of winks and wits courage and honesty came to be respected.

But I had not always to be on my guard. I found John Ballinger fair and just, and ready to make allowances if I happened to be short in my supplies. I also found my Guildford merchant a reasonable, straight-dealing man. I tapped another source of sale in Dorking, and between the three I found that I could get rid of all my produce. I cultivated appearances, washing, packing, grading. I put out my fruit in nice clean punnets. The higher the grade the better the price. There is an artistry in sending the fruits of the earth to market.

My turnover was mounting, and my profits increasing. Mine was a very modest income; Sleer would have sneered at it, but it was real. It might be hundreds instead of thousands, but it satisfied me, for it was honest. I gave value; I did not manipulate figures. Will was getting a full wage, and banking most of it with the Post Office.

Another problem was transport, that link between growing and selling. My motor-bike and side-car had become inadequate, and I bought a little van. It was painted green; it carried my name and address on it, and Charles occupied the seat beside me. I am sure he loved that van. He went with me everywhere. When the van was parked on business, he would sit on guard, barking and making explanatory remarks to anyone who approached. He had a lingo of his own, had Charles, and we understood each other. He could plead, protest, argle-bargle in the most human way. He was a little creature full of strange dignity. To those who knew him he was very much a person. I don't think I realized then how deeply this dog had dug himself into my life. We were inseparable, and where Aloysius Grant Carey was Charles was sure to be.

That winter I became rather more house-proud. I furnished the room across the passage as part dining-room, part library; it was an old-oak room with bread cupboard, gate-legged table and Windsor chairs. I gave myself a Chesterfield sofa for the parlour, and an oriental carpet; also, a luxury mattress for my bed. I laid in new blankets, sheets, towels, etc. I bought an Aga cooker, and Will and I spent part of the winter evenings in taking up the brick floor and replacing it with timber. One of my ambitions was an electric light plant, but we could not afford that yet, but we fitted up a bath in a little back bedroom, and we did the plumbing ourselves, with right-angled screw

joints well red-leaded instead of the orthodox lead bulges. We used up the bricks, plus some new ones, to build a little furnace-house and a lavatory in the back yard, and I installed one of the new sanitary earth-closets in the lavatory.

We were very proud of our work. We had taken down the old brick oven, and used the space as a passage to give access to our furnace-house and lavatory. I did not trouble my head in those days about officials and building by-laws. Years hence an inspector was to come along and condemn my very hygienic closet, because its door opened inwards and not outwards to the winter blasts, but I choused authority by compromising in theory, and erecting a covered way from the back-door to our closet.

My experience has been that it is better to use one's imagination and think ahead, and so elude the official bull, instead of wasting time and tissue in combating its stupidity. The trouble with officialdom is, that having drawn up a set of regulations, it cannot recognize or tolerate exceptions. That which is in the book is written and cannot be altered. Even if the Deity were to descend upon earth and reveal himself as the Great Exception, Whitehall would be unable to accept so divine an anachronism. A Bill would have to be pushed through parliament to render the Divine Presence actual. Till then, it could not exist.

Modern civilization may be an elaborate system of "Don'ts", or a multitudinous collection of new commandments, but even the official lingo has not the clarity of our English Bible. One cannot understand what these good gentlemen mean. Probably we are not meant to understand. Ambiguous jargon should keep John Citizen guessing. I can remember in later years trying to unravel the esoteric significance of a particular by-law. I could not make sense of it; I tried it on my lawyer and my builder, and they were no more able to disentangle it than I was.

Maybe, whatever you did or tried to do, authority could spoof you, by remaining unintelligible.

Those were happy years. Happiness may be like a series of summer days, lived through and enjoyed, and hardly noticed until the weather breaks and wind and wet skies come. Slowly and steadfastly we expanded our production. I took on a lad to help with the poultry and drive the van, or rather, I took on a series of lads whose irresponsible loutishness exasperated me. We bore with the last of them, who was of a less smashing and adventurous spirit, and did not drive the van at fifty miles an hour, crash into

gateposts, and ignore the engine's need of oil. Will and I discussed the advantages of employing someone of the other sex. We were rather shy of having a woman about the place. Meanwhile, I was selling eggs by the thousand, and table birds by the score. We had an acre of bush fruit, and my apple trees were coming into bearing. Our vegetable business increased. We had so organized our show that we could control it, though we worked nearly twelve hours a day. We had another cow, and four Big White sows. We were growing most of our own feed, and getting a good proportion of our manure from our stock. Ours was becoming quite a complex world in which we lived in great simplicity, a couple of celibates who laboured like old Cistercians.

I cannot just say why and when the sky began to cloud for me. Maybe I was living too separative a life, and that when my plan of living had taken on its complete and material pattern, some essential thing was lacking. It was like a picture, lovely and clear, but yet not alive. I had been labouring to prove by living it, the sweet sanity of an Arcadian philosophy, and now that it functioned, some inward impulse was lacking. I know now full well what it was. If man cannot live by bread alone, he should not be able to live fully and richly without a mate. I had been working to satisfy myself, and now that I had done so, my secret self remained unsatisfied.

The fact is, normal man needs a mate to work for, a comrade, a partner in the show. Mere self-expression carried to an extreme and separative ideal becomes sterile. There is no one to applaud, no one to sympathize, no one to share in the little triumphs and celebrations. I needed to think of others. Also, there is so much of the child in man, especially the child at its best. With a comrade one can plan surprises. "She will like that" or "I won't tell her till it is done, and watch her face light up". Maybe the supreme pleasure discovers itself in giving pleasure, especially so to some particular and beloved person.

I must have changed, without realizing the change in myself. I can remember Will looking at me with puzzled blue eyes.

I think we grew more silent with each other.

I understand now that some days I had the black beast on my shoulders, and that Will was shy of me.

He would go and work in some corner by himself.

Even Charles would look at me questioningly, and go away and curl himself up in some corner.

“What ails you, Master?”

I was to be reproached and terribly so, by the dumb and devoted eyes of my dog.

It was high summer, and I was overworked. A heat wave, plus a humid-thunderous atmosphere, was trying both one’s flesh and one’s spirit. I took out the van myself that day, for I had a new client to interview, a gentleman who was running a private hotel and who was proving himself a bad payer. I heard a whimpering just before I started the engine. I had slammed the van door, and Charles was shut out. It must have been the first time that I had forgotten the dog, or, shall we say, that my dark self was turned to the wall like a mirror that has been reversed.

I opened the door.

“All right, come on in.”

Charles jumped in and on to the seat, looked at me reproachfully, and whimpered.

“Well, what the hell’s the matter now?”

Then, I realized that his own particular cushion was not on the seat. Charles was a veritable little clubman in his habits, and liked everything just so, but I was in a hurry, and I told him that he would have to do without his cushion. He gave me a queer look, lay down, and curled himself up. This was unusual, for he liked to stand on the seat and put his fore-paws on the dash and see life clearly and see it whole.

I was in a bad temper. My gentleman’s hotel was a large, private house that had been converted to its present uses. It stood in its own grounds on the outskirts of a certain town, one of those mock Gothic buildings in congested red brick which the Victorians favoured during the sixties. I do not know when a garden becomes “Grounds”, whether it depends upon acreage or the financial position of the owner. I should have described the place as both studied and melodramatic. It had pretentious iron gates, a silly circuitous drive that dribbled all over the place, beds of begonia and zinnia, climbing roses on chains. Deck chairs and yellow sun-umbrellas decorated the lawn. Quite innocently I drove my van up to the front door, and parked it there.

A fat, red-faced man in a chequered coat, riding breeches and buckskin leggings came out of the porch. This was the proprietor, but we had met only on paper.

“Here, you, take that van round to the back. Didn’t you see the notice-board?”

I had not seen his damned board, and his hectoring tone ruffled me. It seemed to me obvious that his inflamed red face was the face of a heavy drinker.

“Are you Major Moss?”

“I am.”

I thought him as ugly as his house, and I was not going to be shouted at by an alcoholic Blimp who did not pay his bills.

“I want a few words with you, Major Moss.”

“And who may you be?”

“My name is Carey.”

He glared.

“Come into my office.”

I went, and we had our words. I asked him curtly whether he meant to pay my bill, and he became Olympian and hinted that petty accounts did not bother him, and that he paid them when he pleased. I am afraid I was rude.

“Does that mean never?”

My rudeness seemed to sober him, and I must confess he gave me a lesson in dignity. He sat down at his desk, looked up my account, and wrote me a cheque for it.

“Perhaps that will satisfy you, Mr. Carey? Obviously, that precludes any further transactions between us.”

“Quite so,” said I.

“May I suggest that you cultivate manners as well as vegetables.”

I was very nearly retorting that he had cultivated a most florescent nose, and it was this testy, alcoholic exterior that had deceived me, for, later, I was to discover that old Moss was not a bad sort, if peppery and inflamed. Nor was his red nose due to alcohol. But I was in a lout’s mood, and I walked out of the house, climbed into the van and started the engine. So sunk was I in a

black temper that I did not notice that Charles was not on the seat. I had brought the car out of the drive on to the main road before I noticed the dog's absence. As a matter of fact two dog-adoring women had enticed him out of the van, and made a fuss of him. I drew the van to my near side, leaned out of the cab window and looked up the drive. I saw a little brown figure haring down the private road towards that tragic gate.

It all happened so quickly that I was helpless. I remember that feeling of helplessness and horror, and the anguish and bewilderment of those moments. A car was coming up at speed behind me, and I realized the dog's danger. I shouted to him, held up an arm.

“Stop there, Charles, stop.”

But he did not stop. He raced out and across towards the van, and the oncoming car caught him.

He must have been hit by a wheel and killed instantly. There was no blood, no disfigurement. I stood there holding him in my arms, stunned, hardly believing that this dear little body was no longer alive. The people had pulled up, and come back, a man and a girl, and both of them were shocked and upset.

I heard the man's voice say, “I'm awfully sorry. I simply could not do anything.”

His voice seemed faint and far away. The dog's head lay in the hollow of my arm. I looked at him. I felt my chin quivering, and my throat contracting. I could not help it. I blubbed.

The two young things were speechless.

“I'm most awfully sorry.”

I gulped something about it not being his fault. I looked at the girl, because she too was making strange sounds. She was in tears.

Her tears touched me.

“It just happened. You see, in a way, it was my fault. Sorry to be such an ass.”

The girl gulped much as I did.

“Nothing of the sort. It gets one, utterly. Poor darling! May I just kiss his poor head.”

I held the dog out to her, and she put her lips to it and caressed the little body.

“I’m so sorry, darling. We didn’t mean it.”

She became just wet and voiceless. The man put his arm round her shoulders.

“I’d rather have hit a kid. No, I don’t mean that, of course. I say, sir, can’t we do something. If you ever want——”

I looked at him vacantly, and he dried up. I wanted to get away, be alone, recover my grip. A creature weighing fifteen stone couldn’t stand blubbing on a public highway. I turned towards the van. I was laying the dead dog on the seat when I remembered that I had denied him his last request. I had refused him his favourite cushion. Beast! Self-absorbed, surly lout! The man was fumbling with a pocket-book. He brought out a card.

“There’s my name and address if you want to do anything about it. I mean, we should——”

I think I smiled at him.

“You have been very kind. No, nothing. I think I’ll be getting home.”

I drove abominably and in a kind of daze. I nearly hit a cyclist in Dorking and the man cursed me. What did it matter? I could not bring myself to look at the dead dog, and yet I wanted to look at him. I reached out once and touched his body.

Was he dead? Might he not come back to me? But there was a dreadful stillness there, a suggestion of rigidity. I shuddered, and looked straight up the road.

Will was carrying a basket of plums into the fruit-house when I drove the van into the yard. He came to ask me a question, looked at me and was mute. I might have had the face of a man who was mortally sick.

“Charles is dead, Will.”

His blue eyes stared.

“Dead, ssir?”

“Yes, a car killed him.”

I put out my hand and touched the dog's head, and Will, setting down his basket, came and stood and looked. Will had known deep trouble in his time, and he was not a man of tears, but his face seemed to go all thin and funny in the midst of its hair. He did not ask me how it had happened. My chin was beginning to quiver again. I was aware of Will glancing at me momentarily. Then he put his big brown hands into the van, took Charles to his bosom and carried him into the house.

Did he understand that I shrank from touching the thing I had loved so dearly? Maybe he did. Will had looked on his own dead. I got out of the van and followed Will into the house. He carried Charles into the parlour, and after a moment's hesitation, placed him in my arm-chair.

Will had been wearing his hat. He took it off, and stood holding it against his chest.

We were silent.

Then I said, "Will you dig? I can't manage it, somehow."

"Where would you be wishing it to be, ssir?"

I rubbed my forehead.

"Oh, in the front. Under the old lilac."

Will went out to get a spade. I sat down on the sofa, and looked at Charles. He might have been asleep. Had dogs souls? Did they go on living elsewhere in some happier world? But Charles had had a good life. Oh, damn! Why had I been such a silly, angry beast, a savage in a hurry and in a temper about a mere piece of petty cash? If I had only seen, thought, paused. And I had been cross with the dog. I wanted to hurt myself. There was a spasm in my throat. I saw Will pass the window. I heard the strokes of his spade as he cut the turf before lifting it. I felt desperate. Could I? But this wild emotionalism was not manly. To think that I wanted to die because my dog was dead! I got up and stood over Charles.

I spoke to him.

"Charles, my dear, you had a more lovely nature than I have. We were—Good God, you do know, Charles, that I—You would have forgiven me. I shall never forgive myself."

I bent down and put my cheek for a moment against his head. It did not occur to me to think that the world might consider me a great, blubbing fool. I was not thinking, but feeling.

Will came to the window. He was bareheaded.

“It be dug, ssir.”

He looked at me questioningly, but my courage had come back. Who was to bury the dog but I?

“I’ll do it, Will.”

I carried Charles out into the garden and laid him on the grass close to the grave. Would his proud little head and his tawny fur have to be fouled with earth? Will had left me alone with the dead dog, and I was grateful. I returned to the house, took Charles’s own pink blanket from his basket, and then my glances fell upon his favourite toy, a rubber cat that squeaked. It was known as Ushie. I picked up the toy and went back to the garden. I wrapped Charles in his blanket, carefully covering his head. I placed Ushie beside him.

I began to blub again as I gently spaded back the earth, and Charlie’s swathed body slowly disappeared. I should never see him again. He——Oh, damn death and corruption! Even the soul of a dog must go on living. I replaced one of the turves, and as I pressed it down gently with my foot I heard a sound come from the grave, poor Ushie’s last squeak.

That little cry of anguish sent a spasm through me.

XVI

THINGS appeared to go wrong with me after the dog's death. I had not the same heart for work. I missed Charles desperately, and not till I had lost him did I realize how profoundly he had entered into my life. I was always expecting him to turn up. I found myself calling to the dog, and then remembering that he was dead. I would wake in the morning and for a moment expect him to jump up in my bed and give me his morning kiss. I would look at his empty basket. It so affected me that I put it away in a cupboard. The house seemed very empty. There was nothing to take me out of myself, and I grew more self-involved, dumb and moody.

I made a little wooden cross and carved Charles's name on it, and set it over his grave. I kept a pot of flowers on the grave, so long as there were flowers to be had. Then I gave him sprigs of holly.

I wonder how Will bore with me during those months, but maybe he understood what I was suffering, for Will was wiser than I knew, a strangely steadfast creature whose roots had once more found good earth. I think he would have stayed with me and forgiven me my moods even if they had been as black as the kitchen chimney.

All sorts of things went wrong, besides my inward life.

We lost a cow, and one of our sows.

Some of my poultry ground became sick, and we had to shift all the wire and houses to fresh pasture.

We had a most damnable frost in May that ruined the fruit crop. Even the young gooseberries were frozen hard on the bushes.

Then we were given a drought. We had to go round with cans trying to keep our early vegetables growing.

Hay was thin, with no bottom to it.

The root crops either failed to germinate, or were riddled by fly.

Cereals alone did well, especially the wheat.

Yes, it was one of those lean years, and I was feeling lean both in the spirit and the flesh. I was lonely, and petulant and discouraged. Even the mechanisms of our world gave trouble. Our damned lad drove the van into a

ditch, and messed up the steering gear. The Multi-Culto began to jib and had to be collected for renovations and repairs. I broke two teeth out of our circular saw. One of my incubator lamps played the dirty on me, and I lost the whole hatch of a hundred eggs.

I remember saying to Will, "There seems to be a curse on us this year."

His answer surprised me.

"Why don't 'ee have another dog, ssir?"

We were cutting an odd patch of late barley which we had sown on a couple of the disused chicken runs after we had dug them over hurriedly, and we were using sickles in the old fashioned way. There can be a nearness in such a job, an intimacy that brings labouring men together in a world of doing things. I was to become more and more a doer and less and less a reader. Books are for those whose good mug of beer is not frothed to the brim. Will carried his stone in a kind of leather sling attached to his belt. I needed it, and I took it from him, and began to sharpen my blade.

"I'm afraid I have become rather a difficult devil, Will."

He paused, straightened, pushed his hat back, and ran the back of a hand over a moist forehead.

"Maybe you make it difficult, ssir."

"For you?"

"No, for yourself. There ben't no curses save they we call down. Bad years come and bad years go. That be nature."

"One in four, or one in seven, Will."

"Two years together, sometimes, ssir. That be our lot on the land. One just goes on ploughing and reaping and hoping."

"Yes, hoping."

"And for why, ssir? Because bad years don't go on for ever. There be more good than bad."

"We've been lucky, on the whole."

"We have, ssir."

He took the stone from me to sharpen his own sickle. I was about to swing into the crop when he spoke again.

"You take it too much to heart, ssir."

Did I? Perhaps I did. I heard Will's hook singing to the stone, and I stood at gaze, thinking. And then he said another thing to me.

"Seems to I, you be too much alone, ssir."

"Perhaps so, Will."

"It ben't as though 'ee were my age. I've had my bite at life. You be young, ssir."

But into what other world could I escape? Not the Sleer world, all Bridge, bathing-pool and tennis. What had Brandon to offer me in the shape of human intercourse? Nothing that I desired, so far as I could see. Blackthorn had satisfied me so long as I had had the comradeship that even a small creature like Charles could give. I know now what Will was trying to tell me. I needed a woman in the house. Had I not thought of such a thing? Of course I had, only to smile ironically over the problem. What modern girl would consent to bury herself in a lonely farm-house, and live the life on the land? Not the sort of girl I should meet in Brandon at the village tennis parties, or sliding down the water-shoot into the Sleer pool. A farmer's daughter? And did not farmers' daughters gravitate towards shops and cinemas? And if I found one who did not, would she have any appeal for me, and if she had what kind of comradeship would be ours?

Was it a coincidence that a few days later I received a note from Irene Sleer.

Dear Mr. Carey,

We don't seem to have seen you for ages. Do come and play tennis on Sunday about three. You don't work on Sundays, do you? At least not all day.

Do come.

Yours truly,

Irene Sleer.

I felt cynical about that invitation. Why did Mrs. Sleer want me to go and play tennis? My previous exhibition could not have been adequate so far as the game itself was concerned. Were they desperately short of players, and content to rope the largest of rabbits into the net? Yet, I decided to go. I was feeling restless and unhappy, and I might meet somebody, oh, yes, just somebody to whom one could talk. I felt that I was growing dumb. I bought

a cheap new racquet in Dorking and a pair of white canvas shoes. They were the largest size the shop had in stock.

I was rather late, for I had had several jobs to do. The same manservant met me; I had hiked, and the Sleer drive was full of cars. I began to wish I had not come. I wished it still more when the fellow conducted me to the court, and I found a whole feminine flower-bed laid out there.

Why had I been invited? Was I a sort of show bull? Had Mrs. Sleer advertised me as an oddity, and roped me in to amuse her crowd in the social arena? Irene Sleer happened to be playing in a mixed double, and she remained unaware of my presence, and Sleer was not to be seen. Maybe he was showing someone his orchids! I just stood there behind the rows of chairs and cushions of this social parterre, and I felt like a figure in a photographic group, save that I was self-conscious and uncomfortable, an awkward oaf. Damn it, had I lived so much alone that I had lost my party poise? What the devil was there to be afraid of?

No one spoke to me. I don't think anyone noticed me. I had come up softly like a bull to look over a gate. There seemed to be some excitement about this mixed double. It was a good game to watch. I recognized that big, turgid brute Bascombe as Irene Sleer's partner. Irene was a bit of a pro, and Bascombe was rushing about and doing some prodigious smashing. The games were four all and there appeared to be some animus in the encounter. The other two players were young things, and a little peeved with each other. Probably they were husband and wife.

I thought, "It seems very silly my standing here like a dummy. Why the devil did I come?"

My impulse was to escape, get on my bike and go home.

Someone had become aware of my presence. A bright little face quizzed me. I saw it in three quarter profile, smirking up at me.

"Hallo, Mr. Carey, still milking cows?"

It was little man Smart, the lawyer. I found a smile, and a retort.

"Cows are rather like codicils, useful for milking."

My smile, I suppose, must have been rather a grim one, for Smart's face tightened up. He had not passed me with that shot. I was aware of one or two heads turning, feminine heads. Someone smiled, a woman with white hair and jocund eyes. She had an empty chair beside her.

"Why not sit?"

I slipped through and into the vacant chair. I had fallen to the voice and the eyes. Here was a woman who could put one at one's ease.

I said, "It seems a good game to watch."

She gave a little laugh.

"Yes, tinged with spleen. And do you really milk cows?"

"I do."

"How restful. Tell me, is it true that your arms ache terribly, when you begin?"

"Quite true, if you have a number to milk."

"Tell me, where is your farm?"

"Over the ridge. Blackthorn."

"Oh, yes, I know now. I used to visit it when the Lawlesses were there."

I looked at her with interest. She had a lovely, serene face, and dark eyes that were both mischievous and kind.

"You live here?"

"I used to live here."

"In Brandon?"

"I still live in Brandon. I meant here."

I understood her.

"Oh, I see, before——"

"The deluge. Now I have the Dower House. Little houses are not in such danger——"

"Of being submerged."

"Quite. But that sounds silly, doesn't it? The wave smashes the big rock and leaves the little one standing."

I had begun to realize who she was, Brandon's one Catholic gentlewoman, Richenda Lady Furnival, the widow of the last of the Furnivals whose house had fallen before other Cropheads, syndicalists from the great City. So, I was sitting beside Irene Sleer's prize social asset! In other senses, I had arrived. And I wondered how Lady Furnival liked Sleer possessing her cedars, and spreading the new City culture over this piece of England.

But I wanted to ask her about the Lawless family.

“Do you ever hear anything of them now?”

“Phil writes to me sometimes.”

“Phillida Jane. I still have her yearly altitude marked up in my parlour.”

“Is that so. And why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There was something so human about it. And poor Lawless must have——”

“Yes, poor dear, a man who was generations ahead of his time.”

How quickly one found one’s tongue and one’s wits with a woman such as this. I had forgotten the game, and when a certain hubbub advertised its ending, I saw Bascombe walking off the court in a thunder of sweat and heat. So, he had lost! I had just begun to tell my lady of my scheme of living, how I regarded the land as a trust and a heritage, and that the life that could be lived on it should be simple, hard and good, when Irene Sleer sailed up on her long legs. She smiled her cold-cream smile at me.

“Oh, Mr. Carey, I must apologize——”

I was standing, and having given me that little piece of recognition, she concentrated upon her social symbol.

“Do play, Lady Furnival. Or would you prefer tea now? Of course——”

“May we have tea? Mr. Carey and I have discovered each other, and mutual interests.”

Mrs. Sleer’s bald forehead registered surprise.

“I’m so glad. Mr. Carey farms.”

So, I had come right into the picture!

Tea was staged in the loggia. I suppose there were about twenty of us, and half the feminine world wore shorts or trousers. Lady Furnival had given me to understand, I don’t quite know how, save perhaps by her apparent desire to continue our conversation, that I was to remain with her. There was a selective choice in the chair she chose, in a corner by a glass screen, and I stood beside her.

She said, “I rather like backwaters.”

I asked her what I should bring her, for the Sleer tea was a comprehensive affair, including iced coffee and alcohol of varying brands. I

saw Bascombe helping himself to whisky.

“Tea—and China—Mr. Carey.”

I went for the tea, and when I had got possession of a cup, I found that little Smart had forestalled me, but he had selected the wrong variety.

“Indian? Thank you so much, but Mr. Carey is bringing me China.”

I arrived with the China, and little Smart remained with his cup. He was not to be repulsed so easily. There was a vacant stool beside my lady, and I saw Smart’s eyes on it, so I sat down quickly and possessed it.

“Aren’t you going to tea?” asked my lady.

“Yes, presently.”

Her glance was jocund and oblique. Mr. Smart was still standing by us, and I knew by his face that he realized that I wilfully had choused him. He began to twitter. What did Lady Furnival think of Mr. Harold Sleer’s garden.

She met him serenely.

“Does one think of gardens? I wonder if you could find me some cucumber sandwiches?”

Mr. Smart went in search of the sandwiches.

“Now,” said she, “seize opportunities.”

I rose, and with graceful deliberation she placed her cup on my stool, and smiled at me. I understood her. I went and collected a cup of tea and some bread and butter, and returning found her cup on my stool, and Mr. Smart standing by and twiddling a spoon. Lady Furnival reached for her cup, and I sat down, and Mr. Smart stirred his tea and eyed me with malice.

Said my lady, “I want to hear more about Blackthorn,” and with a glance at Mr. Smart she added, “Mr. Carey and I are both country-minded. It’s in my blood, I’m afraid.”

I caught the suggestion that I was to talk little Smart off the stage, but he was a persistent person, and it was not until Lady Furnival and I had plunged into the profundities of the insect infestation of fruit trees that he gave up his attempts to cut in, and edged away from us towards his hostess. Lady Richenda did not comment upon his defeat, or even betray any awareness of his departure, for whatever her dislikes might be she gowned them perfectly. I asked if I might go and forage cake for her, and she smiled at me.

“Yes, please do. Chocolate, if possible.”

She placed her cup on my stool while I was away in search of chocolate cake. I found it, and was on my way back when Irene Sleer intercepted me.

“Oh, Mr. Carey, I want to introduce you to Sonia Pearman-Jones.”

“Delighted,” said I, “but may I be excused for a moment. Lady Furnival’s cake, you know.”

I imagine she thought me a pestilent snob, but she let me go, and I served my lady, and resumed my place on the stool.

I said, “I wish you would tell me about Phillida Jane. Whenever I look at those marks on the wall, I wonder.”

“I have not seen her for three years. The last time I saw her she spent a week-end with me. I call her Hebe.”

“Large and golden?”

“Do you visualize her as such?”

“Well, perhaps I do. Is she?”

“She was somebody’s secretary when I last heard of her. And hating it. Her mother is dead. Tell me, have you ever felt poor Lawless about the place?”

“Yes, and no.”

“He loved it, and it killed him. You see, he was no good at selling things.”

“Isn’t it a pity that one should have to sell things? I know that a great part of the world gets pleasure out of buying and selling, but——”

“You don’t?”

“Yes, and no. I have had to drill myself into being quick on a bargain. Silly and sensitive, of course.”

“Perhaps. But I think that the people who make and grow should not have to be merchants. Sufficient unto the day is the labour and the joy of it. Yes, I would like some more tea.”

I am afraid I did not have any conversation with any other feminine thing during the whole of that afternoon. Nor did I play tennis. I was a most reprehensible guest. Lady Furnival and I had found each other, and we had interests and enthusiasms and prejudices that did not belong to the Sleer

world. In fact we disappeared together, for she took me to see the Dower House garden, and very old and lovely it was with its high walls and yew hedges and its exquisite serene floweriness. I felt a new assuagement in this human contact. Maybe I had begun to doubt my inspiration, and here was a great lady who believed in it as I did. She refreshed me. She was one of those blessed creatures who retain their freshness and their youth, and I was grateful to her, for somehow she seemed to set me again upon my path.

We returned to the Sleers, mutually agreed that we had been renegades and should remember our duties.

“May I come and see Blackthorn again?”

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

XVII

MAN may plot out a story, or plan a house or a garden, but when it comes to planning his future he may be no more than a child at play on the sea-shore. The mathematicians may tell us that everything is calculable, and here the dreamers among the physicists seem to disagree with them. I am not a determinist. The mystery of such things as music and growth and colour, and the infinite and complex contrasts in the pattern of nature, have made me goggle at finality. I had started that day in a mood of flatness and depression. I had got on my bike with a new cheap racquet, and ridden down to Brandon feeling that life was stale and tired. Had I any foreknowledge that the day was to be a day of unexpected happenings, a day of mystery? None at all. I had been provoked by an unhappy restlessness into challenging the Sleer world, and I had met Richenda—Lady Furnival.

We had talked about gardens, and fruit, and the life on the land, and Phillida Jane Lawless. Almost to me she was a mythical maiden, a shadow on a wall. I rode back to Blackthorn, bumped along my primitive lane, saw the old white paddock gate, and something more.

A girl was leaning on the gate. She wore no hat and the sunlight was shining on her honey-coloured hair. Her frock was a simple, flowery thing, white, with a pattern in green, rose and blue. It had short sleeves, and her fine forearms showed, their elbows resting on the rail of the gate. Her hands covered her ears. She did not hear me, and only when I dismounted, and the chain and pedals of my machine gave out a metallic discord did she turn her head suddenly so that I could see her face.

Never have I seen a more lovely face, lovely in its health, serenity, and strength. It seemed to glow. It was like rich fruit as to the texture of its skin. Vulgarly she might have been called a strapping wench, big-limbed and deep-bosomed, but she was much more than that, and somehow her presence there caused me a strange pang.

We looked at each other, and her eyes puzzled me, in that their colour was elusive, for, I think one looks first at a woman's eyes and then at her mouth. I was not sure whether they were grey-blue, or a pale tawny brown. As for her mouth, it was full lipped and sweet above a very firm and solid chin. I could not help remembering the name that Lady Furnival had given

to Phillida Jane Lawless, Hebe. It fitted this glowing creature like the evening sunlight.

She was the first to speak.

“Sorry. I’m afraid I am in the way.”

She had a soft, rather deep, deliberate voice. She drew aside along the gate, and stood with her right hand resting on it. I could see her eyes now. They were a warm, clear hazel. Moreover they were fixed upon me with a peculiar and impartial steadfastness, and I got the impression that this young woman was no fool, and that being what she was, of such physical allure, she had men round her like wasps round a ripe peach. And so, she looked at a man and appraised him, with no illusions as to the texture of the creature.

I said, “Please don’t move. There is no law against looking over gates.”

Her smile was sudden.

“Even as cats may look at kings.”

I laughed. She was no cat, but a young lioness, if one was symbolizing the animal world.

“That hardly applies in my case.”

She was serious again, profoundly so. It was as though a cloud had come over her sun. And when she spoke the words she did, I could hardly believe her.

“I used to live here.”

My astonishment must have gaped at her. The divined coincidence seemed too miraculous.

“Good God, you are not Phillida Jane?”

She was a little head in air over my blurring boyishness.

“My name happens to be Lawless.”

I felt rebuffed. This young woman had dignity, and was not tolerant of the easy-osy male. But I was so excited by the strangeness of the thing and by a sudden desire that she should think well of me, that I cast about for the inevitable justification. Lady Furnival? Of course.

“You must forgive me for being a little, what shall we call it——? Well, you see, half an hour ago I was talking to someone about you.”

She was silent, waiting, keeping her appraisal of me poised.

“Lady Furnival. You remember her?”

Her face came alive again.

“So she is still in Brandon?”

I countered with a question.

“Could one imagine her anywhere else?”

She smiled at me as she might have smiled at a nice if impulsive child.

“No. In spite of changes. Brandon is——”

“Becoming a little developed. You know the Dower House? Lady Furnival is there.”

We looked at each other rather like two people who, meeting as strangers at the cross-roads, are moved to mutual liking.

“Rather a wonderful person, Lady Richenda. But would you mind telling me——”

“How I happen to——?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I farm Blackthorn. Do you remember in the parlour behind the door, a record of a certain person’s birthdays and her height?”

Her eyes lit up, and then became shadowy.

“Oh, yes, of course. My father used to take it.”

“It is still there.”

“But it is years and years ago. You left it?”

“Yes. It seemed to be the sort of record one does not erase.”

She gave me a sudden questioning look. It was deep and intense. So I was the kind of man who could leave those pencil marks uncovered. She turned again to the gate and looked at Blackthorn.

“That’s rather unusual. I’ll explain. I wanted to see the old place again. I was a kid here. I suppose you know——?”

She paused.

“Yes, I know.”

“Poor old father. He hadn’t the toughness to say no. In a less commercial world he would have been something of a success.”

“I too have discovered that. One has to learn to haggle, even though one hates it.”

I saw her firm white chin swing round.

“You too. But do you make it pay?”

“Yes, just. Till this bad year.”

“We had three bad years. But I’m keeping you.”

“No. Are you staying?”

“Oh, I’m down at Brandon at the Crown. Only arrived this afternoon. Do you know old Ballinger?”

“Yes. He’s a white man.”

“Utterly so. I happen to be out of a job. After tea I walked up here.”

She drew back again from the gate as though to let me pass, but for me it was only the beginning of things. That was my instant feeling.

“Won’t you come in and look at the record?”

She hesitated for one moment, and then she smiled at me.

“Can you spare the time?”

I could have said that time had ceased to matter now that she was here.

I held the gate open for her, and we crossed the paddock, and though I had made many changes at Blackthorn, the main features and atmosphere of the place must have been the same to her. It has been said that one should never return to the scenes of one’s childhood, and that illusions vanish, and a house that is remembered as notable and lovely becomes shabby and small, but I think a place like Blackthorn may be as changeless as the hills and sky. I could see her quick glances going hither and thither, and I could sense a stir of emotion in her, and I wondered how this corner of England had looked on the day when she and her mother had left it. Had it been summer or winter, gentle or grim?

She asked me how long I had been here.

“This is my fourth year.”

“I see you have planted much more fruit. What’s the general idea? Mixed farming?”

“I have been trying to specialize in catching a market. We have a rather jolly equipment.”

The “We” seemed to provoke a question.

“Married?”

“No. By the way, I haven’t told you my name. It is quite formidable. It almost runs with yours.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Aloysius Grant Carey.”

She gave a little laugh.

“Phillida Jane Lawless. Our parents decorated us considerably.”

I think that when I opened the porch door for her, and she saw that familiar stone-paved passage, she must have flinched for a moment as though the raw surface of things remembered had been uncovered. She was back in Blackthorn as the child or the long-legged flapper, and in spite of that firm white chin of hers she was sensitive to all the fine tremors of living. I have found the big and the strong soft-hearted. It is the little, leathery busy person who is lean and hard. Almost I could feel her catch her breath as though a cold hand had been laid between her breasts. The parlour door was ajar, and I pushed it open and, making some excuse, I left her to go in alone. I had a feeling that she wanted to be alone for a moment. The spasm of pain would pass.

When I came back she was sitting on the sofa. She seemed to belong there. Strange that the absence of a hat should make so great a difference, and suggest the permanent instead of the casual! My impression was that she did not wish to be looked at or be spoken to too intimately. I was casual. I found a box of cigarettes on the mantelpiece and offered it to her.

“Smoke?”

“Thanks.”

I lit a match for her.

“I’m afraid this is rather a celibate show. Will and I do all our own chores.”

She glanced round the room.

“It was much like this in our day. And who is Will?”

“My particular treasure, old English and bearded, and in age, I suppose about fifty.”

I filled a pipe. I was wondering whether she had examined the pencilled scale upon the wall, and discovered my playful addition to it. She had.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Who marked up the last entry?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“It was Christmas day, and I was feeling fanciful. Am I forgiven?”

She did not answer me directly. Her face wore a mysterious inward smile. She rose, walked to the corner behind the door, and stood with her head against the wall.

“Will you read me?”

I picked up a book and handed it to her.

“On your head, please.”

She gave me the level, and I found that my mark was right within a quarter of an inch.

“That was a pretty good guess.”

“What do you make it?”

“Five feet nine.”

She smiled. She passed me the book.

“Your turn. Got a pencil?”

I found the old stub in my pocket and gave it to her, and stood against the wall with the book on my head. She measured me off, and marked the place.

“Right.”

I moved away, and she looked at her mark and at mine.

“About four inches over. That makes you six, one and a half.”

“I think that is about it.”

And then she made as though to go. I think I was wise in not playing for an anticlimax. Phillida Jane was a young woman to be treated delicately. I walked with her to the gate and opened it for her.

“May I confess something?”

“What?”

“I only met Lady Furnival this afternoon. But give her my homage. She has promised to come and see the place again.”

“She used to come.”

“I know. I wonder if you would come up with her? I must remember that she takes China tea.”

She stood looking over the valley to the Downs. I saw her lips and lashes quiver.

“I might, if I am here.”

XVIII

I SUPPOSE that when a man, who has lived alone for years, falls in love as I fell in love with Phillida Jane Lawless, the business can be complete and catastrophic. I must confess that I went over the cliff edge like any Johnny Head-in-Air. Moreover, I had the supreme conviction that my madness was utterly justified, and that romance was the surest sanity. I don't know what Will thought of it and of me; maybe he chuckled, and was wise as to the potency of the magic cup.

All that I can say is that I went at the affair like a bull at a gate, but that when the actual gate confronted me I was dumb and dismayed. I became conscious of my shabby clothes. I rushed off next morning on my motor-bike and side-car, and had my hair cut, and bought a new ready-made suit, two soft shirts, socks and ties. I tore home, changed, and set out again and, greatly daring, parked my machine outside the gates of the Dower House.

I was a little vague as to my plan. I think my idea was to follow up the friendliness of yesterday, and to ask Lady Furnival to come and have tea at Blackthorn, and to give me her opinion of the changes we had made, but when I opened the gate and met her walking towards me down the stone-flagged path a dreadful shyness descended upon me. She was dressed for going out, and I felt superfluous.

I think I blurted at her some sort of apology. I had no intention of being a nuisance, but would she care to see the farm? I was daring to take her at her word.

I remember the way she looked at me, with a kind of gentle, humorous understanding. From the very beginning she must have divined what had happened to me.

“I should love to come.”

“May I fix a day?”

“You may. And shall I bring the Coincidence with me?”

I must have goggled at her.

“You mean?”

“The Coincidence had dinner with me. As a matter of fact I have a date with it this morning.”

I was at her mercy. I felt somehow that I could throw myself at her feet.

“So, of course, you know.”

“I do. Rather extraordinary. Almost dramatic. And what do you think of my Hebe?”

I stuttered. I think I made some blank remark about Miss Lawless having grown up most decisively, and all the time, Lady Richenda’s jocund, smiling eyes were on me. My new suit must have shouted at her, and if my face was as revealing as my suit, my secret was hers.

“Yes, she is a rather lovely person.”

She could say it, and I might wish to say it, and could not do so and, having dared the encounter, I was in a sudden hurry to escape. We large creatures are, on certain occasions, ridiculously timid.

“I must not keep you.”

“My dear man, you have not answered my question.”

“What question?”

Her eyes glimmered at me.

“Am I to bring Phillida?”

“Oh, of course, certainly, if she cares to come.”

“What day will suit you?”

“Any day you wish to choose.”

“Shall we say Wednesday?”

“Yes, Wednesday. Thank you so much.”

I walked down the path with her to those very beautiful iron gates which were like grilles giving the world a glimpse of an enchanted place. I opened one leaf for her, and stood aside to let her pass through, and as she passed out she gave me a Mona Lisa look.

“Things may happen so suddenly; don’t you think so?”

I knew somehow that she knew, and that my shyness and silly diffidence may have pleased her. Was my face such an open book, and had she forgiven me for trying to use her as a medium? I think I blushed.

“Yes, I’m afraid they do.”

“Why be afraid, my dear?”

I blurted out the truth.

“Well, one is, you know. Don’t think me absurd, but when——”

She paused with a hand on my arm.

“Absurd and lovely and good. Good luck, Mr. Carey. I will try and persuade the Coincidence.”

“Yes, please do.”

I experienced hours of ridiculous panic and suspense, but the morning postman brought me a letter from Lady Furnival. The postman was a surly soul. I suppose he was of the opinion that people who live in lonely places like Blackthorn should be forbidden to receive letters. But I had opened that letter almost before his sulky, hog-shaped back was turned. I read—“The Coincidence will come. Expect us about half-past four.”

Will and I had a great house-cleaning. Our celibate show needed polishing up for the occasion, and believe it or not, I assure you that I worked till midnight on the Tuesday re-distempering the kitchen. Women might be particular about kitchens, and if I was the world’s sudden wooer, romance could yet need a coat of whitewash. But the kitchen was a somewhat dank hole next morning, and we had to light a fire and open the doors and windows and dry the place off. Will did know that ladies were expected, and very particular ladies, and he helped me like a mother with this housemaid’s job. We dusted and scrubbed and polished, and restrawed Daisy’s home and the pig-sties, and swept out the barn. About twelve o’clock on the Wednesday I dashed over to Guildford and bought flowers and cakes, and when I returned I had a glimpse of Will’s posterior protruding from the nearest fowl-house. He had completed the general netoyage by cleaning out the fowl-houses, and seeing that the mash-hoppers and drinking fountains were clean and garnished.

I was in a state of restlessness all that afternoon. I ran the mower over the small lawn, edged up the beds, and put fresh flowers on poor Charles’s grave. These activities left me hot and moist, and I went upstairs and put on a clean shirt and collar, also, my very new suit. I had laid the tea-table after clearing away my lunch, and the cutting of thin bread and butter had caused me heavy breathing. There were fancy cakes and sultana cake, and I thought the old gate-legged table looked charmingly dressed with my cottage-china,

a flowery set that I had bought in Dorking. I sat down to wait, and tried to read a book, but my eyes and ears were on the alert. All this must sound very blah, but I was in such a state of emotional turmoil that I could not decide whether I was behaving like a most infernal ass, or whether my reactions were normal and valid. Why go gaga because I had found a pretty girl leaning over my gate? Why should she care a damn about me and my farm? Also, was it not more than likely that a looker like Phillida Jane had been captured by some other fellow?

I kept glancing at the clock, or imagining that I heard a car in the lane. Twenty-three minutes past four. I put the book aside and strolled out into the garden, and looked at Charles's grave. How very much alone I was in this romantic crisis. I wished Charles back with me. Even the presence of a dog would have helped me out in this social adventure, especially so a little, lovable creature like Charles. I looked at my wrist-watch. Half-past four! And then I heard the car in the lane.

Ass that I was I had forgotten to open the paddock gate, for our lane crossed a corner of the paddock to reach the house and its buildings. I bolted out and sprinted across the grass. My poise and my dignity must have hung out like the tail of a ragged shirt, but maybe there is virtue in an impulse. One may realize that there is laughter in the world, and that a man should be able to laugh at himself, for, when I and the Furnival car arrived simultaneously on opposite sides of the gate, I saw that the joke was against me. It was a very small car, and Lady Furnival was driving it. Moreover, Phillida Jane had the near door open, and was preparing to slip out and deal with my forgetfulness.

I forestalled her.

“So sorry. My watch must be slow.”

My white lie passed serenely. Phillida swung the door to, and I stood holding the gate open and feeling breathless. Lady Furnival had her window down, and was smiling at me.

“It is the right day, Mr. Carey?”

“Oh, yes, of course. My watch must be slow. I was just coming out.”

She drove slowly through towards the house, and I closed the gate and followed them.

I asked Lady Furnival whether she would prefer to have tea before seeing the farm. From the very first moment Phillida and I were shy of each other, though it would be more correct to say that I was shy of Phillida, for I seemed to sense in her a dispassionate aloofness. I suppose my malady could not be concealed, and towards it she appeared unwelcoming and static. Lady Furnival suggested that we should halve the tour of inspection, with tea as an interval, and then I did the most damnable silly thing. I was particularly proud of our mechanical equipment, and I wanted to show it off, and I took them to the barn.

I swung the big black doors open, and I was aware of Lady Furnival giving me a quick and questioning look. It was momentary, but it woke me like the cut of a whip. I understood its meaning. It had said, “My dear idiot, must you begin here? Have you forgotten?” I felt paralysed. I thought of closing the doors, only to realize that such a gesture would have made matters worse. I stood helpless, but my lady took charge of the crisis. She walked into the barn, and began to examine our gear, and to ask questions in a gentle, pragmatical way.

“How very interesting! Now, tell me——”

I stood beside her, but one guilty glance over my shoulder showed me that Phillida was not with us. She had strolled away across the yard towards the other buildings. I felt desolated.

Dear God, what a gaff I had perpetrated! I was dumb. And then I was aware of Lady Furnival’s eyes looking at my shocked face.

“My dear man!”

Almost, I whimpered.

“What an infernal ass! Can I——?”

She shook her head at me.

“No. Some things are better ignored. But these old memories——”

“I know. But I have damned myself.”

“Perhaps not quite. Hadn’t we better pretend?”

I shook myself into shape, and proceeded to show her my toys, for toys they had become, and in my rush to show them off I had countered this sin against memory. But I did not talk about my machinery. I said that this old barn had become so full of fruitful things for Will and for myself that it had ceased for us to be the house of tragedy. Rather, it was the sanctuary of our

Arcadian world in which the simple and sacred rites of husbandry were practised. She listened, and I could tell by her face that she understood that in my haste I had opened the doors of a happy place, and not those of a mausoleum.

She said, “Well, let it be that. I see nothing hanging in the dusty sunlight. Atmospheres change, even to those who remember.”

I could not help looking towards Lawless’s daughter. She was leaning on the byre gate, exchanging stares with our cow, Daisy.

“Hadn’t we better——?”

“Go on pretending for a minute. Cows are placid and reassuring creatures.”

“Thank you for being so tolerant. Well, as you see, we can do everything for ourselves here, thresh and mill, meal or flour. I know that the factory farm is the new idea, but I crave for things to be individual.”

She passed a hand over our beloved thresher as though caressing it.

“Even a machine can be a symbol. Not the crude Russian sickle and hammer.”

“Both communal and personal, if one can combine the two.”

“Why not?”

“Yes, why not?”

“I may be obsolete, but I am young enough to hope——”

“That the Sleers will not possess the earth any more than the Stalins.”

“Exactly. Why should not the English spirit evolve something different, and more human?”

I was closing the big black doors when Phillida, having persuaded Daisy to have her poll stroked, turned and came to join us. She did not look at me. Maybe she had reserved judgment on the act of a man who was calling himself a clumsy, egotistical oaf. Lady Richenda went on talking and I blessed her for it, and though she talked æsthetics, her words did not sound like the words of a poseuse. I have always distrusted people who write and talk upon æsthetics, perhaps because they put nature in a studio and make her pose, and nature does not pose, but when Lady Furnival declared her love of old farm buildings, the patina of oak, the lichen upon tiles, the warmth of weather-worn brick, her touches were actual. Yet, that short stroll

back to the house was a tense and uncomfortable progress, so far as I was concerned. If I had desired to create an impression, most certainly I had done so, but not as I had wished.

Will had promised to have the kettle boiling for me. The parlour door was ajar, and I pushed it open and stood aside to let Lady Furnival and Phillida pass in. I felt that this brittle atmosphere needed something that would shiver it, and melt the ice spicules of a mutual constraint, and it was to happen, but not as I expected. Nature was to provide it. I saw Lady Furnival pause; I heard her exclaim.

“Dear, dear, how rational!”

What was the matter? I looked and saw Fluff the cat posed upon the table, her head well sunk in the milk-jug, a rather capacious milk-jug, and whole-heartedly enjoying it. My first reaction was one of anger, the exasperation of a man whose particular party was proving anything but a success. Damn the beast! I made a dash for the cat, and Fluff, suddenly stricken with guilty fear, upset the jug, streaked off the table, and took a leap through the open window.

Spilt milk! Well, there was more in the dairy, but the table was awash, and the milky flood had soused my dish of bread and butter. Damn that infernal cat! And then I heard laughter. I suppose that my ravaged face was as funny as the cat’s exploit, and for a second my dignity flushed up. Were they laughing at me?

“How nice and naughty and natural,” said my lady.

Phillida too was laughing, and something gave way inside me, my taut, troubled self-regard. Laughter? Of course. That was just what I needed. Fluff the clown had staged a comic turn.

I found myself laughing.

“I apologize for the beast’s disgraceful behaviour.”

Phillida rallied me.

“Disgraceful—be——What we need is a duster or something.”

“Obviously! And look at the bread and butter!”

Lady Furnival sat down on the sofa, while Phillida and I made sudden human contacts and clashes by the table. Her firm white chin was set for action.

“Get a duster. I’ll cut bread and butter for you, if you think it matters.”

“Of course it matters,” said I.

She picked up the milky dish.

“All right. Lead on.”

I collected the upset jug and made for the kitchen with Phillida in tow, and there we surprised Will bending over the kitchen range and watching a kettle that was prevaricating.

“Fluff’s been at the milk, Will.”

He faced about, straightened, and gave his blue eyes to Phillida.

“This is Will,” said I.

Phillida smiled upon him.

“Good day to ’ee, Miss. That durned cat be——”

“My fault, Will. I left the door open. But we want more milk, and a clean jug.”

Will collected a jug and disappeared into the dairy, and I found a loaf and the butter-dish, and set them on the kitchen table.

“Is that Goodman Friday?”

“Yes.”

“Rather a lovely person. A son of Zebedee.”

“Will is biblical.”

“May I have a knife?”

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. Hadn’t you better mop up while I cut the bread and butter.”

I went and mopped up.

XIX

MY cloud of self-consciousness had cleared. Maybe I was a little astonished to find myself being ordered about in my own house by a young woman with a firm white chin. Phillida might have the face of a Hebe, and the proverbial peach skin, but her strong hands took charge of the occasion. Possibly I had exhibited myself as a big, blundering idiot in need of help, and when Phillida appeared with the teapot in one hand and the dish of bread and butter in the other, I gazed at her like a dumb dog and felt that Blackthorn had a mistress.

“Won’t you pour out?”

She sat down at my gate-legged table and took charge. Lady Furnival remained on the sofa, and I found a stool for her cup and plate, and a sudden sense of ease and assuagement. The cat’s comic interlude had brought laughter back into the world, and a certain marvellous person was handling my china in a room that must have been as familiar to her as it was to me.

Was all this meant? Had the mythical Phillida Jane Lawless, about whom I had dreamed and wondered, become a figure of fate? The unreal and the real were intermingled. I could not keep my eyes off her, and she did not seem to mind.

Lady Furnival had a village meeting at six o’clock, at least, she said so, something to do with the Women’s Institute, and when she had looked at my orchard and garden, she conveyed to both of us a suggestion which I was rather slow in gathering. Dinner at the Dower House was at a quarter to eight, and Lady Richenda supposed that I must have many jobs to do, but there was no need for Phillida to hurry. Might she not like to wander over familiar ground, and she, Lady Furnival, would send Rogers back with the car for her. I did not seize my chance as I should have seized it; I left it to Phillida, whose face was neither yea nor nay. I said that I had Daisy to milk, or I should be in disgrace with the lady.

“Coming, my dear, or not?”

“I can walk back. I would rather like to stroll across to the old beech wood.”

She looked at me as though for my consent.

“Of course,” said I. “Go where you please. I could drive you down to Brandon in the side-car.”

She said neither yes nor no to that, and we walked across to the Furnival car. I left my opportunity in suspense, and in doing so was wiser than I knew. Phillida, after certain experiences of the sex-storming male, was not a young woman who chose to be hustled. Lady Richenda entered her very small car; it was a coupé in white and black and I was made to think of a great lady in a sedan-chair. She gazed upon us benignly for a moment, pressed the self-starter, put her car in gear and turned it with catholic efficiency, I ran to open the gate for her, and as her car passed through she gave me a wave of the hand, and two words, “Good luck.”

I found Phillida in the garden, regarding Charles’s grave. It had its posy of flowers, mauve and rose asters in an old brown jug, and I wondered whether this capable young woman would think me a sentimental fool. She did not glance at me when I rejoined her, but she asked me a question. Her voice was soft, and her eyes gentle.

“A dog?”

“Yes, poor Charles, a Cairn. Run over by a car.”

“Had you had him long?”

“Three years. Long enough for him to be almost a human person.”

“Much more likeable than most humans, probably.”

“Yes. A dog needs you as no human does.”

“Isn’t that rather negative?”

“Perhaps. I’m an unsociable sort of brute. A dog does give you what
_____”

“Aren’t we rather egotistical about dogs?”

I stood up to her catechism.

“Of course. Why not confess to it. We like to be first, the only and the irreplaceable, or feel so. But one gives a dog a good deal.”

“More than you give to humans?”

“To most humans. But aren’t there differences?”

“Well, anyhow, aren’t we both being rather priggish about it?”

This rather nettled me. I was not being priggish about Charles. In fact there were times when the thought of him still left me thick in the throat. I said that if only one could refrain from the modern habit of perpetual self-analysis, and of poking our fingers into our psychological interiors, and live and love as a dog lived and loved, we might be very much happier. Perhaps I sounded heated, for she looked at me in a new way, a different way. Mouth and eyes seemed to overflow that firm white chin.

“I agree. But can we? Isn’t that our curse? Look here, let me do the milking for you.”

“You?”

“Well, I used to. I dare say I still have hands, and that cow of yours seemed to like me.”

My tetchiness vanished. I was very tired at harvest-end, more tired than I knew.

“Daisy is a sensible beast. Serious?”

“Quite. If she kicks me out I shan’t grouse.”

There was peace between us. We went and collected the milking bucket and stool, and found Daisy waiting in the cowshed. She looked at me reproachfully; I was late and udders can be importunate. She looked at Phillida, and Phillida spoke to her and caressed her poll.

“You have got to put up with me, my dear.”

Daisy did put up with her. I watched Phillida perch herself on the stool and tuck her honey-coloured head against the cow’s flank. Daisy looked round questioningly, a little critically, as though considering the situation, and the touch of those strange fingers. Would she hold up the milk, or rebel? She did neither. She turned her head towards the manger and stood still. The milk purred into the pail.

“It’s all right,” said Phillida, showing me her profile. “If you have another job, go to it.”

“I’ll just see if Will wants any help.”

“I know where the dairy is. Need any things scalding?”

“No. I can manage.”

I left her with Daisy, and found Will feeding the pigs. I told him that Miss Lawless was milking for me, and in the midst of sounds of greedy,

porcine suction Will said something that I did not catch.

“What’s that, Will?”

He dropped one bucket inside the other, and let the handle fall with a clang.

“Daisy have took to she, ssir?”

“She has.”

“That there cow’s got sense.”

I stood and watched Will walk off with his buckets, and wondered whether that had been a chance remark upon the intelligence of Daisy, or whether it had been intended as a plain man’s suggestive verdict. Well, Phillida had liked the look of Will, and Will liked Phillida. Could one accuse this English Hodge of being a matchmaker? I watched the pigs packed round the trough, still sucking hard at their supper. God, how those beasts did enjoy things! Did they analyse their feelings, and discuss together with squeals and gruntings the virtues of an Arcadian hedonism?

I got a basket and went egg collecting. Many of the birds were in moult, but I foraged quite a good harvest. Wouldn’t it be a tactful idea to send Lady Furnival a basket of eggs? I decided that it would. Moreover, it would provide me with an excuse for driving Phillida back to Brandon.

I took my eggs to the dairy, and I was putting out my offering when Phillida came in with the milk bucket.

“Finished?”

“She let me dry her out all right. Do you weigh?”

“Yes. There’s the spring balance.”

She hung the pail on the hook of the balance, and read off the weight.

“What’s the bucket weigh?”

“Five pounds.”

“Shall I mark it up?”

“I’ll do that.”

I found the stubby bit of pencil in my pocket, and I marked up the card. Then I showed her the pencil.

“Recognize that?”

“No. I’m afraid I don’t.”

“I found it in one of the parlour cupboards, and kept it.”

Her eyes lifted to mine.

“Why?”

“Oh, well, it seemed part of the place. I thought it might have been used for marking up your yearly score.”

She was silent, silent with a profound and baffling seriousness.

I reminded her of her visit to the beech wood. I told her that I had rechristened it “Beechhanger”, and the word was hardly off my tongue before I realized that I had once more suggested something hanging on a rope. I hurried over the lapse, to speak of the names I had given to the various fields, and I found myself strolling with her down to the brook and across the wooden bridge to the shade of the great beech trees. Her face became luminous here. It was cool and still and utterly silent in the wood, and I had set up a log-seat under one of the trees and from it one could look across the valley as from a cloister window. The stubbles were pale gold beyond the meadows. The root crops had a tinge of blue in their greenness. Blackthorn lay in her nest of foliage like a red feathered bird. Turret-clouds were piled in the sky.

Phillida sat down.

“Tell me the names again.”

“Brook Bottom just below. Then, the Paddock, and Orchard Close.”

“Yes.”

“Then, Ploughman’s Pride.”

“I like that.”

“Yes, it’s the biggest of them.”

“Fifteen, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t the stubble lovely? Did it crop well?”

“Close on twenty to the acre?”

“Bushels or hundredweight?”

“Hundredweight. Then comes Five Acre, roots and kale. And above that Blackthorn Field. The hedge, you know.”

“Yes, mother used to make sloe gin from it. By the way, did anyone tell you?”

“What?”

“That it was I who found my father?”

She sat very still, looking out upon this English scene. A wayward wind, moving the beech boughs, let a shaft of sunlight strike her head. It glowed, but her face had a luminous pallor, like the face of a marble figure in some dim sanctuary. I was standing beside her, and I know that my feeling for her changed when she spoke those words to me; it became a consuming tenderness, a passion to protect.

“No. No one had told me that.”

She sat elbows on knees, her chin resting on her hands.

“Yes, it was in the evening, just such an evening as this. Something dark swinging ever so slightly in that dim barn. One felt paralysed. And then a hatred of life and of certain people seemed to storm up in one. The beastliness of the bargain game.”

I wanted to touch her. I said, “Have you forgiven me for that damned lapse of mine? I could have——”

“Oh, that? Wasn’t it very innocent? This place, perhaps, has been different for you.”

“How?”

“I should say that it has recovered its happiness. You are not pushed to the last penny.”

“No. But——”

“Sometimes it has torn the heart out of you. The land does. But, after all, it’s a man’s job, not for the little easy-osy people who expect life to be dished up in tins.”

I wanted to ask her about her own life, what it meant for her and what it might mean, but I was shy of showing such curiosity. I gathered that she was out of a job, and from what Lady Furnival had said, she had left her last one because she had fallen out of love with it. Somebody’s secretary, some other

person's shadow. Moreover, there may have been other reasons, importunities, discords. She was wearing a wrist-watch, and I saw her glance at it, and gather herself up, and I wondered if she was loth to leave this peaceful place. I hoped so.

"Time I was moving."

"I'll drive you down."

"Oh, there's no need."

"I have a basket of eggs for Lady Furnival."

"I suppose I am capable of carrying a basket of eggs?"

"Quite, but won't you let me do what I want to do?"

She seemed to hesitate, and then she humoured me. We walked back to the farm, and I left her in the garden and went to run my machine out of the shed. I brought it round to the garden gate. It was a noisy beast of a thing, but it had served me well. I saw her bending over Charles's grave, tucking two or three fresh flowers into the jug. That touched me. I did not want to think of Phillida as a hard young woman confronting an alien world, and setting her firm chin at it. I wanted her to be woman, as I thought of woman. We men are like that.

"Ready?"

She came to the gate.

"Got the eggs?"

Damned fool lover that I was I had forgotten the basket.

"No, but I'll get them. I'm afraid the side-car's springs aren't too good."

She gave a little laugh.

"I'm rather solid. I'll suppress them."

I think we exchanged about a dozen words during that drive into Brandon and, when I pulled up outside the Dower House gates, she climbed out with the basket.

"Coming in?"

"No, not to-night. One shouldn't——"

"You had better wait for the basket."

I had intended leaving the basket as a possible excuse for a visit, but it was not to be, and my simple subterfuge was frustrated.

THIS business of falling in love is a strange experience, eternally trite and eternally new. I had had one or two mild sex affairs in my time, but they had never ripened into finality, and they had left behind them a feeling of blank wonder, a cold curiosity as to how and why those particular young women had piqued me. Just the wayward appetite of the male, I suppose. But my falling in love with Phillida Jane Lawless was a very different experience. One does not in these days talk of twin souls, or indulge in sentimental guff. I wanted Phillida utterly and completely. My desires were catholic and biblical, to be expressed by the simple phrases of those great old Englishmen whose psychology was, I am afraid, serenely and confidently male. Flesh of my flesh, spirit of my spirit.

I did not see Phillida for three days, though she was with me all the time. I was a dreaming loon. I thought of her as I forked potatoes, and scattered grain to the poultry, and gathered apples, and washed up my crockery. I imagined the hands of Phillida sharing the work with mine. I thought of her sitting in my favourite chair before the winter fire. I thought of her putting flowers on Charles's grave. I thought of her at night lying in my arms.

This last was an impertinence which was to be chastened. I was no arrogant lover, but I was to be schooled in the school of humility. How was I to know that Phillida was not interested in the marriage-business, and that if I had a right to self expression and a scheme of living, so had she.

My sulky postman brought me a letter inviting me to Sunday supper at the Dower House. I am afraid I sat down immediately, wrote a grateful acceptance, and getting on my bike, posted my letter in the box at the bottom of Whitebeam Hill. Surely my new friend must be in collusion with me? She approved of catholic romance, and biblical marriage. I did not suspect when I wrote my reply that Phillida had left the Crown for the Dower House as Lady Richenda's guest, and that when two women of character get together and talk intimately about life, and ways and means of living it, the resulting pattern may be very different from that imagined by the illusionist—man.

Discussing me they might be, but I did not hear Phillida saying, "He seems quite a decent sort of person. I think I could keep him from being a

nuisance. Somehow, my heart is in this bit of England, and I have always wanted an out-door job. This is quite a possible one. Don't you agree?"

Lady Richenda's note had said, "No dinner-jacket needed", and I was glad, for my dinner-jacket was a disgrace. Thank God for human informality! I knew that the Sleer world dressed sedulously every evening, and that Harold had a nice taste in silk waistcoats. I put on my new suit, and blessed its easiness, for hard manual labour had filled me out, and I might have cracked the seams of my D.J. I welcomed the formally informal, not realizing that as an instrument played upon by two intelligent women, the duet might be my very undoing.

I found Lady Richenda and Hebe sitting by an open french window, a serene garden before them, and a serene room at their backs. I should have described it as a brocade and lacquer world, mature and planned and lovely in its antique polish. Dresden China, and Petit Point, and even a portrait by Romney. I walked into a serene and friendly atmosphere. Would I take sherry? I would. It was given me in a little greenish glass from Prague. Phillida was in a black velvet frock, my lady in jade green. I felt the spell of these two women upon me, youth and maturity, gracious and comely, subtle as old wine and the scent of some enamelled pouncet-box. Blessed was the man who was admitted into such a sanctuary. They made me feel so much at my ease that I was caught in the feminine net when the suggestion was made to me with a naturalness that could not be countered.

We supped in a room that was still William and Mary in its panelling and its furniture. I faced a formidable person in a red coat and a periwig who looked as though he could have defended a dozen Gibraltors. Would I take wine or whisky? Whisky seemed out of place in such a room, and I chose wine. We drank Chateau la Something; I do not remember the name, only that it was rich and douce and old. Lady Richenda talked socialism, more in the Morris vein than in that of Mr. H. G. Wells. My own views were somewhat fluid at the moment, and though I was rather anti-profit, I clung and still cling to the realist exhortation, "Give them all an equal start, and let the Devil take the hindermost." I have never been able to see why the slacker should be tolerated and treated as of equal value with the good man. That sort of flabby impartiality has never appealed to me.

"But one should catch them young," said Phillida.

"Doesn't a rotten heritage matter?"

“I’ll give you fifty-fifty,” said she.

So, the meal passed, and with the coffee my lady remembered that she had forgotten the post.

“Oh, those wretched letters! They ought to have gone.”

“Shall I take them?” said Phillida.

“Would you, my dear? Thank you so much. Do smoke a pipe, Mr. Carey, if you are pipe-minded.”

“Wouldn’t it be——?”

“Desecration? I think not. Besides, we will sit in the loggia and watch the light fade.”

I believe now that all this was staged for my education, kindly but resolutely so. Phillida vanished, and I wondered what the Brandon loafers would make of her frock. They might snigger, but she could terrify them. My lady and I removed to the loggia. She had a cigarette, I my pipe, and feeling warm with wine and love, and inspired by the exquisite setting in which I found myself, I was tempted to dream dreams.

Lady Furnival began to speak of Phillida, and I was ready to listen to such a dissertation, but the theme was to prove other than I had expected. I heard my lady discoursing on the consoling wholesomeness and strength of Phillida Jane Lawless, on her sweet sanity, on the comforting reality of outward and inward charm. I was only too ready to play echo, though I was shy of showing too much enthusiasm. And then, the tenor of my hostess’s discourse changed. If she had laid an ambuscade for me, and mercifully so, or a trap for both of us, I was caught.

“Tell me, Mr. Carey, haven’t you room for someone who craves an outdoor life?”

Of course I had, but differently so.

“You mean——?”

“You see, Phillida is rather like a big and beautiful animal. She has been tied up in a stall. She loathed it. She wants sun and wind and live things. I suppose it is in her blood. Don’t you think you could find work for her?”

I admit that I was startled.

“On the farm?”

“Why, yes. She is trained, you know. She can milk and manage poultry, and she knows a good deal about fruit.”

Inwardly I gasped, and my pipe went out.

“You mean, I should employ her?”

“Why not? She could lodge in the village. I should like her near me. Such lovely and wholesome creatures are rather rare.”

I was non-plussed and confounded. Was Lady Furnival making a serious suggestion, or was she subtly assisting me in my newly born romance? And had she planned to forget the posting of those letters? Had the stage been set, and I lured on to it, to be prompted in the playing of a particular part?

I said, “To be frank with you, I had other ideas.”

“Well, frankness helps. Why be afraid of it?”

She was right. I blurted out the truth.

“You see. I rather hoped that there might be more to it than that.”

She looked at me very kindly.

“I am going to call you Aloysius or Grant, Grant for preference. Any objection?”

“Of course not.”

“I rather include you with Phillida in my garden of Eden. So, you are in love?”

I was feeling desperately self-conscious.

“Yes. Sudden but actual.”

“And why not? But I want to warn you. Romance is rather out of fashion with some of the young. Phillida has had, what shall we call it, disillusionment.”

“Oh!”

“When you come to care for a cad, and the cad——”

“Good God!” said I.

“Don’t be scared. She has got over that affair. But doesn’t it lead you to understand——”

“That emotional things may be nauseating?”

“Exactly. I suppose many of us have our neuter phases. We have been shocked and nauseated. Anything emotional seems rather slimy. We ask for a cool, clean job, just that, ice, marble, flowers, Eden without the serpent. Can you understand?”

I relit my pipe and smoked furiously.

“Yes, I think so. She asks to be left alone.”

“Quite so. The Vestal stage. Mind you, it may not last, but vex her now, and——”

I broke in curtly.

“I hope I’m not that sort of fool.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not so sure as I should like to be. But, I have some sort of——”

“Pride?”

“Perhaps.”

“Rechristen it—compassion. My dear man, consider. We have known each other only a few hours, but I like you, and I feel that I can trust you. A tree does not fruit until it has had time to grow. One cherishes one’s tree, and then——”

“You are trying to warn me against making a mess of my hopes.”

“In a way, I am. Be patient.”

“Do you think it will be easy?”

“No, but might it not be worth while?”

I said that I would think it over, but I cannot pretend that I was happy about the problem. Supposing Phillida were to become my employee (horrible word!), would contiguity produce romance or a utilitarian casualness? She might accept me as a farmer, but not as a man. Had I been a vainer creature I might have chuckled to myself and felt assured that my manly charms could reduce her defences, but I was not an arrogant and self-pleased lover. I asked Lady Furnival whether, if I chose to accept the idea, I should put the proposal to Miss Lawless, or would she do it for me? I think we were both of us watching the gate for the return of Phillida. She had been an inconceivable time posting those letters.

“Should not the responsibility be yours?”

“Perhaps. But has she any idea? I mean, has she mentioned——?”

“I know that she wants to get back to an open-air life.”

“Then I should put it to her as a purely practical proposition?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“At once?”

“No, wait a little. She will be with me for a fortnight. Also, it will have the appearance of mature reflection.”

The evening had ceased to be for me a prelude to romance. In fact, when Phillida reappeared at the gate and walked up the paved path between lawns that were sleeked by the setting sun, I saw her differently, almost as a creature who could be unfriendly and hostile. Why should I involve myself in any way with this young woman, and agree to admit her into my life? I was struck by the horrid thought that I should have to pay her a weekly wage. It was not the finding of the money that worried me, but the idea that there should be a commercial link between us. I should be renouncing some of my freedom. I suppose that love contains an element of fear, and I admit that I was afraid of the mysterious emotional complexities that might develop, of possible discords, clashes, incompatibilities. I stood up when she rejoined us. I glanced at my wrist-watch. I was in as much of a hurry to escape as I had been to come.

“Thanks, dear,” said our hostess.

Phillida sat down, but I remained standing. If I had been lured on to a stage, I felt that I had dried up in my part.

“You are not going, Grant?”

“Afraid I must. I don’t like to leave everything to Will.”

“Share and share alike?”

“Yes. We have had trouble with foxes, and we shut up the houses at night. And there is always one confounded hen that does not want to go to bed.”

Phillida was silent, and I felt her silence like a strange and chilly void between us. So, she had had her romance! It made me angry, angry somehow both with her and the cad. Why should I spend myself in trying to rekindle a flame that might have been soused in sour wine? She did not want

emotion; I did; and the knowledge that I should have to play the Agag exasperated me.

I thanked my lady for her dinner, and said good night with an air of cheerful casualness. I left them sitting in the twilight and, as I walked down the path, I supposed that when I had gone they might indulge in feminine confidences about me.

Damn it, I was not going to be used.

It was growing dark when I reached Blackthorn. I had had to switch on my lights on Whitebeam Hill, but when I turned them off at the gate and the bright ray disappeared suddenly like a sheathed sword, the place became ghostly and dim. There still was sufficient light for all the detail to be seen, but the house was like a faded picture, sad and almost sinister. It looked empty, silent, unwelcoming. Had Charles been alive! I felt my stomach sink in me, and all the little disasters of the year crowd upon my consciousness like a swarm of stinging flies. Had my luck turned, fortune gone sour on me, even in the one human relationship that had provoked me to a sudden new sense of the mystery of life? My strutting, self-important anger passed. I felt a rather miserable fellow, a poor mongrel creeping into a dark, cold kennel. What right had I to be angry with anyone, or to expect life to present me with a bouquet just when I desired it?

I put my machine away and went in by the back door. The place had a dead feeling. It smelt of earthy, country smells, onions, beer, cooking. Will was sometimes a church-goer, and I gathered that he had walked down to Brandon to chant psalms like a good Cromwellian. I did not know what to do with myself. I lit a lamp, and then went out to shut up the fowl-houses, and found the birds all in and perched. Somehow, I did not want to go back to the house. It seemed to share my unhappy mood. I wandered about in the gathering darkness, but this little world that was mine had ceased to fill me with pride and satisfaction. I found myself looking at the black bulk of the old barn.

Her father had hanged himself in there!

Surely, Lady Richenda had been romancing? Phillida Jane Lawless would not ask to return to a world such as this.

XXI

A PARTICULARLY vigorous and healthy person such as I was, does not remain long in the slough of despond, or soused in self-pity, for when I pulled back my curtains on a superb September morning, my mood was positive and not a cynical negation. Nature admonished me. "Go to it." For nature must love the adventurous people, youth that will take risks. I got up and shaved myself, and made a good clean job of my chin. I went down and found Will about, opening up, and ready for the day. Will was a universal. He went on for ever.

I had come to have great faith in Will's wisdom, his almost biblical shrewdness and, obeying an impulse, I asked him how he would fancy a woman about the place. He looked me straight in the face, and took his time about answering the question.

"There be women and women, ssir."

"I know, Will, but if we had someone who could take the cows and the poultry off our hands."

"Can she milk, ssir?"

"Who?"

"Why, that there young lady."

I admit that I laughed, if a little self-consciously. Why disguise the obvious with a man like Will?

"She milked Daisy for me the other night."

"Did she do that, ssir?"

"Yes. Daisy approved."

Will smiled at me.

"Maybe you'll be wanting I to go back to my little room."

"Of course not. She would be lodging in Brandon."

Will looked a little puzzled, and I could divine his thoughts. He was prepared to see in Phillida Blackthorn's new mistress, and I think his simple reading of the romance cheered me.

"It has not got as far as that, Will, yet. It may never get as far as that."

And again Will smiled.

I saw things differently. If Lady Richenda had a liking for both of us, and wished to bring us together, why should I not take my lady's conspiracy at its face value? The Dower House had nothing to gain from us but friendship and those warm and happy human contacts which may be blessed to a rather lonely woman. Lady Richenda was Elizabethan Brandon, and the new Brandon was becoming syndicated Sler, and I could not visualize her sharing her secret self with Irene & Co. I have discovered that one loses so much by niggling at life, and by posing and parading conventional prejudices, that the decision I took then seems valid, if a little reckless. I was to remember certain words of Richenda's. "My dear, at my time of life one asks for naturalness, simplicity and sincerity, even though manners may be a little blunt."

I let a day pass, and then I rode down to Brandon and the Dower House. I asked for Lady Furnival, and was told that her ladyship had gone to London for the day. I stood my ground and asked for Miss Lawless. Yes, Miss Lawless was in, and did I wish to see her? I did, and I did not. I was in a devil of a funk now that the crisis was upon me.

I was shown, not into the Dower House's state chamber, but into a little occasional room that appeared to combine the uses of library, office and workshop. The social graduations, as ordered by the mind of the domestic servant, are subtle yet severe. I had supped with Lady Richenda, but I did not appear to be destined for her drawing-room when she was out of the house. Did this good maid think that I might pocket some *objet d'art*, one of the miniatures or snuff-boxes? Or was it just intelligent snobbery? I do not like the word snob. I was a farmer and, according to the more mature traditions, farmers do not sit on brocaded chairs.

I did not sit. I stood and looked out of the window, at Lady Richenda's Knott Garden with its triangles and half-moons of santolina, box and lavender. I listened. I heard footsteps, the opening of a door, and turned to see Phillida Jane in a flowered overall, her arms bare to the elbow.

I said, "I hope I haven't disturbed you?"

She was wearing her enigmatic face, a kind of cold, fresh, sunny May morning face. She said that she had been at work in the still-room, trying her hand at some old-fashioned concoction. So, the Dower House still boasted a still-room.

"Won't you sit down?"

We both sat down. We were very formal with each other. She had the air of waiting for me to explain the reason of my visit, and not as though she accepted it as a natural phenomenon. Almost it seemed to me that her young dignity had been strengthened and emphasized by the atmosphere of this serene old house.

My inclination was to persuade the affair to be friendly and informal, but she made me feel stiff and uncomfortable. I began by asking her if she was keen on country life, and I could not help seeing myself as a shy curate catechizing some serious young girl who was in no mood to accept callow fatherliness.

“Yes, I am,” and her eyes asked me why I required the information.

I began to boggle over the business.

“I was wondering? I mean, would you consider an actual job?”

“On the land?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of trying to get help. Will and I have our hands pretty full. Don’t think it cheek, but——”

Looking me straight in the face she seemed to reach out a cool and rational hand.

“You are offering me work?”

“Yes.”

“Why should it be cheek?”

I felt myself indulging in inward wriggles. I had put up a white lie with apologetic dressings, and she was stripping it of phantasy.

“Well, you see, one’s rather shy of suggesting. I mean, the place was your father’s. And I wondered——”

“You would not expect me to live in?”

“Oh, no, not unless——”

“You would want me to do the milking?”

“Yes, but five o’clock, you know. Getting up from Brandon. I dare say I could do the morning turn.”

“Do you do it now?”

“Will and I take it week on, week off.”

I was quite sure by now that she was going to refuse my offer, and I was conscious of both disappointment and relief. God, how I was feeling things! I twiddled my hat like a yokel, and smiled an imbecile smile.

“No obligation, you know.”

“None at all,” said she, “but I think it rather nice of you to ask me.”

“Oh, not at all.”

Her eyes were much steadier than mine. She seemed to look at me, and through me, and into me, and I was sure that there was nothing she did not know about my inward preoccupations.

“What would the terms be?”

I started.

“Oh, it’s about twenty-eight shillings with keep, isn’t it? That means that if you were in rooms I should have to pay you another ten or twelve shillings.”

“What can you afford to pay?”

The directness of the question staggered me. Was she dissatisfied? Was she thinking me a mean devil?

“Well, as a matter of fact, I could afford two pounds a week.”

“What does Will get?”

“Oh, much more than the minimum. That’s about thirty-five at present. I give him thirty-five and his keep.”

“And he’s worth it?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“If he receives the value of forty-five shillings, I shouldn’t be worth forty.”

“I shouldn’t say that.”

“But isn’t it obvious? May I think it over?”

I got up. I wanted to escape. I felt that I had made a fool of myself, and that she was letting me off lightly. “Yes, do. Of course there’s no hurry.”

“I’ll let you know in a day or two. And thank you, Mr. Carey.”

The Mr. Carey finished me. I was convinced that I had perpetrated a ghastly gaffe, and that she had been kind to me as one is kind to some nice

impulsive fool-dog.

I rode back to Blackthorn, feeling, in the vulgar parlance, “That—that was that”, and when I met Will I thought it best to tell him that I had made an offer to Miss Lawless, and that I was very sure that she would not accept it. Will stroked his beard and, looking as solemn as an apostle, surprised me with one of his terribly naïve questions.

“Why did ’ee not ask she t’ marry ’ee, ssir?”

I was nettled, perhaps because I felt that I had made an ass of myself.

“Damn it all, Will, I’ve only known the lady a few days.”

“But you be willing, ssir?”

I had to face Will and laugh.

“Well, if you must know, I am.”

“Maybe, the young lady——”

“Oh, shut up, Will! There are reasons. Besides, as far as I can see the incident is closed.”

“I shouldn’t say that, ssir.”

“I do.”

I tried to put the whole matter out of my mind, but the more I sought to stifle it, the more insurgent it became. I could not help wondering whether Will had been right, and that my trying to play the part of the self-controlled, awfully decent sort of fellow, don’t you know, had been just B.B.C. Yet, according to Lady Richenda——Yes, but could any woman, however wise, divine the real inwardness of another member of the sex? I did not know what to do. I was passionately bothered and bewildered. I could not think of Phillida without a forlorn anguish. I was utterly restless. I would start a job and leave it, and go on to something else. There was one moment when a desperate impulse nearly sent me headlong into Brandon, to blurt out the truth to her and take my chance. I wanted to say, “Phillida, I’m afraid I was a too careful ass the other day. The fact is, I don’t want a land-girl but a wife. Now, the horrid secret is out. Strafe me if you choose. After all, I don’t see how anyone could fail to be guilty of loving you.”

But I did not go. I carried on, waiting upon the human silence down yonder. Perhaps she would never reply to me. Perhaps she would disappear and send me a formal little letter, thanking me, and refusing my offer.

So restless and unhappy was I on the third day that I took out the motor-bike and went scorching about the country-side. I wanted speed, danger, distraction. I ended up at Chanctonbury Ring, but even that high, serene, mysterious place could not soothe me, though its beech trees were as still as death. Two cars full of noisy people came cruising over the turf, and I was sure that cars should not be here, especially when these people sat down to picnic. But what right had I to feel that the place was sacred to one small soul? This vast sky and the dynastic Downs belonged to Time and Nature; and my silly, separate self needed snubbing. Had I not desecrated the place with the smell and the detonations of my motor-bike? Moreover, is not the cult of emptiness and Arcadian æsthetics rather overdone, and apt to become the pose of the consciously superior and supercilious people?

I had tea at a Sussex village on the way home, and a very bad meal it was, one of those teas that make you feel that unwashed hands have cut the bread and butter. Flies crawled over the sugar and the cake. I was glad of the thought of Blackthorn, even though it meant labour and loneliness, for after all your hands were your own, and if you were in a tired and a haphazard mood it did not make contact with other human sliminess. I saw the North Downs and welcomed them with their yews and thorns, wayfaring trees, beeches, and wild clematis. My machine swept me up and over Whitebeam Hill, and down into my valley. I straddled my machine at the gate, and leaned forward to open it.

Then, I saw Will. He appeared to have been waiting for me. He came across the paddock with his long, loping shamble that had a dignity of its own. He cocked a thumb over his shoulder, and gave me a solemn smile.

“She be in there.”

“Miss Lawless?”

He nodded.

“I kep her and gave her tea. She be in t’parlour with a book and your chair.”

I left my machine by the gate, partly because I did not want its discordant voice to announce my return, and partly because there was a frightened silence inside me. Why had she come? What did it mean? I cut

across the paddock to the garden fence and, passing slowly along it, I kept my eyes on the parlour window. The lower sash was up, and I saw a honey-coloured head, and the line of a strong white neck. Phillida had turned my chair so that her back was to the light while she was reading. I walked softly, realizing that she must have heard my noisy old machine, and that she was refusing to be disturbed. If it was a conscious pose, it seemed to me to be a helpful one. I reached the gate, walked up the path to the porch, and into the passage, and paused for a second or two outside the parlour door.

When I opened it and entered she put the book down on her knees, and looked round and up at me. I remember being impressed by her calmness, by a young dignity that sat there almost as though it belonged. She smiled.

“Will insisted——”

I glanced at the table.

“I’m glad he gave you tea. Did you find the cigarettes?”

“Yes, and old Cobbett. I have just been reading how he tried to avoid Hindhead.”

“And didn’t!”

I strolled across to the sofa and sat down. My heart might be beating faster, but her calmness gave me poise.

“Will is a great person. He did everything but cut the bread and butter. I was rather worried about Will.”

“Oh, why?”

“Whether he would resent——”

I sat very still, though part of me felt like jumping off the sofa.

“You mean?”

“If I accept your offer, do you think I shall be sand in your celibate show?”

My hands were knotted between my knees.

“I forgot one thing.”

“And that?”

“I should have to ask you to drive our van sometimes.”

“What fun! And deliver the goods?”

“Yes, unless——”

“I have a driving-licence, and a clean one. When would you like me to start?”

I stood up and went to the mantelpiece for my tobacco tin. I felt myself trembling.

“Just as soon as you like. But, about terms?”

“Thirty shillings a week.”

“It seems paltry.”

“Is it, if one is doing the job one likes?”

XXII

I SO well remember that autumn morning when I heard the gate clash just when the dawn was breaking, and I knew that Phillida had come to Blackthorn to do her first milking. There had been a heavy dew, and the sky was clear, and though I might be content to rise at such an hour and not acclaim it virtue, I could not help thinking it hard that this girl should get up in the dark and ride up Whitebeam Hill just to milk two cows. I had shaved myself. I had been careful to do that and, as I opened the front door, I thought of the winter mornings and the wet or bitter darkness, and I told myself that Will or I could do the job, and that she could turn up at some more civilized hour.

Yes, the smell of that autumn dawn, the stillness, the secrecy, the stealthy stealing in of the light in its cloak of grey. I had the door open before Phillida reached it, and I was out in the garden. She came gliding over the dew-wet paddock on her bike, hatless, a green scarf round her neck, her legs in breeches and brown stockings. Somehow, I had not expected her in this man's get-up. She looked very well in it, but that the costume had an esoteric meaning and was not just a symbol of efficiency, was beyond me for the moment.

“Morning, Mr. Carey. Daisy up and dressed?”

There was no mystery in her salutation. It was frank and casual, yet business like, and I, the lover, standing at the gate of the morning, divined a wilfulness in this pragmatism. Those breeches and stockings, and scarf and pullover were part of her philosophy. Almost I could hear her saying, “Cut out the sentiment, and let's get on with the job.”

I opened the gate for her.

“Where would you like to keep your bike?”

“Oh, anywhere. Can I leave it in the barn?”

“Of course.”

I had thought of suggesting that she might park the machine in the porch or the passage, but it occurred to me that she might prefer a more neutral area where contacts were not intimate.

“Things in the dairy?”

“Yes.”

“Been scalded?”

“Yes. You can leave that to us.”

She parked her bicycle against the fence.

“May as well be responsible for my whole job. What’s the next one?”

“There is some stuff to deliver at Brandon and Dorking. Feel up to taking the van?”

“Rather.”

“I’ll check up the list with you presently, and show you the round-book. People like an early delivery.”

“And do I take orders?”

“Yes. I’d better go into what we can supply. It has been a difficult year, and we are short of some things.”

“Right ’o. I’ll start on Daisy straight away.”

Her cheerful naturalness seemed to keep me at arm’s length, but I did feel that I had the right to be a considerate employer.

“I say, have you had any breakfast?”

“Early tea. Don’t worry; I have rations with me, and a thermos.”

I understood that she was determined upon independence.

Often had I sat by the fire on winter evenings and painted imaginary mental pictures of Phillida Jane Lawless. I had seen her as the child, and the long-legged flapper, and the grown woman, but never had I pictured her as she appeared to me during those winter days, frank, lovely, unmysterious, and efficient. Her thoroughness surprised me, as did her strength. She could lift and shoulder a sack of corn or of potatoes. She was not to be pitied, or spared, or caressed with a spurious chivalry. No, thank you! She had her job, and she meant to be up to it.

We had our first row over the morning milking. I suggested to her that it was not necessary for her to trail up from Brandon at five or so in the morning, and that Will or I could do the milking. I don’t know why, but she seemed to resent the suggestion, man’s complacent condescension to weak woman.

She said, “I like it.”

“But——”

“Yes, do you mind not interfering. I know you can give me orders, but when I have taken on a job, I don’t want mere lipstick.”

She had a way of saying things with such calm, sweet tartness that though one might feel rapped over the knuckles, one could not flare. There were times when I wanted to flare, for I was man, in love with her, and her strong young body provoked me.

“Isn’t that rather unreasonable?”

“How?”

“Well, we just wanted to save you what seemed——”

“Please don’t look on me as a pansy. You see, I have theories. And you ——”

She stood with folded arms, smiling at me almost as one boxer smiles at another. She could take and give blows.

“And I?”

“You didn’t funk this life because it was hard. Is it preachy-preachy to say that this country has gone soft like an over-ripe orange? There are plenty of us who think it has to be hardened up.”

“The Spartan creed?”

“If you like. I’m young and strong, and I like doing hard things. I like getting up at five in the morning. I like everything about nature, frost and snow, and even north east wind. So please don’t treat me as though I had come out of a beauty parlour.”

I was nettled.

“I won’t.”

“Thanks, awfully. Life on the land isn’t a petting party.”

Most certainly it was not.

Like many men I had certain conventional ideas about women that were illusory or incomplete. The gentler sex! Generalizations are fallacious, but I suppose each individual being is somewhat intent upon getting his or her own way, and that the tradition of man’s dominance must have provoked women to various expedients in the pursuit of power. The sweet woman idea

may be obsolete, but as a sentimental pose it may have been very effective in the attainment of ultimate aims. Man was made to put his oily head on an antimacassar, and his morals were preserved in syrup. Perhaps? But modern woman is, I gather, different, more frank and upstanding and ruthless in her claims and freedom of choice and action. The good woman of Victorian days, and she still exists, got her own way by pretending to sacrifice herself; her husband's comfort and well-being were her supreme concern, and she saw to it that her man was so nicely doped that her sacrificial claims entailed his surrender. "George, my dear, my only wish is to make you happy." And George ended by being happy in her way.

Phillida Lawless was different. No doubt she hated humbug, and insincerity and the expedients of sex. She was not going to pretend about things. She was determined to be herself, a strong, upstanding person who would not tolerate interference, even when dressed up in sentiment. This was no classical Hebe, no glowing and inevitable paramour, but a young Brunhilda, armed and resolute, confronting life and man as countries to be conquered and held in subjection. Again, perhaps? And should not I have become bored with a Hebe, cream and roses, warm embraces, tumbled bed clothes, a cloying amorousness? I felt that I should like to challenge Lady Richenda on the picture she had painted for me.

Moreover, on the practical side my new engagement prospered. This young woman could work. She had a stout heart and a strong back, and as for the bargaining business she was much harder than either I or Will. Women are often much tougher in the market-place than men, and Phillida had no silly sensitiveness about making people pay for our produce and pay adequately. I believe she kept an eye on the retail prices, and the activities of the middle-man, and was ruthlessly ready to cash in. She told me on several occasions that I was not charging what I should, and had I not better leave it to her?

We had another argument.

I said, "There is always the other fellow's point of view. A man likes his cut at the cake."

She countered me confidently.

"Yes, I know, but he will always take a bit off your slice if you let him."

"Think so? One does not want to have one's market cut. If one is too fierce——"

“Agreed. But nine people out of ten will exploit you if you are too gentlemanly.”

I used to wonder at her seeming hardness. Was it hardness, or clear sane courage? And had her father’s fate something to do with it? Maybe, Christopher Lawless had been too sensitive and too gentlemanly, and the men of tougher fibre had bled him, and deep down in the daughter was a desire to be revenged. Was that possible? Very possible, and perhaps without her realizing its existence.

Yet the woman in her provoked me, and all the more so because of her seeming coldness. Each day she was near me, and I might not touch her, nor even betray my feelings. If I tried to show tenderness towards her, she countered it with bright and ironic sharpness. I could hear her saying, “Please don’t get silly, my lad. I don’t want it. Emotion is a nuisance. Get on with the job.” She made me suffer, for I could not grow used to her presence, and accept it without secret anguish. I would lie awake at night, trying to persuade myself that some word of hers, a look or a smile had a new and significant meaning. Perhaps she would change. Perhaps she was just testing me. Perhaps, if I was patient with her, that which I desired so fiercely would grow and flower in her.

But sometimes I felt pretty desperate.

I asked myself why I should bear this starvation, take this young woman into my world and suffer for it?

Yet, what grievance had I? She had promised me nothing. The relationship had been, from the beginning, purely practical and unromantic. She was not even supposed to know that I loved her. Her whole attitude was that of a young woman at an open window, cool and serene, and enjoying the air and the sunlight, but ready to slam the window down should emotional storms gather.

The early part of the winter was wet, bleak and sodden, and it hurt me that she should have to stodge about in the muck. I could not help being hurt by anything that seemed to affect her. Then, she caught a cold. Would she nurse it? No, sir? We had a scene, and it must have been quite a ridiculous scene, for she sneezed and kept blowing her pretty nose, while I got hot and angry.

“Don’t be silly,” said I. “You go to bed for two days.”

She was as wet as the winter, and her voice was comic.

“I’m quide all right, dank you.”

“You’re not.”

“Yes, I ab. Don’t fuss.”

Angry though I was I could not help laughing, and my laughter seemed to exasperate her.

“What’s fuddy about a code in be head?”

“Oh, nothing, but why be so tough? Look at it in this way; I don’t want one of my hands laid up.”

“I wodn’t be.”

“All right. I won’t argue.”

But she was.

I had a note from Lady Furnival saying that Phillida was in bed, and running a temperature, and that Dr. Gibson had ordered her to stay there. I am ashamed to say that I was pleased. In my innocence I believed that illness might soften her, and give me a chance to show tenderness. Phillida was lodging in the house of a local joiner, a rambling, red-tiled cottage in Brook Lane, and I rode down on the Sunday morning, taking with me a bunch of chrysanthemums I had bought in Guildford. Mrs. Potter opened the door to me; she was fat and rosy and maternal, and when I told her who I was and passed her the flowers, she asked me to step inside. Fat and kindly she might be, but she had a tongue like a bell-clapper, and she let fly at me.

“She do have to work so hard, Mr. Carey. Up in the morning in the dark, and when I says to her, ‘Why don’t you let the men do it,’ she fires up at me. Bless us, the trouble I’ve had to keep her in bed. If it hadn’t been for Dr. Gibson——”

I tried to stem the flow.

“How is she to-day?”

“Oh, better, sir. I’ll take up the flowers. Any message?”

“Tell her to stay where she is.”

“I will, sir. Praps she’d see you with me for a moment, and you could tell her. She’s that obstinate about things.”

Mrs. Potter left me by her kitchen fire, and went up with the flowers, but she was back in half a minute, looking a little ruffled.

“She thanks you, sir. No, she’s not feeling like seeing anybody. I gave her your message.”

“And what did she say?”

Mrs. Potter betrayed hesitation.

“Well, sir, as a matter of fact she said, ‘Tell him not to fuss’.”

I managed to smile.

“Tell her I won’t, Mrs. Potter, but if she comes back too soon I’ll box her ears and send her home.”

Mrs. Potter gave a fat titter.

“Tee-hee, I’d like to see any man doing it, even one o’ your size. You’ll excuse me, sir, but she ain’t that sort, if you know what I mean.”

I knew too well what Mrs. Potter meant, and I began to wonder whether there was any leafy lane by which I could approach this young Vestal virgin. I am afraid I did not believe the whole of Lady Furnival’s story about Phillida and her romance, for I did not think that any man could impose upon Christopher Lawless’s daughter, even though it is notorious that strong-minded women appear to feel tenderness for some weak and rotten man. Is it the maternal spirit, the desire to possess and to protect, to wash the wretched little creature’s face, and to retain the child in subjecting the man? Had Phillida dissipated the first perfume of her youth in trying to produce a sweet cleanliness in some irresponsible and futile cad?

I felt baffled and depressed. I had offered her flowers, and she had told me not to fuss. I turned into the Crown, and took refuge in the lounge by Mr. Ballinger’s generous fire. He came to talk with me, and I ordered two sherries, and we drank together.

He was a kindly soul was John Ballinger. He understood how to sympathize with another man without making him feel poor and cheap, and I dare say my face suggested that I was feeling poor. He knew that I had had a bad year, and that more than once I had failed him in the matter of supplies.

“Well, here’s luck, Mr. Carey. After all a bit of rough weather does teach us things.”

“I’m afraid I’ve let you down once or twice.”

“Don’t you worry about that. I’ve managed. Besides, you’ve never let me down on quality.”

Even that little bit of praise and appreciation cheered me, together with the sherry and the fire. I fared forth again and found Brandon going home from church, or that part of Brandon which continued in the footsteps of its fathers, and twenty yards from the Dower House I met Lady Richenda.

“Come and lunch with me, Grant.”

I accepted. Lady Furnival was not a person to be fobbed off with excuses.

“I have just been inquiring for Phillida.”

“Have you? She is better. That young woman takes a lot of keeping in bed.”

“So it seems.”

“Leave her to Dr. Gibson.”

I did not confide in Lady Furnival, for I had a feeling that she might tell me things I did not want to know. I suppose I was shirking the issue, but she did say one thing to me that persuaded me into a particular mood, and on the way home stark and significant enlightenment became mine.

“If a girl like Phillida cared for you would she have taken on the job that she is doing? Hardly. It is just because she can confront you without emotion that she chose Blackthorn. It is the life that piques her, not the man in you.”

I had touched bedrock, and my illusion seemed as dead as the moon.

XXIII

PHILLIDA returned at the end of a week, looking a little wan and drawn, and I'm afraid her pallor moved me more than her Hebe health.

The wind had swung from the south-west to the north-east, with a hurrying grey sky, and black frosts at night. Will and I had taken turns at milking, and though the cow-house was warmer than the open yard, I was determined that Phillida should not come trailing up out of Brandon at some unearthly hour. If I could not be her lover, I would at least be master on my own farm.

I met her that first dark morning at the gate. The beam of her lamp flickered to and fro, and I was carrying a lantern.

I said: "Hallo, what are you doing here? I told Gibson not to let you up before eight. You've had flu, you know."

She answered me almost gently, and a woman's gentleness can be insuperable.

"I'm quite all right."

"Well, the milking's done. You go and sit by the parlour fire. I have lit it."

"Just idly?"

"Don't be ironic. You ought not to be out on a bitter morning like this."

"Nothing a poor weak woman can do?"

"Well, if you must be active you can scour out the pans, and get my breakfast ready."

"Thank you, sir. Bacon and eggs I suppose?"

"Yes, two rashers and two eggs all round, including Will."

Her irony and my assumption of masterfulness were like two birds fighting in the air. I am sure that she liked my masterfulness as little as I liked her irony, but my struggle to hold down my desire gave me a fallacious sort of hardness. I got up each morning and did the milking before she arrived, and we went through the same kind of verbal scuffle. She said that she was quite fit again, and that my interference was idiotic. In fact, we were completely frank with each other.

I wondered how long the conflict would last, and whether she would tire of it and surrender the job. The north-easter was still blowing; they were black, bleak days, and I insisted upon finding her work under cover. There were potatoes to be sorted and graded, and the chats cooked for the pigs and poultry, two new fowl-houses to be creosoted, fruit-netting that needed mending. Will and I were cutting and carting timber for, with the ground hard, work on the land was at a standstill. She accepted these jobs and carried them through with a silent thoroughness. They were boring activities, and I wondered how profoundly they bored her, yet she seemed quietly and calmly cheerful. We were casual and bright with each other. I persuaded myself that I was testing her; it did not occur to me that she might be doing the same by me.

Early in January the weather improved, that is to say we had clear skies and sun, and glitter. The hedges and grass were all hoar-frost. Will and I were still at work in the wood, and one morning I saw her coming across the Five Acre, a green muffler wound round her neck, and her hands in leather gloves. She had her colour back, and I thought she looked very lovely and desirable. Why could she not care as I cared? There was a kind of anguish in me as I watched her.

She said, "Find me a job here!"

"Want one?"

"I am tired of potatoes."

Poor kid, she might well be. Why had I shut her up in that tragic place?

"You can clear up the tops if you like. Trim and faggot them. There's a billhook."

She picked up the billhook.

Will and I were working the cross-cut, sawing the trunks into lengths. There was rusty, trampled bracken all round us, and overhead the thin blue winter sky. The larches stood up like the bare masts of ships in a harbour. We were in a little clearing where the leaf-mining moth and other grubs had killed the trees, and we had turned the timber into gates and posts and battens. There were other dying or dead trees about us, and you could tell them by the redness of their trunks where the yaffles had been at work pecking the bark off in search of grubs. Will had lit a wood fire and hung a kettle over it. He was a great lover of fires, as though some primitive instinct lived on in him, and fire was a symbol and a safeguard, or sacrificial, Biblical or Beltane, beacon or cresset. On such a day as this Will would eat

his dinner where he worked, sitting on a log close to the fire and drinking gigantic cups of tea. I had had to buy a special cup for Will, and it was like a small wash-basin.

So, we worked in silence, our saw snoring to and fro, and Phillida's billhook flicking at the branches. I watched her, and so I think did Will. She was quite handy with a billhook, striking at the branches close to the stem, and in the direction of their slope, and using the nose end of the billhook. One clean, sharp blow sufficed to trim off most of the stuff, for she had a good blade and she knew how to use it.

Will and I were rolling a log aside, and I spoke to her.

"That's not the first time you've used a bill."

She went on working, and answered me over a shoulder.

"No. I used to cut lots of our wood. And I used to have a fire."

"Like Will's?"

"Yes, it smells good."

"That it do, Miss," said Will. "And I like to see the smoke going up straight and blue."

"Like your eyes, Will," thought I.

We went on with our sawing, looking sometimes at the saw-cut and sometimes into each other's eyes. Such conversation as we held was usually very simple and obvious. "Nearly through, Will", or "She's pinching. Let's have a log under here". I had my back to Phillida, and Will was facing her, and suddenly he faltered in his stroke, stared me in the eyes, and gave a kind of poke of the head at something behind my back. I turned and saw Phillida sitting on one of the logs. She seemed to droop; she had gone very white; the billhook lay across her knees.

I dropped my end of the saw and walked over to her. It was obvious that she had overtired herself after that bout of flu, and that the bitter cold had overstimulated her heart.

"Feeling faint?"

She did not look at me.

"I shall be all right in a minute."

"You've been doing too much. Put your head down, right down."

I took the bill from her, and she lowered her head almost to her knees. I stood and watched her; I was stung by sudden tenderness; I wanted to pick her up and carry her back to the house and lay her on the sofa before the fire, but I was afraid of hearing those rebuffing words "Don't fuss."

Her colour did not come back. She raised her head, and her face was pinched and white.

"Sorry, but——"

I dropped the bill, bent down, and putting an arm round her, lifted her up.

"Back to the house, my dear. Can you manage, or shall I——"

She got on her feet, her lips pale and set.

"All right, I can manage."

But she was shaking. I kept my arm round her, and walked her slowly out of the wood, taking as much of her weight as I could. She had to stop once or twice to rest, leaning against me, and I was conscious of a sense of exultation. I had touched her as I had never touched her before, and I was moved by the thought that this might be the beginning of other things. I just stood and held her, and let her take her time.

"No hurry, Phill. Feeling better?"

She nodded, and we went on, across the field and into the garden-gate. She was very tottery and here her strength gave out and I felt her body going flaccid. I gathered her up, and her head rolled on to my shoulder, her hair brushing my cheek. Her eyes were closed like the eyes of one asleep. I managed to get the door open with one hand, and I carried her into the parlour, and laying her on the sofa, put a cushion under her head and pushed the sofa closer to the fire. I piled on more logs, and fetching a glass, poured out a tot of whisky, added a little soda-water, and bent over her.

"Drink this. Can you?"

She opened her eyes at me, and put out a hand.

"What is it?"

"Whisky. Drink it down."

She shivered, took the glass from me, and sipped the stuff. I found a rug and spread it over her.

"Feeling cold."

“Sorry to be such a nuisance.”

“Nonsense. You lie there and keep quiet until you feel better. Then I’ll get the van out and drive you down to Brandon. You’ll have to take things easily for a week or two.”

She lay sipping the drink. She seemed to be in no mood to challenge my masterfulness. I bent down and stirred up the fire, and its blaze seemed to answer my hopes. There was no cynic in the room to tell me that you may be deceived by a woman’s docility when she is a little tipsy or in pain, and I was trembling with excitement. Her defensive self-sureness seemed to have turned to wax before my fire.

I sat on the back of the sofa and looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

“You ought to have told me you were not feeling up to things.”

“But I was.”

“Well, I ought to have spotted it. Feel warmer now? Your colour’s coming back.”

She finished the whisky, and passed me the glass.

“Thanks, Grant. I do so hate anything flabby.”

“True, oh Queen, but even Cæsar——”

“Give me a cigarette.”

“Ought you to?”

“Yes, that little drink has bucked me up.”

“Just one, my dear. I’ll go and get the van out.”

When I came back I saw that she had smoked only half the cigarette. It was lying in the ashtray, smouldering. Her colour had gone again.

“I’m not going to say I told you so.”

“You’ve said it! Yes, I’ll be good and go home.”

I helped her up, found her coat, and wrapped her up in the seat beside me. It took us less than five minutes to run down into Brandon, and the fresh air seemed to revive her. She was out of the van before I could get round to help her. She seemed to be in a strange hurry to be rid of me and to reach Mrs. Potter’s door, and in my innocence I did not realize that there might be other reasons. I was such a celibate, innocent ass.

Next morning's post brought me a letter from Gibson. He said that he had examined Miss Lawless and that she was suffering from what he described as a post-influenzal heart, and that she needed a rest and a change. I took time and my chance by the forelock, got on my bike, and caught Dr. Gibson in his surgery. I thanked him, and said that I agreed with his opinion, and that Phillida could take a month off as he advised. Had she anyone to whom she could go? Apparently she had, an aunt who owned a cottage in Cornwall not far from Falmouth.

I rode on to Mrs. Potter's. Phillida was breakfasting in bed, and again I pressed my opportunity. If her heart was affected, only temporarily of course, I hoped that it was affected emotionally towards me. I was paternal and authoritative with Mrs. Potter. It was necessary that I should see Miss Lawless, and insist upon her taking a holiday and a rest.

Mrs. Potter left me in her parlour and trotted upstairs. I could hear voices, Mrs. Potter's cheerful and caressing, and, I imagine, addressing Phillida as "Dearie". Phillida's voice was no more than a murmur, oracular and baffling.

Mrs. Potter came trotting downstairs. Miss Lawless would see me.

I found Phillida sitting up in bed and wearing a light blue pullover. Her hair was combed off her forehead, and she looked rather like a big, blond boy in the school infirmary. The room struck me as dark and cold. It lacked a fire-place.

I stood at the foot of her bed.

"So, Gibson has given you your marching orders. I'm glad."

She looked at me queerly, with a curious obliqueness that seemed to shirk some issue.

"I'm afraid I'm letting you down."

"Nonsense. By the way, it will be a holiday on pay."

"No, I can't take your money when——"

"But, Phillida, that's the law as it affects most people, unless you have contracted otherwise. So, you see."

She shook her head at me.

"No, my lad, I'm not as hard up as all that."

"Then, let me pay your fare?"

“Nothing doing.”

I made myself smile.

“You are an obstinate jade.”

“Jade is a pretty hard substance, my lad. Remember that.”

I rested my arms on the bed-rail and looked at her steadfastly.

“Need you be so hard with me?”

Her eyes avoided mine. Almost she had a sulky air, and her faroucheness baffled me.

“There may be reasons for hardness.”

“I might understand. Why be so secretive?”

“Are you my Father Confessor?”

“I should like to call myself your friend.”

She smiled at me suddenly. Her face cleared, and opened up as though a curtain had been drawn back.

“You are a good sport, Grant. Can’t we leave it at that?”

“I’ll leave it just where you please, my dear. The land teaches one patience.”

She went on her holiday, and Will and I and Blackthorn bore with the winter. That there is much to be said for the winter I will admit; it is final and firelit, and full of healthy hunger. It is good to come in to the lights and the fire after stodging about in the muck and the cold. Weeds do not grow, pests are not active. The early sunsets wrap a blanket round your superabundant energy and will you to sleep. Moreover, the hours of daylight seem more precious, and when they are sunlit, like balls of amber threaded on threads of jet. It may be that to say that life is what we see in it may be platitudinous to those who prefer the midden to the granary, and the stink of corruption to those lovely scents nature can offer us, the smell of hay and of the earth after rain, a bean field in flower, the smell of new timber and of wheat-meal. It has always puzzled me why so many of the moderns prefer poking about in sepsis, and are contemptuous of hearty, human health.

But this winter was a brute of a winter. There was no burking its beastliness. It was both sodden and cold and sunless, and when Phillida left

us we had no more of those sparkling, frosty days. It was no ice and steel winter, but a gum-boot affair, chilling your feet, without warming your blood and muscles. I think the beastliness of that particular month made me miss Phillida the more, the glow and the serenity of her. Her fortnight enlarged itself to six weeks, but I was glad she was not with us during this foul weather, for it might have taken the heart out of any country enthusiast, and I was again beginning to dream dreams. The spring was coming, crocus, daffodil, almond blossom, gaudy tulips, and I had within me a feeling that Phillida had come nearer to me since our parting. She must know that I—— That one hour of contact and of compassion had made me believe that she had begun to understand and to trust me. Phillida would come back with the spring, and I dreamed of a different Phillida.

XXIV

IT was early March, and we were busy sowing our spring oats and cloching our early potatoes. I had my first batch of eggs in the incubators.

The winter, having done its damndest, seemed minded to leave us like a lamb. Already, the larch wood was showing a tinge of amber and the sallow buds were swelling, and the elder bushes flecked with green. I had a letter from Phillida, a formally friendly little letter. She apologized for being away so long, but said that her aunt's doctor had advised it. She was fit again, and would be returning to Brandon on the Saturday, and I might expect her at work on the Monday.

Expect her! I was full of the spring, of the surge of the sap, and romantic sex was urgent in me. I was dreaming of a different Phillida, a sentimental, daffodil Phillida who would return to my world with the spell of the fruit blossom. The brittle hardness of winter would have passed. I thought of her as a douce and glowing creature who might be willing to let me love her.

I was up very early on that March morning. I wanted the sun to shine and the sky to be blue, and when I pulled back the curtains I saw one of those tumultuous, splendid mornings when white clouds belly out to a live wind. This was the weather I wanted both for the land and for my love. I had mown the grass in the garden. Crocuses were in flower about Charles's grave, standing up like little yellow and purple flames. The Lent lilies were bending their beaks downwards and changing from green to gold. I was in a singing mood. The north-east wind might blow cold, and the sunlight be fallacious, but my heart was warm in me and my hopes high.

I am afraid I hung about waiting for her. I left the early chores to Will, and I dare say that Will was wise as to my preoccupations. I had had my early tea, and I stood at the parlour window, smoking a pipe, and watching the white gate of the paddock.

And I was afraid. Are all men afraid of the thing they love? Surely not. In fact, I was a creature of sentiment. I wanted life to be a little mysterious and tender. I believed life to be mysterious. So, I stood, biting hard at my pipe, and watching that white gate, inwardly in turmoil.

She came. I saw the gate swing open, and here a queer, incidental fact struck me. Somehow, I had expected her in a skirt, as a feminine figure, and she was in breeches. I had been thinking and dreaming of her in terms of

sex, forgetting the familiar habit of her, and she came to me in man's guise. I remember feeling shocked, not by her breeched state, but by the symbol it suggested.

I left my pipe on the windowsill, and went out to meet her at the gate. I suppose a man dreams of seeing a woman's face light up, that exquisite glimmer of the eyes; and of finding her hands meet his, lover's hands. My own eyes could have concealed no secret. She had remounted her machine, and came pedalling over the grass, looking just like a big blond boy with her green scarf and her pullover. She might have been riding along a towing-path, coaching a racing crew. I stood and waited, and as I watched her, the tender illusion seemed to drain out of me.

She raised an arm.

"Hallo, Mr. Carey. I wonder you haven't filled up my place."

I think I said, "Good morning. Glad to see you back."

She dismounted, and her face was bright and casual, and I realized that she had no secret emotion to camouflage or control. She had come back to me just as untouched as she had left me.

"Milking done?"

"Yes, this morning."

She gave a little laugh.

"So you weren't quite sure that I would turn up?"

"I think I was, but cows can't wait. Had a good time?"

"Oh, not so bad. I'm rather sick of loafing about. How are things?"

"Oh, not so bad."

She wheeled her bicycle along the garden fence towards the buildings, and I followed her, feeling completely deflated. I was telling myself that I had been an idiot to cherish illusions, and that a girl like Phillida did not react to a sentimentalist like myself. She wanted her own life, and the job, and the realities of sex had made her fastidious and a little scornful.

The barn doors were open, and she wheeled her machine in there. I know that time heals wounds, but I wondered whether this building had ceased from causing her qualms. Yet, why wonder at all about anything connected with this young woman whose desire was to be regarded merely as a fellow worker? I was angry with myself.

“What’s the immediate job?”

“Filling mash-hoppers, and egg-collecting.”

“Right. I’ll get on with it. Any cream wanted to-day?”

“Yes. You might set the separator going when you have brought the eggs in. There’s a delivery to Brandon and Dorking. Will and I are cloching earlies.”

“Usual hour?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind if I pick up one or two things for myself at Dorking?”

“Of course not. Why ask?”

I was as curt as she was. If she was trying to make me understand that she did not desire emotion, then I would be no barley-headed boy sick with love and self-pity. I went off later to help Will with the cloches, which, when they were all set out, would look like a glass battalion on parade. Our sun-traps had no effect upon my grim gloom. Will gave me one of his blue stares, asked one question, and then was silent.

“Miss Lawless come back, ssir?”

“She has.”

I imagine that my face was self-revealing. I worked with a kind of savage and deliberate steadfastness and, as I said, our silence was complete.

I began to sense the antagonism between us. I felt that she felt that I was making claims, and she was in no mood to consider such claims. Maybe we were both afraid of each other. All that I can say is that the constant provocation of her exasperated me. I even contemplated being ruthlessly frank with her, and saying, “Look here, I have made a mistake. This isn’t the place for a woman with looks. I’m sorry, but I think you had better leave us.”

If I could complain of her coldness, I could not complain of her work. It was excellent, and it was obvious to me that she had her heart in the job. She was strong, thorough, and observant. She used her head, and had not to be prompted. That was yet another complication. She appeared to be content here, a happy Hebe, and it seemed absurd that one should allow sex to spoil what should be a comforting comradeship. Why the devil could I not be content with the positive things I had?

Moreover, the year appeared to be promising well. The weather had ceased from being cussed, and was smiling upon our labours. We had rain when we needed it, and open weather at just the right moment. The fruit was flowering well, and no late frosts arrived. We lost hardly a chick. Our crops were going in and coming up like dream crops.

Yet, everything irritated me.

When Will chose to say of Phillida, “She be as good as a good man”, I received the statement sulkily, and with inward impatience.

“Women don’t last, Will. I give her two seasons at the most.”

Will did not argue with me. He may have guessed why I indulged in cynicism.

So, the days went by, and then one April evening she came to me as I was mixing meal.

“Do you mind if I ask you a favour?”

She need not have put it that way.

“What?”

“I have a cousin coming for the week-end. May I show the place off?”

“Of course. Male or female?”

“Male.”

“Right, take him anywhere you please.”

I laughed at myself over the news. So, a dear cousin was spending the week-end with her, and modern youth did not do that sort of thing unless it wanted to. Had she planned to provide me with the obvious hint? I imagined so, and I laughed at myself, and was angry. When I paid her her money on the Saturday, I did it with the formality of a cashier passing notes over a bank counter.

“By the way, I haven’t asked you whether you are satisfied here.”

She gave me a bright look.

“Quite, thanks. And you?”

“No complaints. Will thinks you ought to be a man.”

“You can tell Will from me that I would rather have been a man.”

“Is that why you wear breeches?”

I knew that I was being consciously rude to her, but my tongue did not touch her calm temper.

“No, just efficiency. May I bring Eric up on Sunday?”

“Any time you like.”

“Thanks so much. We might stroll up after tea.”

Eric! I have always disliked the name Eric. Eric Brighteyes, or Eric Little by Little! Damn Eric! But what a lout jealousy makes of one! I knew that I ought to have been courteous and asked them both to tea, but I was a curmudgeon, and I did not.

I kept out of the way on Sunday afternoon. That is to say I had my tea in the parlour, with the window shut and the curtains half drawn, and I remained there, smoking my pipe and pretending to read the Sunday paper. Presently I heard their voices. No, I was not going to look at Eric, but look I did, like a surly, jealous dog peering out of its kennel. My surprise was complete. I saw quite a little fellow, and he was lame, and as he limped along at Phillida’s side, I became the fool of yet another illusion.

Would not a strong young creature like Phillida feel protective and tender towards that sort of man? It was a question of contrasts. I could not touch her because I was large and beefy and obvious. Caring is such an incalculable thing, and in actual life bold Lochinvar does not always ride off with the lady.

The two cousins disappeared, and I went churlishly back to my chair and my paper. I was not going to be big-brotherly to Master Eric. Moreover, I assured myself that they did not want me. I was still in this petulant mood, when someone darkened the window.

I looked up and round and saw Phillida there. She could see me, and the flutter of the paper as I turned in the chair.

“Mr. Carey.”

Mr. Carey, indeed! I got up and went towards the window.

“Yes?”

“May we have the barn key? Eric wants to see the equipment.”

The various keys hung on a hook in the kitchen, and I went and fetched them, opened the window and passed them to her.

“You may as well take the lot. Is Eric farm-minded?”

“No, just interested. Won’t you come and demonstrate?”

“You know almost as much as I do.”

“But I don’t think I can swing the engine, and I know Eric can’t.”

Did this little piece of flattery move me? Maybe it did, though Phillida had stated nothing but the truth. If, physically, Eric was a poor thing, and I the strong man, was that in my favour? And was I not being incredibly petty? I found Phillida in the garden, and it seemed to me that she was in one of her gentler moods, perhaps because of lame Eric.

“Your cousin interested?”

“Mechanically,” and she smiled at me. “So far as we are concerned he hardly knows a potato from a cabbage.”

“What’s his job?”

“Oh, electrical engineering, but he also writes poetry.”

“On galvanometers and ampères and all that?”

“Not quite. It’s dreadfully modern, and jerky, and explosive. I tell him it’s like an engine misfiring.”

“And what does he say to that?”

“Just laughs. Eric’s a nice child, and so innocent, though his poetry pretends to be horribly wicked.”

We found Eric inside the barn, up on the stage of our thresher, and peering into the “concave chamber”. In fact the first part of Eric that I saw was his posterior with a pair of cheap grey flannel trousers stretched tightly over it, and very much caught bending. He was a creature of quick, eager movements, nervy and light as a bird, and his face surprised me. It was a Mediterranean face of the intelligent type, sallow, olive-skinned, clear cut and narrow, with quick, smiling brown eyes. He had the soft mouth of a girl, and a suggestion of hips and a bust. I had come forth from my sulks prepared to hate the fellow, and for my sins I found myself liking him.

“This is Mr. Carey,” said his cousin.

“I say, I have always wanted to see inside a thresher.”

He was, as Phillida had said, a nice, impulsive child, whose curiosity was so bird-like that it forgot to show off. I climbed up on the narrow feeding-stage beside him, and turning back a metal flap, gave him a better view of the “concave”. He wanted to know all about it, how the blades were

adjusted, if and when you had to deal with different sorts of grain. Next, I had to explain the sieves and the blower, and the queer box-like troughs that play up and down and extrude the straw. Meanwhile, Phillida sat on an upturned bushel-measure, and smoked a cigarette which, in the barn, was forbidden.

I happened to glance down at Phillida and her face puzzled me. She was like some young Dea Mater benignly watching two of her human children at play, creative children, eager in the artistry of contriving and growing things, and not like the horrible young product of Nazi Germany, that cad's country, with a little super-cad as God. We may pour scorn upon the Ancients and the Medievalists, but how much wiser they were in their human psychology. Only a religion which understood the organic profundities could have given to other women the figure of the Virgin Mary, compassionate, universal, the eternal mother. But I was looking at Phillida and wondering at the inward glow that seemed to shine upon us with glimmers of secret mischief and humour. Were we two boys amusing her, and causing her to philosophize, and if so, why? I forgot the sinful smoking of that cigarette.

“How much h.p. do you want?”

“Five.”

Eric was now at the engine. He said it was a jolly job, and could he start it up? I took the starting handle from its peg, fitted it, glanced at Phillida and saw her give a shake of the head.

“Better let me,” said I. “She’s a bit sulky when cold. You hold up the valve for half compression.”

I don’t think he suspected that I was saving him from betraying his lack of strength. I wound at the handle, and after a dozen times the engine came to life. I stood back and glanced again at Phillida. She smiled at me and the smile seemed wholly mine. So Eric the man-child and I went on playing. I had to demonstrate the grinding-mill to him, and show him how it was adjusted to deliver either meal or flour.

“So you could bake your own bread,” said he.

“We could.”

“How awfully jolly. Supposing there was a war, you would be self-supporting.”

“Almost. We couldn’t manage tea or sugar.”

“What about beet?”

“Too complicated. It is a devil of a process, or rather, a series of processes.”

“Well, honey?”

“Yes, that’s an idea. What about it, Phillida?”

“Meaning me?”

“I’m not imposing anything on anybody.”

“Bees might not like me.”

I laughed.

“Is that possible?”

Eric had a sample of flour in the palm of his hand, and suddenly I was aware of him looking at both of us with brown, bird-like eyes. It was like the inquiring, interested gaze of a thrush, but there was neither fear in it, nor jealousy. What Eric saw or divined I do not know, but he seemed to become more quiet and thoughtful, like a creature drawing apart to feel and reflect. There was a silence in the barn. It was Phillida who broke it as she rose from her seat, the bushel measure.

“Eric must see my cows.”

“Of course.”

I liked her speaking of them as her cows.

I had some jobs to do, and an unexplainable shyness had caught me. I thought they might like to be alone together, and I said good-bye to Eric, and told him to come up at any time he pleased. It was a cold clear evening and it felt like frost, and I thought that some of the cloches needed covering. I had bought yards and yards of Hessian for this purpose; also, we were keeping bracken between some of the rows. I was at work some time on this, and when I strolled back and round to the front of the house I saw two figures walking towards the paddock gate. They had their arms round each other, and they did not see me.

I was conscious of a spasm of jealous anguish. And yet I could not feel bitter towards that lame, child-man.

XXV

I CANNOT say why, but the anger passed from me after I had seen those two so intimately linked. The conclusion appeared inevitable. If Phillida had suffered disillusionment, and Lady Richenda may have exaggerated the affair, then, was it not probable that she might react maternally to this boyish creature, and feel consoled and refreshed by his vivid, happy temperament? I am a simple sort of ass, and this is a simpleton's story, and I suppose I have always attached the simpler, human significances to the reactions of the working world. And they are, on the whole, profoundly and positively good. I have lived most of my life with country folk whose blood seems to assimilate clean natural sap, and when I read some of the modern novels I am puzzled and amazed. Is humanity so squalid and so unlovely? All that I can say is that I ask for peaceful and lovely things, especially so in these days of horror, when German man appears as a horribly ingenious and diseased urchin exploding beastliness over the heads of the gentler peoples. Maybe I am a simpleton, regarded with scorn by the cynical elect, but I would challenge any of them to boast that their lives have been happier and more rich than mine.

I had lost my anger against life, but I was acutely unhappy, and this spring with its beauty was full of pangs for me. Blackbirds sang of love that was not mine. I would lie and listen to the dawn song of the birds, and all that tumultuous joy mocked me. Green leaves, daffodils, pear, plum and apple blossom, primroses in the banks, sony tulips among the wallflowers, growth and flowering everywhere, birds mated, and I alone seemed mateless. I tried to lose myself in labour. All day I was at something or other, restless, eternally active, consumed by my desire. And yet I had more self-control; I seemed more able to conceal things, to meet Phillida as I imagined she wished to be met, with a matter-of-fact friendliness.

I remember saying to her, "How's Eric? Bad luck that leg of his."

She seemed to look at me curiously.

"Not such bad luck as it might be. Eric's more head than body."

"A happy spirit."

"You liked Eric?"

"I did. One could not help it."

Her eyes lit up for a moment, and I thought that the light was for the other fellow. Well, what right had I to complain? Love blows like the wind. One cannot set the vane to order, or alter the blackbird's song.

Yet, we got on better together, and there were no clashes, perhaps because I made no outward claims upon her. That was how I felt about it. I tried to treat her as I would have treated another man, and with the naturalness of one worker with another. Countrymen are not given to wasting words or mincing them, though there may be some wastage in the village pub, and I talked earth and corn and eggs and milk and fruit-sprays to Phillida. I found her as interested in our work as I was, quick to confront problems, steadfast in carrying things through. I had not to worry about a job when she had it in hand. There was nothing slap-dash about her. Even her movements were deliberate and easy, a country rhythm, and thank God she could finish. So many of the young rush at a job, become bored, and skimp the finish of it, to rush off to something new. I know nothing more exasperating than the slap-dash mind. She had a sense of order, and a passion for cleanliness that sometimes scared poor Will. All the dairy utensils had to be like the equipment of an operating theatre. She cleaned her tools before putting them away. She washed the cows' udders as though they were infants. I noticed that Will was more careful about his shirts, and less of the shaggy apostle. She had a challenging and a tonic effect upon us both, even though the relationship promised to be impermanent. She might go off some day to mother Eric, and to become the mother of other Erics.

So, we came to the month of May. May is a tricky month, lovely and fickle, and until the first fifteen days or so have passed any grower of fruit remains anxious. It has always been a tense month for me, and this particular May tantalized me with all its insurgent mystery. I felt starved in the midst of its bitter-sweet beauty; it had a tang, the provocation of fruit ripe as to colour, but sharp and green within. I suppose I was overworking myself, and there are limits even to a strength such as mine. I was irritable, even with Will. He seemed slow and stolid, just when I wanted to speed up nature.

Phillida came to me one morning.

“Sorry, Grant, but I'm afraid I have a job for you.”

“Oh, what?”

“I know you are pushed, but one of the cow-house posts is pretty rotten. Haven’t you noticed it?”

I had. The timber had decayed between wind and water, and if you touched it with the toe of a boot the rotten stuff crumbled to powder. I had meant to replace it and forgotten, as one forgets things one does not want to remember when one is hard put.

“I don’t want the roof down on my cows,” said Phillida.

“Or on you! I’ll get a post cut out, and Will and I can slip it in. We shall have to underpin that beam.”

She thanked me.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you just now, but——”

“Do you think I want you hurt? And what would Eric say?”

That was petulant of me, but I was very tired that day and short of temper. She gave me a curious, steadfast stare, and then a sudden smile that was bitter-sweet.

“I rather wish I hadn’t bothered you.”

That settled it. I had become pretty knowledgeable with the circular saw. The saw bench happened to be in place, and I went to the barn, slipped on the belt, and started up the engine to see that it was running properly, for I should need all its power. We had some eight foot larch posts in the rough stored in a shed, and I got one of them on my shoulder and carried it to the barn, and I think I felt arrogant about my strength. Eric could not have lifted the end of the thing. I lowered the balk on to the bench ready for ripping, and restarting the engine, shot the striking gear over. Now, larch can be the devil. It binds and pinches the saw, and stops both it and the engine. Will had a trick of his own which he had taught me. He kept a long handled wooden wedge which you could use as a sort of lever in the saw cut to keep the slices apart, and while you used your left hand to steady the balk and thrust it forward with your tummy, you kept the saw cut from closing on the saw with your wooden wedge.

I had to square the balk into a proper post, and I had ripped off two outer slices of bark and timber and had started the third when the trouble began. This third slice began to pinch. I jammed my long lever in, but twice the saw stuck and the engine stopped. I had to pull the post back, restart the engine and try again. Maybe I was tired and irritable, and a man is apt to be impatient and to hurry things when he is in that state. I knew the dangers of

such a saw, and the care Will exercised, and the silence he insisted on, but when the saw again began to jam I lost my temper. The blade had almost stopped revolving, and I put all my weight on the wedge. It opened the cut, but it did more than that; it canted forward just as the freed disc began to whirl at speed, and my hand ran up against the saw.

It was all over in a second. I was conscious of one slash of pain, and stood staring at the stump of my hand. All four fingers had been sheered off below the knuckles. The fingers lay on the saw bench. I saw blood spurting, yet, for the moment the shock and horror of the thing seemed to paralyse me. I had no hand, only a mutilated stump plus a thumb, and the stump was spurting blood over the saw bench and that fatal post. I was dazed. No fingers, no hand, no power to grip a tool! Blood! Bleeding had to be stopped. I knew some of the elements of first aid, and I grasped my right arm with my left hand and got my thumb on the main artery.

Then, I walked out of the barn into the sunlight. I had not thought of stopping the engine, and it chugged on with the saw humming in the motionless post. I wanted to cry out, "My hand, my right hand". I felt like a frightened child, for all the implications of this maiming crowded on me. And then I saw Phillida. She came out of the cow-house. She was not ten yards away from me.

I said, "I've had an accident."

Even in my semi-dazed state I was aware of her face going as white as milk. Her brown eyes grew big and horrified. For a moment she stood still, staring at my bloody stump of a hand, and then she seemed to come floating swiftly down on me.

"Oh, my dear!"

"The saw——"

"Your fingers! Oh, Grant!"

I felt faint.

"I'd like to lie down. I've got the artery."

She flung an arm round me, and pulled me against her. She was strong. She got me across the yard, and as we went I heard her calling for Will. My knees were beginning to give when she helped me into the house and lowered me on to the sofa.

"I'll get a towel."

She found one somewhere, and came back rolling it into a band. She slipped it round my arm, high up, pulled it tight and knotted it off. Her white, stricken face was close to mine.

“Let go now. Let’s see.”

Her tourniquet had stopped the bleeding, and she drew a quick deep breath.

“Thank God. Wait, I want another towel. Where the hell is Will? Someone must go for Gibson. That thing must not stay on too long.”

She hurried out and came back with the roller towel from the kitchen door. It happened to be clean, for it had been put up only that morning. She snatched an old cushion from a chair, placed it on my knees, folded the towel over it, and told me to put my hand on it. Then she folded the towel over my hand as though the maimed thing was better hidden.

She stood over me.

“Like anything to drink?”

“No, I’m all right, Phill.”

“Oh, my dear, it seems all my fault.”

“How could it be?”

“I must leave you a moment. I must find Will.”

She went, leaving me feeling as strangely numb as my hand. I wondered why it hurt so little. But she had called me dear. She could not have been more shocked and moved if Eric—I was conscious of a sudden spasm of emotion, of wounded exultation. Had those words come to her lips inevitably, revealingly, or had they been no more than the rush of her quick compassion? I lay and looked at the ceiling. Something seemed to come alive in me, the realization of the damnable thing that had happened, its bitter significance. I had lost my right hand. I was only half a man, I should not be able to use any sort of tool, unless—I was feeling rather desperate when I heard her footsteps in the passage.

She was calm now, and some of her colour had come back, but it seemed to me that her calmness concealed some profound revelation. She glanced at the towel and saw that the redness had not spread.

“I’ve sent Will off. He can ride a bike, thank God! I might have taken the van.”

Her presence steadied and comforted me.

“I’m all right, my dear.”

“I did not want to leave you.”

She pushed a tuffet up to the sofa and sat down close to me, bending forward slightly, her elbows on her knees. The sun was shining in and it lit up her hair, but her face was dimmer than her hair.

“Like the curtains drawn a bit?”

“No, Phill.”

“Is that thing hurting?”

“Not yet.”

“I shall have to slacken it in half an hour or so, unless Gibson comes.”

“I dare say the bleeding has stopped. It was a clean cut.”

I remembered those fingers lying on the saw bench, and the mess of blood. I did not want her to see it.

“Don’t go into the barn, my dear.”

She shook her head.

“I won’t.”

“I’ll tell Will.”

“Oh, that barn! It seems a fatal sort of place for me.”

“It was my own damned fault. I was in too much of a hurry.”

There was silence between us for some seconds. We looked at each other steadfastly as though the same thought was in both our minds, and each of us shrank from expressing it. I did not want to play for pity. But all the implications of this morning were crowding back on me again, and I was scared by them. How could I carry on here with only one hand?

I saw a little frown pucker up her forehead. She sat with her chin on her hands, thinking. The silence held, and it began to trouble me. Maybe she was confronting the end of this adventure, Blackthorn once more empty, the land going back to weeds. It hurt me. Not till now had I realized how much I loved the place.

Suddenly she spoke, with her eyes on my wrapped-up paw.

“That must not make any difference, Grant.”

“But, my dear——”

“Do you love this place?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

“So do I. I think I have always loved it. And more of the job will be up to me.”

I lay and gazed at her, fearing to believe what I heard. She was not going to desert me just when this disastrous thing had happened in the spring of the year when work presses hard even upon a fit man.

“You are not leaving then?”

Almost, she looked angry, head up, eyes alight.

“What do you mean, leaving? What rot! You didn’t think I——”

“Well, you see, Phill, finance, I mean, one hardly realizes yet how much ——”

“My dear, you mustn’t talk like this. We are going to carry on. I don’t want to seem heartless, but——”

The sound of a car broke in on us, and I saw Gibson’s blue coupé slide into view beyond the fence. So, Will had been lucky. Phillida was on her feet, half turned towards the door.

“Thank God! I must finish that sentence, Grant. You’ll learn to do many things with that hand. You’ve got a thumb. My dear, don’t misunderstand me.”

“I hope I never shall,” said I, in doubt as to her full meaning. My friend she might be and no more, but she had called me dear, and such words make one dream.

Gibson was one of your doctors with a smile, but he was not smiling when he and Phillida came in to me. She had met him at the porch door, and from the moment Gibson entered the room he did not appear to take his eyes off me. I—was the job, as between man and man. As I have said, he was a sturdy, stocky person with a boy’s cheeky blue eyes which had grown kind in the forties, and I was to understand why Brandon thought so much of its doctor, and found him good and wholesome. He did not belong to the cheap and rotten little world of the literary scavengers. He had a bag with him. He had his coat off and was at work on me before a cock could have given six good crows.

“Arm feel numb, old man?”

“Just a bit.”

“Hot water, Miss Lawless, and plenty of it. Now, let’s have a look. Time we had this tourniquet off.”

I watched his face; I did not want to look at my maimed hand, and his face was a mirror of man’s compassion. The thing shocked him, as such a mutilation might shock any craftsman who has to use his hands. I saw him frown, and his lips tighten, and his eyes set in a comprehensive stare. His face said, “Bad business this, very bad business. What can one do about it? Not much.”

He loosened the tourniquet, and watched those red stumps for any spurting blood, and I gather that the arteries had clotted and closed themselves, for he looked relieved.

“How did it happen, Carey?”

“Circular saw. Just too much hurry and carelessness.”

“What a pity! Sorry, old man. No more bleeding, I think. Have to wash you up and get you dressed. Thank the gods you’ve a thumb left.”

“Will that——?”

He smiled full faced at me.

“Oh, yes. I know one chap, a carpenter, with a hand just like this, and he can do all sorts of things. That thumb of yours will become a clever fellow.”

“Thanks, Gibson. That’s something.”

“Now, what about a nursing-home or hospital?”

“Need I?”

“Not if you don’t want to, and unless there’s trouble, which there shouldn’t be.”

“I’d rather stay here.”

“Anyone to look after you?”

“Yes, Will. He will be as good as a mother.”

Phyllida must have heard our last words, for she came in with a basin and a jug of boiling water. Her face had a profound seriousness. She stood holding the basin and looking at me.

“If he is going to stay here Will and I can do everything.”

“Splendid,” said Gibson, giving her the glance one gives to someone strong and lovely and consoling. “The Three Graces,” said he, which was enigmatic, but quick of him, for how rarely do three such qualities flower on the same stem. But Phillida was in no playful mood. She stood holding basin and ewer like an archangel in the miracle-play, and the sun made a halo round her head. Yes, some heads do deserve haloes, in spite of the cynics, and as I looked up at Phillida I seemed to divine another change in her. She had the air of a creature consecrated to some new purpose.

“Here is the water, Doctor,” said she.

Gibson gave a puckered smile. This was no occasion, it seemed, for badinage, though he meant it kindly.

“Thank you, Miss Lawless. Put it there. Do you think you can help me?”

Her eyes were steady, as though saying, “Why not? Do you think I am going to faint?” But she just bent her head to him, and placing basin and jug on the table, drew it nearer to the sofa.

“Will that do?”

“Excellently.”

It was she who held my arm while Gibson washed and dressed my hand. She knelt by the sofa, and leaning over the back of it, supported my arm as though it were a baby being christened. She did not flinch, though I did, for those four stumps stung me when first they were touched with fluid. I caught my breath, and she glanced quickly into my face, poignantly and compassionately so, and I managed to smile at her.

“Sorry. That smarted a bit.”

I made myself watch Gibson’s clever and deliberate hands. He was very gentle. He folded gauze over my paw, and masses of wool, and bandaged me. He asked for a clean pillow or a cushion, and a towel, to make a bed for the thing, and Phillida went for them. I gather that Will was sitting in the kitchen, and that it was he who found them for her, for Will knew the ways of the house.

“Now, my lad,” said Gibson. “You will stay there quietly for a while. I’ll come up again later and see you. I don’t think there is going to be any trouble about bleeding, but I want the dressings watched. Will anyone be about?”

“I shall,” said Phillida.

XXVI

WHAT amazing egoists are we men! In reading through this record I rediscovered the sentence in which I said that Phillida gave me the impression of being a creature consecrated to some new purpose. Was I that purpose? Did I dream, as I lay there on that sofa that Phillida Jane Lawless's whole inspiration would be the cherishing of a large man-baby who had lost the fingers of one hand? Perhaps I did, but my dream was very tenuous, even though I had been bred in the superstition that woman is the God-destined ministering angel.

Will came in and sat by my bed, a rather dumb Will who gazed at me with dog's eyes, and mumbled something about my not worrying. I was to leave the job to him and Miss Phillida. What else could I do? But worrying I most certainly was. I told Will that he would have to valet me and put me to bed, and then there was the question of shaving. Could I use a safety-razor with my left hand? Will did not use a razor.

"I can shave 'ee, ssir. Don't you be for letting things terrify 'ee."

"I don't know what I should do without you, Will, just now."

"Don't 'ee worrit, ssir. Maybe it was my fault showing 'ee how to use that thur wedge."

"Nonsense, Will; I was just a damned fool in a hurry. Where's Miss Lawless?"

"Out with a hoe, ssir."

Phillida brought me tea, and poured it out and set it on a table close to the sofa. I saw her glance at my bandaged hand. There was no stain to show that things were not as they should be. She left me, saying that she had much to do, as I knew she had, for all my jobs were on her shoulders and on Will's. Gibson arrived just as I had finished tea. He looked me over and was kind and cheerful.

"Who will get you to bed?"

"Will."

"Useful fellow, that."

"I don't know what I should do without him. Doctor, may I smoke?"

“Feel like it?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Pipe or cigarette?”

“Pipe. There’s one on the mantelpiece. And tobacco.”

Here was another problem. I could not fill a pipe, and Gibson did it for me, stuck it in my mouth and lit it. He said that Master Tomthumb would do the job for me later, and then he left me, for he was a busy man, with a maternity case waiting for him at Burnt Oak Farm. I puffed away at my pipe, but it smoked hot and burned my tongue, and the tobacco did not seem to taste as it should do. I put it aside, and became aware of the room growing less cheerful. The sun had gone west, and there were clouds about, and the things about me looked grey and faded. I suppose the reaction was upon me, for I began to go down into a pit of gloom. Even my helplessness over that pipe had rubbed the full and bitter meaning of this morning into my soul. I felt frightened and worried and cold. The fire was nearly out. I was alone, and all the depressing thoughts that came swimming into my consciousness had an exaggerated bitterness.

The light grew more grey and cold, and the fire went out. Where had everybody gone? I felt like a scared and forgotten child, but so much more than a child, for I understood the implications of this ague of depression. I wanted to get up and walk, and find someone; but Gibson had made me promise that I would keep quiet for forty-eight hours. He had said, “Always give nature a chance, my lad.” Yes, Will and Phillida were busy, busy on my account, and how could I feel neglected, but feel it I did. I fell into a quite ridiculous bog of self-pity and self-depreciation, and floundered there, until actually I was weeping. A little, whimpering voice kept saying, “You’ve no right hand, you’re a wretched cripple.”

I was so sodden with gloom that I did not hear Phillida come into the room. She caught me emotionally naked. Her first glance was at the grate.

“Your fire has gone out.”

I gulped something, and she turned to me with a quick sway of the body.

“Grant. My dear!”

“Sorry to be such a foul ass.”

“My dear!”

She was down on her knees beside the sofa, and she put one arm under my head, and drew it on to her shoulder, and her other hand touched my hair.

“My dear, you mustn’t feel like this.”

“I know. Rotten of me. Better in a moment.”

“No, not rotten.”

I felt the warm flesh of her strong young arm, and her breath was on my cheek. My mood of fatuous misery changed into a sort of mordant fear which played about the flame that was my love for her. I could not bear her to be just kind to me. The very nearness and sweet warmth of her hurt me.

“Sorry, Phill. Fact is, I can’t bear this.”

“The loss? Well, can’t I understand? It’s a sort of symbol, isn’t it?”

“No, I don’t mean that.”

I got my head off her shoulder and back on to the cushion. There must have been a quite savage passion for the truth in me, and an impulse to blurt it out.

“I can’t bear you touching me.”

She turned full face to me, withdrawing her arm.

“Sorry.”

“No, dear God, not that. You see, I care too damnably.”

Her eyes held mine. They were luminous and deep and steadfast, and her face had a strange solemnity.

“Do you mean that, my dear?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Didn’t you know?”

She put her head down till her forehead rested on my shoulder, and for a moment she was silent.

“Grant.”

“Yes, Phill?”

“Don’t ask me anything for a moment. I want to think; I want to feel. There seem to be all sorts of things I did not know until this happened to

you.”

There was both pragmatism and mystery in the way she made up the fire and persuaded it into an exultant blaze, and then she turned the sofa so that I had the full warmth of it and, throwing a cushion on the floor, sat down with her back to me. She was leaning against me and the sofa, and I put my left arm over her shoulder, and her right hand came up and clasped my left.

“No more saw-bench, my lad,” said she.

I was in such a state of happiness, with that fire blazing up like a sacred symbol, and her hair shining in the light of it, that I could have said that those four fingers were worth the sacrifice. Almost, I could not believe that all this had happened. I was conscious of wonder, and a profound humility.

“Do you really mean it, Phill?”

“Oh, doubting Thomas!”

“My sweet, it is all so wonderful. Do you mind my calling you my sweet?”

“Why should I?”

“Well, you see, I suppose I’m a romantic sort of ass.”

“How flattering! And I am, I suppose, a tough, businesslike blonde!”

I laughed.

“Sometimes, Phillida, you have seemed to me so much like a serene and capable young priestess of Vesta. Good at lighting fires, and all that.”

“How unpleasant!”

“Oh, no. Exquisite and marvellous. Only one’s so afraid of seeming _____”

“Silly?”

“Well, in a way.”

She turned to me suddenly, her face close to mine.

“Isn’t it rather good to be silly, sometimes? Oh, let’s get away from being little, stale, tied-up highbrows. Don’t you want to——”

“By God, I do.”

“Then do.”

I think she closed her eyes when I kissed her, but her lips gave me back that kiss, richly and unrestrainedly so. Then she put her head on my shoulder, and we sat and gazed at the fire and were silent. What more was there to say? It was growing dark, and I think we were content to be there together in this new and lovely faith. I was saying things to myself, if not to her. "Oh, wonderful night! No more loneliness. That such splendour of comradeship should be mine! To love and cherish until death. One spirit—one flesh." I am quite sure that neither of us heard Will steal along the passage. He had taken off his heavy boots and walked like life in his socks, not for reason of stealth, but just because he had something to say to me, and did not know what the room contained.

But we did hear the door open, and Phillida raised her head. I did not see Will's face, but I could imagine it. I heard his voice.

"Beg pardon. Do 'ee want more logs?"

My hairy St. Peter was embarrassed, and it was just like Phillida to say what she did say.

"Oh, Will, we are going to be married. It won't make any difference, you know."

"Yes, Will," said I. "I'm a lucky beggar."

"You be that, ssir, sure-ly," said the voice, and the door closed on us.

Phillida snuggled down again, with her head upon my shoulder.

"Poor Will."

"Why poor Will?"

"I hope he won't be jealous."

"Why should he be?"

"Well, he's rather devoted to you."

"I think we might share that devotion. He thinks you——"

"What?"

"Rather what I think, that someone's a very marvellous person. Am I being silly?"

"Do you think any woman minds such silliness?"

"Let's go on being silly."

“Always and always?”

“Why not?”

It grew dark. We did not light the lamp, but sat on by the fire, and a more serious mood possessed us. I asked Phillida if she had ever sat like this before in front of this same fire-place, and I felt her fingers tighten on mine. It was as though I had called up a ghost, the very apparition I did not wish to summon at such an hour, and I was full of remorse.

“Sorry, darling.”

She sat looking into the fire.

“Why be afraid of answering questions? Yes, as a kid. Poor pater used to get very tired, and lie just as you are lying. He liked me to come and rest. Mother wasn’t quite consoling.”

“Not like you.”

“Very like me, perhaps. Poor dear, I think in her secret heart she could not forgive failure, and father was a failure, as worldly things go.”

“Aren’t you putting a terrible responsibility upon me?”

“Isn’t it on us both, my dear? Just now, we are full of the elemental stuff. This marriage business isn’t built on profiles and eyelashes.”

“I think I know that.”

“Do you? In a year or two you will be taking my body for granted.”

“Nonsense.”

“Oh, yes you will. But it’s the me that matters. I’ve got a temper and a stubborn will of my own, and I like my own way.”

I touched her cheek.

“Can’t we combine wills and urges?”

“That’s the whole problem.”

“Well, I rather love this place and its life, and if we can both love it _____”

She pressed her head against my shoulder.

“Yes, that’s going to be our salvation, perhaps. You are a wise kind of child, Grant.”

“I don’t know. I feel that I love you very dearly, and that I shall always love the person called Phillida.”

“The patchwork called Phillida!”

“Yes, even the patches.”

It was dark now, and I remembered that she had to ride back to Brandon, and that even a young love must eat and sleep. Also, Will and I had to sup, and Will would have to get me to bed, so, when she crawled forward to put more logs on the fire, I looked at the dear, desired silhouette of her, and asked whether Mrs. Potter would not be worried.

“Not in the least, my dear,” said she. “Mrs. Potter knows.”

“About me——?”

“Yes, and that I am sleeping here as nurse. I took the van down and brought back a suit-case.”

“But, Phill, the spare-room bed isn’t——”

“I’m sleeping on the sofa when you move upstairs. And in a minute I must get active about supper.”

“Does Will know?”

“He knows and approves.”

Having fed the fire she sat on her heels before it, and I saw her in profile, that firm chin and kissable mouth, the little blunt nose and finely moulded forehead. Her hair was full of flickers of light, and I was content to lie and look at her.

“Grant.”

“Yes, my sweet.”

“Shall I call you Grant or Aloysius?”

“Whichever you choose. Why not keep the Aloysius——?”

“For solemn occasions! But before we sup I have a confession to make.”

I thought of Lady Richenda’s story and wondered whether I was to hear of that other affair, but it was not so. Phillida told me about it later, and I gathered that it had not been so catastrophic as Lady Furnival had believed. In fact it was Phillida who had discovered the cad in her first lover, and with characteristic courage had shed him. There had been no shattered illusion.

“Need one confess things?” I asked her.

“But this concerns us both, and the farm.”

“Oh, the farm!”

“I’m afraid I’m not so kind or uncommercial as you are. I have no isms or urges. I want to make money.”

“You mean——?”

“My dear, I saw another man martyred here, and I think that rubbed reality into me.”

“I can understand, but wasn’t it the profit idea that——?”

She turned, and faced me, chin up, her eyes large and shadowy and steadfast.

“What’s wrong with value for work done? Father was one of those lovable creatures who thought the world so much better than it is. He was a William Morris person, and the butchers and dealers slew him. You will say that it was just the middle-class scuffle for profits, but are the so-called working-classes very different? And the thing we call the State? We talk Socialism and invent nice schemes and think we have solved everything, and cured nature of meaning to get as much as it can for as little as it can give.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Don’t you?”

“Well, aren’t there exceptions?”

“Can one live on exceptions? I’m not greedy, Grant, but I’m not going to be exploited by faddists and cranks and the little envious people who gabble. I love this place and I would be ready to fight for it.”

Yesterday, I might have smiled upon her realism, but I found that I and my urges seemed to have changed in one short hour. We were to be comrades here on the land. I was no longer a rather dreamy creature concerned in evolving a scheme of living for one. I had a partner, a partner for whose happiness and well-being I could fight savagely, against anything and anyone. So few people matter profoundly in the individual pattern, and I think I realized that my centre-piece would not be torn out of the pattern to placate some backstairs humanist.

I said, “Things are different now. I feel more like a pioneer who has to take a musket with him into the fields. But, my God, darling, I’ve forgotten. I’ve only one hand.”

“Three,” said she, “and a thumb. I’m not going to let you die in a barn for a lot of nice sentimental theories. We’re peasants, and peasants are tough.”

XXVII

WILL helped me to bed that night, a Will who was not backward in coming forward with a countryman's views upon marriage, and the young gentlewoman whom I was to marry. Almost I suspected Will of having been thrice or more at the beer barrel, and if he had I forgave him both for his unusual loquacity and his candour. We all had supped and Phillida had filled my pipe for me and lit a spill for it, and down below in the parlour she must have heard our voices as Will valeted me and spouted words and yeasty breath into my face. It was while he was getting me out of my shirt that he delivered himself of his supreme piece of candour.

"I could 'ave told 'ee before that what this thur house needed was a woman, a young woman of stuff and sense, and I reckon you've got she."

"Oh, more than that, Will."

He began to unbutton my vest as I sat on the bed.

"Sure-ly. You won't be for giving things away now."

That piqued me, for it was pure Phillida.

"Have I given things away, Will?"

"Not exactly, ssir, but I reckon you be a bit too easy for they middlemen and their like."

"In fact I'm soft."

"I wouldn't be saying that, ssir, but a bit too easy. You've got the ideas. Make they pay for 'em."

Will buttoned me both into my pyjamas and his peasant philosophy, and helped me to bed, and presently Phillida came up and into the room, and bent over me maternally. If she was tough she could be tender. She brought a cushion with her, and upon that cushion my hand was laid like a lapdog. It was beginning to hurt me rather much, and Phillida must have divined my pain.

"Hurting, Grant?"

"Yes, a bit."

“Gibson left some dope with me. I am going to give you a dose and then kiss you good night.”

She brought me two white tablets and a glass of water, and stood over me while I swallowed the things.

“Knock on the floor if you want anything. Oh, I’ll go and get a stick.”

She went for the stick, and hung it on the bed-rail behind me.

“Can you reach it?”

“Yes.”

She bent down to me, and I put my left arm round her neck.

“Oh, my darling, I’m so happy.”

She said nothing to that, but the kiss she gave me on my mouth was like the sealing of a sacrament.

The dope eased the pain, and I needed no dope to make me feel at peace. I lay and envisaged this new world of mine, and I confess that I wondered whether it would have taken shape had I not lost my fingers. Was it so strange that physical loss and mental anguish should have revealed the reality to us, or had Phillida worn a wilful veil, and only my little tragedy had made her shed it? Well, did it matter? We moderns have grown to fear so many things, and perhaps some vast human tragedy may be needed to frighten us into a reaction against fear. The German Beast may enrage us into the practice of the more primitive virtues, that high courage which is so often the prerogative of the simple man, while you little clever people cower in corners. All that I know is that I had no fear of this new comradeship. In the words of the Old Book, perfect love casteth out fear.

I woke at some hour in the night with the fingers of my right hand hurting me. There were throbs and pulsations of pain, as though my fingers were still there, yet this illusion bothered me less than the actual pain. I felt like a creature in a trap, though the trap was no more than wool, bandage and pillow. How did a rabbit feel with its paw in a steel gin? I told myself that I would set no more such traps. The ferret and the net and the gun were more merciful. But it was very boring this pain; one could not escape from it; one just had to lie there in the darkness, and try to think of happier things. Yet pain, like acute fear, is elemental, and can be an obsession, and shameless.

There was a candle by my bed and a box of matches, but when I tried to get a light by using my left hand, setting the box on edge and rubbing a match along it, the trick would not work. The box slid about or fell over. I picked it up, and put it between my teeth, and was in the act of rubbing a match against it when the door opened, and there was light. My match flared up at the same moment.

“Grant, why didn’t you knock?”

I dropped the box from between my lips, but I still held the match like a tiny torch.

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Pain?”

“Yes, just a bit.”

She put her candle down on the table, and took the burning match from me. I think it must have burned her fingers, but all she said was, “Children must not play with matches. Dangerous, you know. I am going to give you another dose.”

I looked up at her. She wore a little lace cap, and a jade green dressing-gown, and to me she was a thing of loveliness and compassion. I felt like a child, content to be scolded.

“My fingers hurt, Phill. Funny, isn’t it, when I have no fingers?”

She bent down and kissed my forehead.

“Poor darling. We must stop that pain.”

“Were you awake?”

“Yes. I had a feeling about you. What about some warm milk?”

“Phill, I’d love a cup of tea.”

“So would I.”

She went downstairs, and in a little while she was back with two of my willow-pattern cups. She put two tablets in my hand.

“Swallow.”

Then, she gave me the cup, and sat down beside me. We drank our tea. The candle flame was as straight and still as a saint’s upward pointing finger. The old house seemed to hold us in profound sympathy and peace.

“You’ll feel easier soon.”

“I feel easier now.”

“Am I dope?”

I think we laughed a little over that, but I remember that she must still have been sitting there when I fell asleep. If there is assuagement in such a presence, then life is indeed blessed.

Gibson’s dope kept me sleeping late, for when I woke, the life of my little world was in full flow. The familiar sounds came to me with peculiar volume and distinctness, real and consoling, and as fragrant as the breath of the morning. Cocks crowing, a brisk breeze in the trees and the creepers about the windows, a distant grumble of machinery. Will was finishing off that fatal post, a sow grunting, movements in the house. There was yet another sound that was new to me, but which could not have been new to this old homestead, a woman singing, not loudly or consciously, but a desultory, low murmur, a summer sound. I lay inwardly smiling. Phillida was singing the popular dance-tune—“Allelujah”.

Did the old house wonder at it, and remember the voices of other women and other songs, “Drink to Me Only”—“Tom Bowling”—“Juanita”—“She Wore a Wreath of Roses”—“The Belle of New York”, songs from the “Geisha”. I looked at my great white paw, and was moved to wonder at other matters.

I heard her footsteps on the stairs. These stairs had voices of their own, particular crackings and creakings. The footsteps paused. Then, the door opened with stealth.

“Hallo! Awake.”

“Yes. What’s the time, Phill?”

“About half-past seven. I’ll get your early morning tea.”

The innocent vanities of man! I was feeling rather squalid. I wanted to wash, shave, clean my teeth, brush my hair, then the day could begin.

“Thanks, darling. I wonder if Will——?”

“Yes, I’ll send Will up. Like him to bring up your tea?”

“Please.”

She closed the door, leaving me to wonder whether my little vanities and my shyness had been understood. They had. And in such quick

understanding of life's little niceties I found a promise of more profound accords.

Phillida and I were married at Brandon in the month of June, Phillida from the Dower House, and I from Blackthorn Farm. It was not a public occasion, and its modern flavour may have been judged by the fact that Will was my best man. Eric gave his cousin away, an Eric who appeared to bear me no malice, for Eric was more brain than body. As for Will, dressed in a black coat and striped trousers, and with his head and beard barbered for the occasion, he played the part with apostolic and natural dignity, old England, upstanding, weather-stained and strong. I was the most nervous member of the bunch, and Will had to prompt me once. "Here be th'ring, ssir." I saw a little tremor of a smile on Phillida's face, and the oblique and almost mischievous look she gave me.

We had a small reception at the Crown. Mr. Ballinger had been with us in the church, complete with frock-coat and white vest. He gave us champagne, and afterwards refused to send in a bill for it. As for our honeymoon, it was a brief affair for, in this busy month of the year, Blackthorn could not spare us. I had had to take the wedding-ring in my left hand, and superstition might have grimaced over the act, but no ill fortune pursued us. Our most notable present had been a small two-seater car, Lady Richenda's gift to the bride, and with Phillida driving we gave ourselves a week-end in the New Forest. It was a lovely season of the year, and this green world was Thomas Hardy, without his melancholy.

Tom Thumb was being educated, and so was I. We put him through his paces daily. He was helped by Mr. Left Hand but not too much so. He was learning to hold a knife, and a razor and a match, and even to scribble with increasing success.

I have heard it said that most honeymoons are awkward and uncomfortable affairs, a pilgrimage in passion that does not end on the sacred heights. Ours was otherwise. We were comrades from the first.

XXVIII

I HAVE no doubt that many people wondered why so stalwart a couple were not blessed or cursed with children, but I think that from the beginning the farm was our child, and when the Hitler War came and the German Beast was loose in Europe, we were secretly glad that we had no son to be offered up. But that is a long way ahead, and we had both our heads in the soil. As Phillida had said we were peasants and we were tough, and I'll admit that I was much more fierce on a bargain when I had a mate to work for. My relationship with old Ballinger and one or two of my early customers remained as before, especially so with John Ballinger, the man who had toasted us with free champagne.

If I had ideas, so had Phillida, and a very determined chin. She never tried to boss me, for so mated were our interests and our plans that we ran in double harness as perfectly as two people could. I loved her very dearly, and I would have given way to her had she asked me to, but she had such a sense of fairness, and so sweet a sanity that we did not clash. Also, she loved me.

After that bad year I had become cautious. Will and I had been able to pay our way and put a little money aside, but I had been chary of risking more of my capital. My ideas upon life on the land with regard to economics and self-sufficiency had not altered, and they could be condensed in the slogan "Feed yourself first, and market the surplus". It is, of course, the old peasant plan, and I know that many of our highbrow agriculturists condemn it whole-heartedly, but it was to prove its virtues when the German Beast broke loose. I found Phillida even more enthusiastic than I was about the scheme. She mingled the modern and the medieval. As a housewife the home-brewed beer and home-baked bread economy appealed to her. She loved the Dower House still-room, and liked to get hold of books on herbs and home-made wines. She loved the richness of the life, its sensuous profusion, fruits of the earth, milk, honey, butter, bread and wine, rows and rows of bottled fruit, jam, cheese, pork-pie, custard, strings of onions, shelves full of apples. We were a very healthy pair and we enjoyed our food. Phillida was very strong, glowingly and happily strong, and what would have irked the anæmic, urban, tinminded wife was joy to her. It wasn't virtue, but nature.

Moreover, if she had the peasant virtues and few of the peasant vices, especially so the supreme meanness or carefulness of a little, self-centred

world, she had a pleasant shrewdness, and more than that. Her temperament was like nature, generous, rich, abundant. But her foresight surprised me. She had lived for a while in Germany in the thick of the new Nazi enthusiasm. She had not liked it, the false friendliness of it, the hardness, the cunning, the secret frenzies of jealousy and hate. She talked to me about the Germans. She said that it was her conviction that they were the same old Germans who would bid their enemies to a feast and, while drinking with them, stab them to death. I thought her prejudiced, but the future was to prove her right.

We went together very carefully through all my accounts, and hunted profit and loss in every corner. Even the absence of my fingers had altered the position, so far as crude labour was concerned.

Said Phillida, "We've got to get away, Grant, from the English cabbage culture. This is the age of tins, my dear, dats and tins. The tin-opener is the sacred symbol."

"You don't suggest a canning-factory?"

"God forbid."

"My idea is the glass idea."

"Absolutely, and in other ways."

"Just how?"

"Fruit bottling."

"For the million?"

"No, for our own particular corner."

We thrashed it out together. Our prime purpose would be self-sufficiency, the capacity to stand a siege, for Phillida was strangely sure that a siege was coming. Her prophet was Winston Churchill. She said that he seemed to be about the only public person who understood the essential beastliness and cunning of the Hitler gang. Her foresight was quite extraordinary. Meanwhile, we decided to concentrate for our market upon luxuries, and produce that which was not perishable and easily transportable.

"Why crowd a van with cabbages and potatoes?"

We chose eggs, early vegetables, mushrooms, asparagus, high grade fruit. We would grow all our own cereals for our poultry. I think we realized even then that if a war were to come the importation of bulky foodstuffs would be cut in favour of such articles as butter, tea, sugar, steel and

munitions. I do not believe that one person in a hundred thousand foresaw this. The professionals did not, and when the crisis came they were in Queer Street.

Phillida clung to her fruit-bottling scheme. She pointed out and with reason, that the fruit-growers' curse was a glut of perishable fruit which was left unpicked or sold at a loss. If one could bottle on a fairly extensive scale, this waste would be prevented. Also, there might be a good profit in it if you obtained a steady local market.

"But you would always be losing bottles, Phill. I mean, you would be selling them."

"Not necessarily. One could treat them like sacks, returnable."

"You would have to control a very local market for that, and collect empties."

"Quite so, darling. Our delivery van could do both."

"But, the market?"

Yes, that was the problem.

Yet, Phillida was so keen on the project that she suggested buying the equipment herself, a sterilizer and an army of glass jars. She had saved some money, and she proposed converting the capital into working assets. I did not discourage her, for I had come to have a good deal of faith in her foresight. Buy the things she did, and we made a list of the varieties of fruit most suitable for bottling—gooseberries, raspberries, logans, cherries and plums. The big black cherry appeared to be the most profitable of all.

Also, we needed more land, and the opportunity presented itself. The Brandon Syndicate, having profitably exhausted the possibilities of the village, bought up two moribund farms on Whitebeam Hill, and set about developing them. There was a parcel of outlying land, about twenty acres in all, joining up with our boundary, and the Syndicate, not needing it, sold it to me.

As for additional labour, on that point we consulted Will. Phillida needed permanent help in the house, and it occurred to us that if we could attach a family of real countryfolk to the place, treat them in a sense as fellow settlers, both domestic and labour problems might be solved. Phillida was not very sanguine on the subject. She said that if the man was good, the woman would be indifferent, and vice-versa. As for the children we might train them, and just when they were becoming useful they would be infected

by town-fever and leave us. We put the problem to Will, who fondled his beard, and reflected upon it. Did he know of anyone who would be content to live and work in a lonely place like Blackthorn? He did not. Moreover, where were they to be housed? We should have to build a cottage, and the outlay would cost us seven hundred pounds or so.

Phillida nursed her chin and frowned over the problem.

“We could mortgage.”

“Not on your life!” said I.

“Have you, on your life?”

As a matter of fact I had not, and she knew it.

“Disgraceful neglect,” said she. “Insure yourself, and we could raise money on the policy.”

“Yes, one could build, but what about the God-given family?”

Yes, that was the problem.

Phillida already had sketched out a label for her fruit, and coloured the still-life picture, of cherries, raspberries, plums, and her title ran “The Blackthorn Brand”. It sounded somewhat acid, but the label looked very colourful and attractive. We had converted an unwanted bedroom into an office and workroom, and here she promulgated her ideas. Her ideas were not like those of the young woman in “Tons Of Money”, and they did not scare me.

“Aren’t there societies which train youngsters for the colonies and the land?”

“I believe so. Dr. Barnado’s, for instance.”

“I’d like to catch my workers young,” said my wife, giving another purple dab to her cherry; “you can’t get new ideas into crusted port, but new wine can be matured. What about it?”

“It’s a definite idea.”

“You see, Grantie, we should be up against the cussedness of the ordinary country mind. New-fangled nonsense, and all that. Besides, I might attach a girl, or a couple of girls, and get them interested.”

I could imagine anything becoming attached to Phillida. Our new dog, Bunter, a rather truculent Airedale who discouraged unwanted visitors, was lamb to Phillida’s Mary.

“It would be highly probable.”

“You could begin with a lad.”

“And you with the lasses.”

“Well, we could try it. The girls would live in, and I could train one of them for fruit. Will might take charge of the lad. Couldn’t we convert the old stable into a billet?”

“Quite easily, with a little reconstruction, provided the local bureaucrats don’t make trouble.”

“Why should they?”

“My dear, it is obvious that you have no knowledge of the official mind. It is not so much a mind as a negation.”

We put the project to Will, and to our surprise he approved of it. Youngsters, like dogs, should be caught in the puppy stage, and trained in the way they should go. Then the proper technique becomes habit, and is not regarded as new-fangled nonsense, to be shirked or sabotaged behind one’s back. We collected information, and consulted Lady Richenda who happened to be a vice-president of a particular institution, and though we did not know it at the time her parlour-maid had come to her from this Home at the age of fifteen. Lady Richenda’s verdict was encouraging. She said that the records showed that ninety per cent of the children turned out well, provided that they were wisely placed.

“Why not go and look,” said she. “It is rather like buying a dog. Bright eyes and plenty of tail wag; nothing sullen or surly.”

We decided to try the experiment, and Lady Furnival went with us to the country colony maintained by the Home. She was both subtle and human in her suggestions. Let it be no official occasion, no inhuman parade, but an informal and tentative stroll. I liked the place directly I set eyes on it, an old country house that had been adapted, and was still maintaining the country spirit while educating these City children. The resident manager was rather like a good brown loaf, solid and deliberate and gently autocratic. He took us round the place, and showed us the boys and girls at work in the garden and orchard and on the home-farm. They were taught crafts, husbandry, poultry and bee-keeping, dairy-work, cooking. Phillida and I kept our eyes, ears and hearts open. We talked to some of the youngsters, and when we retired to consult together, we found that each of us had made a choice.

Phillida's eyes had fallen on Mary, mine upon Bill. Mary was a buxom, open-faced, smiling little person with blue eyes and a snub nose. Bill was a dark child, rather thin and intense, the sort of boy who has pride and grows keen on the job. Both were orphans; both had a clean bill of health.

So, the matter was settled. Lady Richenda sponsored us as reputable employers. We talked frankly to both the youngsters, explained the life to them, concealed nothing, painted no rosy pictures. We liked them and they liked us. They were to be our co-workers and friends, for I am convinced that this is the only relationship which is lasting and worth while. Bill was being trained as a land-worker, Mary in what the moderns call domestic science. They came to us trustfully, and I can say that we did not regret it, nor, I hope, did they.

I apportion most of the praise to Phillida. Young things became devoted to her. She had the beauty of the inward spirit, and of the outward and visible flesh.

I found Bill quick both in intelligence and in temper. It was the temper of pride, and as such it appealed to me. He was a sensitive lad, white metal, not clay, the kind of lad whom it would be both cruel and foolish to hector. We had one flare-up because I had to correct him over a piece of work, but when I explained to him like a friend that I was not just blowing off, but was insisting upon efficiency and thoroughness because the job was the job, we soon understood each other. He had fire and keenness, and an excellent curiosity. He wanted to know and to do. He was a lad who responded. I gave him books on fruit and farming to read, and we discussed them together. Moreover he and Will were like the old dog and the young. Both he and Mary had been with us less than six months when Lady Richenda asked us whether we had observed a particular change in them.

We had not.

"My dear," said she, "I do not speak as a snob, but those two children have grown like you."

Phillida's brown eyes were open wide.

"Oh? Just how?"

"Sackcloth into silk. Their voices are different; they speak a different language; they have a new poise!"

"Oh, don't say they are 'refained'!"

"God forbid! They have been with you a great deal."

“Well, we all work together rather like friends.”

“Polish not tarnish. I have just been reading a most squalid book about the young. I should like to plant the author on you for six months.”

“Thank you,” said Phillida, “we’d rather not. Though Grant might Adco him and dig him into the cabbage patch.”

My wife brought me not only a lovely face and a lovely nature but peculiar good fortune. It was like her laughter, deep and spontaneous, yet subtle. When I teased her about our luck, and how, since I had married her, things seemed to shape for us in the right way at the right moment, she would answer that she owed me four fingers. With Bill putting on muscle and experience I was able to give more time to the cunning of management and marketing, and as for our luck even Sleer and his Syndicate served us. A kind of new suburbia was springing up on the other side of Whitebeam Hill. We could not see it, and we did not want to see it, but we could sell to it. The Whitebeam Estate was to possess a golf course, a country club complete with bathing pool, and a population that subscribed to the corresponding conventions. A central plot had been reserved for shops, no more than half-a-dozen shops, and it was christened The Market.

Phillida saw our chance and seized it. Brandon and the Whitebeam Estate were her allotted prey. She pounced before a rival could become established.

“We, Grantie, are to be their greengrocer, fruiterer, and poultryman.”

“What, take one of the shops?”

“No, darling, buy a super-van.”

It was a good idea, but there were snags. The Whitebeam World was a grape-fruit community; it would demand plums and peaches and grapes at all seasons, and Blackthorn could not supply such luxuries. I pointed this out to Phillida.

“Darling,” said she, “we can do that as well, can’t we? Buy in such things from the merchants and retail them.”

“Yes, of course we could.”

“And I’ll teach these folk the virtues of bottled fruit.”

I laughed at her and with her.

“By Gemini, but you do get your own way.”

XXIX

FOR a couple of months Phillida experimented with our old and more modest van. She toured the Whitebeam Estate in person, wearing smart blue trousers, a pullover, and no hat. I did not like her in trousers, but we compromised on the matter; in the evening she put on a pretty frock. My wife was a determined young woman, and during some of those days of touting for custom I divined in her secret and silent anger. Was she receiving social provocations? Undoubtedly she was.

I remember the day she came back laughing, merry and glowing and ironical.

“Oh, Grantie, life is a jest!”

“What has happened this morning?”

“I was ordered to go to the back door.”

This angered me. I might despise the Sleur world, but I did not feel like letting it be rude to my wife.

“The damned snobs! Have you had much of this?”

“Quite a lot, darling. It has taught me to laugh. I am the greengrocer girl.”

“Look here,” I said, “I’ll take on the job. I’m not going to let you be _____”

“Don’t worry, dear. It’s a life study. Besides, we are getting the market.”

“I know, but——”

“Do you realize how much we took last week?”

“Let’s see, it was——”

“Thirteen pounds, seven shillings and three pence, and as yet I haven’t collared half the possible custom.”

“But I’m not going to have you snubbed by these——”

“Wait a day or two, darling. I have a remedy, and I am going to try it.”

She did not tell me what her remedy was, but later, with laughing eyes, she described the episode to me, and I was present at the sequel. Apparently,

she told Lady Furnival of the snubbing she had received, and these two great women conspired together to stage a comedy. On her next round Phillida gathered Lady Richenda into the van, and they set off for Whitebeam and drew up outside the gate of “Capri”. The house was very white and the gate very blue, and in it resided a merchant who had a little Vicky of a wife. It was this lady who had sent my wife to the back door. She was newly arrived, and did not know Lady Furnival by sight. So, these two naughty women, each with a basket, marched up to the front door of Capri, and Capri’s Queen Victoria, who was pottering in the garden, came forward to chasten them.

“I think I told you the other day to go to the back door.”

She was an imperious little pigeon of a person, with a pouting bosom and bulbous blue eyes.

“Oh, certainly, madam,” said Phillida.

“With pleasure,” said Richenda.

“And don’t forget, in the future, tradesmen round to the back.”

Phillida said that she giggled.

“No, modom.”

“I must apologize,” said Richenda, “for forgetting my proper status.”

Irony did not cut any ice with the lady. She sniffed an odour of impertinence, and pointed to the gate.

“You can take the stuff away.”

“With pleasure, modom,” said Phillida.

“With very great pleasure, modom,” chimed my lady.

As I have said, I was present at the sequel. The Whitebeam Country Club was to open with a dance, and Lady Richenda was invited to act as a patroness, its principal patroness. She consented, provided that she was allowed to bring two guests. The committee were charmed and gratified. Anyone whom Lady Furnival chose to bring with her would indeed be persona grata. So, Phillida ironed my dress suit and bought a new frock, and we drove down to dine at the Dower House before the show.

It was a very Slerish show, one of those competitive social affairs that always have made me want to bay the moon like a dog. Most of the new gentlemen here were interested in merchandise, and their wives not

interested in it at all, but their activities were those of the entrepreneur and the wholesaler; it is retail trade that is vulgar. What a strange, silly world it was those days! It needed a war to shake us out of our absurd social insincerities. Well, the committee, two gentlemen and three ladies, were waiting to receive Lady Furnival and her guests, and as the two parties approached each other Phillida nudged me. For Madam Capri was a member of the committee, and had the pleasant task of meeting the great gentlewoman whom she had ordered to the back door.

Lady Furnival was jocund and gracious. Her manners were so beautiful that they clothed her like a perfect frock. She shook hands with the committee, and again Phillida nudged me. I saw a little woman looking rather pink and pinched, with her blue eyes standing out on stalks.

“Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith, your ladyship,” said the introducer.

Lady Richenda smiled upon her.

“How do you do. I think we have met before.”

Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith burred something, but it did not refer to back doors. Then, Lady Richenda introduced her guests, and Phillida, with one of her most glowing smiles, put out a hand to Capri. The Blue Grotto gaped at the Greengrocer Girl, and I felt smooth and naughty within.

Moreover, my wife was the most comely creature in the room, and so the other men seemed to think, for I could get no more than three dances with her the whole evening. I danced twice with Lady Furnival and once with Irene Smeer, to whose high standard I could not attain. She was vapidly bored with me and showed it by her glassy brightness.

“How well your wife looks, Mr. Carey.”

I agreed with her.

“And where did she get that frock?”

I knew my Irene and I lied to her.

“Oh, from Paris. Besides, it wouldn’t matter, would it?”

She screwed up her bald forehead at me.

“Meaning?”

“She’d look lovely in a pudding-bag. Just nature, you know.”

I was playing wallflower when Smeer sidled up to me, a most immaculate Smeer. He glanced at my tie, and I knew that its sin was out. It was ready-

made. I am a duffer about ties.

“Well, Carey, how are eggs?”

He was that sort of man, and his little complacent smirk was as shining as his glacé boots.

“How do you find them?” I asked.

He nibbled at me.

“I don’t.”

“If you are a ham and egg man you eat them each morning for breakfast.”

Sleer must have known that I was getting at him, and I could see his jejune face icing up some retort.

“Does your wife really like that job, Carey?”

“What job?”

“Delivering eggs and vegetables.”

I laughed.

“Strange to say she does.”

“I suppose it is rather a struggle.”

I refused to catch his thrust.

“You mean getting up early, and all that? No, we like it. We don’t sit up till one in the morning pushing cards about.”

Sleer and I parted. I was becoming bored with the show and the music, and supper was due, and I had booked the supper dance with Phillida. I found her with a very smart and impertinent young man who tried to bluff me out of my rights. He was pert and facetious. “No, really, sir, husbands must not intrude.” I looked him full in the face, slipped my arm through Phillida’s, and led her off.

“Sorry,” I said; “but I’m afraid you can’t gate-crash me on this business.”

“Thanks, Grantie,” said my wife. “The little rat wanted me to go and sit in his car.”

I must confess that the supper and the champagne were excellent, and Phillida and I enjoyed ourselves like real country bumpkins out for the

night. We danced together after supper and Phillida, looking over my shoulder, pinched my arm.

“Grant, there’s my next partner waiting. I’ve tried him before, and me no likee.”

“Which one?”

“That big blond beast who looks like a German, over there by the door. He has pearls or something on his waistcoat.”

I looked and was wise.

“Oh, Bascombe the Broker.”

“If there is a sort of man I can’t stand, a hundred per cent he, and flaunting it.”

I held her fast.

“Won’t it be bad for business?”

“He only hunts here at week-ends. No use to us, Grantie.”

“Very well. I’ll be the he-man and carry you off. Let’s go and sit in our car.”

“Yes, let’s.”

So, Bascombe the Buccaneer was avoided. It was a lovely night pulsing with stars, and we wandered round the Sleer garden with our arms round each other, before taking refuge in our rabbit-hutch of a car. We were large and we filled it. Phillida had left her bag in it, and she said she wanted to powder her nose.

“Switch on the light, Grantie.”

“But supposing the pirate is on the prow?”

“Never mind.”

She had her mirror out, and was attending to her face, which seemed to me quite unnecessary, and I said so.

“You are a nice husband, Grantie, and I love you. I have been thinking, what would happen to all these people if a crash came?”

“You mean, war and all that?”

“Yes, my dear. They seem to be just manipulators, passers-on of other people’s products. They laugh at us now, but would they laugh if London

and Lombard Street and all that were bombed to blazes?”

“I wonder,” said I.

“We have roots, my dear one.”

“And I have something more, my sweet,” and I kissed her, only to realize that a large male face was being pressed close to the window. It was Bascombe, but he went away.

Following upon her sponsoring by Lady Furnival, who was real Dresden, and no recent purchase in the honours list, the new Brandon and Whitebeam more than accepted Phillida. It did not ask her to go to back doors, or, I imagine, refer to her as the Greengrocer Girl. Almost, I think, her job was regarded as chic and rather original, nor was it possible for anyone to cast a shadow across the glowing figure of my wife. I believe the story of “Capri” got about, and was regarded as a pretty jest, Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith sending the Dower House to the back door. But if Phillida became somewhat the fashion in this new suburbia, her success was financially profitable, and in accepting Phillida Whitebeam began to accept her fruit-scheme. The Blackthorn Brand was on the market, bottles returnable at a reduction and collected free of charge. My wife was very proud of her new venture, and imported a second girl, one Daisy, from the Home, to be trained as a fruit-picker, grader, and bottler.

Phillida kept meticulous accounts. She sat down at her bureau for half an hour each evening, and entered up her sales, and attended to debit and credit. The Blackthorn Brand had a banking account of its own, for I had passed the whole of the fruit business to my wife. She did not like being interrupted when she was totting up figures at her desk, and I left her to it.

I have a happy picture of her sitting there sucking the end of a pencil, and gazing reflectively into the garden while she considered, perhaps, the addition of a halfpenny to the price of a bottle of plums. In spite of her firm chin she would never grow old and solid and frowsty and domineering. In spite of, and possibly because of her halfpennies, the Brandon women loved her, for she found time to share in the life of the Women’s Institute, and she understood them and the housewife world. They would listen to her, because she was country and knew just how much sugar went to a pot of jam, and how sloe-gin and gooseberry wine were made, and how much a pullet’s egg weighed, and what you should do or not do when a cow was calving. Mrs.

Ponsonby-Smith, who knew none of these things, and tried to patronize the cottagers, was regarded with suspicion and dislike.

“Grantie.”

“Yes, my sweet?”

She was tapping her lower lip with the end of her pencil.

“We might buy that new van now.”

“In funds?”

“Yes. A balance of three hundred and seventy odd.”

“You’re a marvel.”

“We might buy a Morris truck chassis and have a special body fitted. I have sketched out a design.”

“Let’s see.”

“Come and look.”

I went and bent over her, and saw the sketch of a van coloured sparrow’s-egg blue, with cream shutters and wheels.

“You see,” said she, “shutters on both sides, two shop windows, so to speak, with shelves for display. Fruit on one side, vegetables on the other.”

“Absolutely it,” said I.

“If Daisy turns out well I shall let her take the round some days. She can wear a white linen coat and a blue peaked cap.”

“With The Blackthorn Brand in gold on it!”

“Don’t be frivolous.”

So, Phillida had her super-van, and a month after its entry into service a misguided person opened a fruit and vegetable shop in the Whitebeam Market. I wondered whether Phillida would be worried. She was not. She made no concessions to competition. She bought in her luxury articles, and could supply all that the shop offered, and at your door. Her rival lasted about six months, and then put up his shutters. He was followed by a confectioner who agreed to stock Blackthorn bottled fruits and preserves. Phillida, tapping her lower lip with her pencil, serenely surveyed a market that was hers.

My side of the business also was prospering. Our plan to grow our own poultry food worked excellently, though we did buy in a certain quantity of

maize. I grew sunflowers for oil, mixing a little of the seed with my grain feed. We fattened our cockerels and found a ready market for them and, thanks to our equipment and the producing of the bulk of our grain and mashes, we made a steady profit. Also my vegetables and fruit under glass in the open were proving a very successful venture. New Brandon and Whitebeam took all the early lettuces and potatoes, and asparagus and forced rhubarb we could grow. We were very lucky too with our strawberries; I was picking fruit by May 10th in a good year, and punnets of these luxuries sold well. The Sleer world was a luxury market, and I should have been grateful to it, but I wasn't. I never forgot Phillida's warning, but I knew that even if some world crash came we should have food behind us, and food might be worth half the paper-money in Europe.

As for life and its philosophy I found them both good and steadfast, though I think Phillida helped me to understand the art of living rather than its philosophy. We were very happy together, and I never tried to dominate her in any way, and the pact was mutual. The very possessive people are a nuisance, and though quite a number of men developed a passion for my wife, I did not strut and fume, but left her to deal with them, which she did. I gather that life was so full and good for her that she had no inclination for such etceteras. She laughed at them. But Lady Furnival did say to me one day, "Grant, you are a very wise husband. You will always keep what you have." When I asked her to explain the saying, she assured me that in marriage possession was not nine-tenths of the law; generosity and trust were far more potent.

"Trust your wife, my dear. Give her freedom and she will love you always."

"Always, and in all cases?"

"Oh no, Grant, but with a woman like Phillida."

As for my right hand it was astonishing how much I was able to do with it, and as Gibson had assured me it developed a cunning of its own. Tom Thumb grew into a most capable dwarf, but neither my wife nor Will would let me touch the saw-bench.

XXX

I FORGET the exact date, but it must have been two or three years after the Hitler régime had entered into its power policy that we met a very charming and intelligent Polish woman at Lady Furnival's. She took a great liking to Phillida, and I think she liked me, and she came to spend a week-end with us, for our spare-room was now one of Phillida's prides. La Polonaise and my wife were both big blonde creatures, serene and stately, and though our friend was continental in many of her views and prejudices and made us feel rather simple folk, she understood, and loved the art of life as it was lived at Blackthorn. At home in Poland she was the mistress of an estate, and loved it and cherished it, and was wise in all the country ways. She gave my wife recipes for all sorts of preserves and dishes; she was an expert cook, and to prove it cooked and served us a Sunday dinner.

But she was puzzled by the English. She said that the English were lazy and rather stupid, but the kindest and most pleasant people in all the world to live with. And how was it that we did not foresee the terrible thing that was coming to us? Did our MacDonaldis and our Baldwins know nothing of the character of those ruthless scoundrels who were dominating Germany? The German was essentially a beast, and the Hitler crowd were inflaming that beast. Yes, we English were too trusting and too easy. No doubt we did not want war, and did not believe that war was possible.

"You go and play games," said she, "with people who are preparing to cut your throat. The German does not play games as you understand them. War is his obsession. It has for him no rules and decencies. He will what you call play foul when it suits him."

She knew Germany and the Germans very well, and loathed and feared them. What were we to expect from an ex-house-painter, a wine merchant, a sex pervert and drug-addict, and a clique of clever liars and sadists? We could not argue with her, for she knew so much more than we did, and I must say her warnings impressed us both very forcibly.

She left us saying, "My dears, evil may soon be loose in the world. May it not spread to this good country of yours. But, remember."

We never saw her again, but we were to hear of her from a Polish refugee who escaped to become an English airman. She was on her estate when the Germans spilled themselves over Poland. Her husband was in

Warsaw, and was killed in the defence of the city. She died otherwise. The Pole went white and his jaw muscles stiffened in a spasm of cold fury when he spoke of it. She was outraged by drunken Nazis, and then dragged out and shot on the steps of her house. Yes, evil was loose in the world.

I know that a shadow seemed to spread gradually over the spaces of those peaceful days. Phillida and I both felt the chill of it. Lady Furnival, who went to Baden for a cure in the spring of 1938, came back strangely silent and troubled. A huge white swastika had been set up on a hill above that lovely valley, a great abortion of timber like an immense hoarding. Richenda said that a shiver had passed over her when first she had seen it from the window of her Baden hotel. It was a sinister and a menacing symbol, like some hard and brutal face promising blood and tears and anguish to a world that might have been so happy. Thinking of it now, I wondered if any of our wise men foresaw the evil of it, an evil that was consummated in the treachery of a corrupt and cowardly France.

So seriously did Phillida and I take this prophecy that we talked over its possibilities, especially as they might affect the life of Blackthorn. How would it concern the country at large, and a farmer in particular? For what should one prepare? There would be air-raids, submarine warfare, rationing, and restriction of this and that, a shortage of various commodities, conscription perhaps of both men and wealth. Were we alarmists? Most certainly we were not, but people who liked to think and plan ahead. Moreover, we were not alone in our forecasting of the world's stormy weather. Lady Furnival could not get the image of that monstrous swastika out of her head, nor the flat, grim and almost gloating faces of the German crowd in the Kursaal grounds. She said that she was convinced that the Germans were preparing a secret and implacable assault upon Europe; that they were full of hate and envy and a rage for revenge. Oh, yes, you could not judge by the politeness of hotel staffs, reception-clerks, concierges, waiters. It paid them to be polite. A German could smile on you while he was preparing to cut your throat.

Phillida, the housewife, was all for foresight and preparedness. The store-cupboard was her symbol, if the country had to stand a siege. She pointed out that the early accumulation of commodities was neither waste nor hoarding, and in this she was years ahead of the officials, who began the war by forbidding us to buy this and that, and then implored us to store coal, fertilizers, and a reserve of food. Phillida called it conservation. She said the laying-up of capital in useful and non-perishable goods was wise policy, and we began to make a list of the things that might be denied us. It became a

kind of game of wits with us, the drawing-up of this list, and at meals we would keep a note-book by us, and challenge each other to think of more items.

I supposed that one of the first cries would be for more food production, and that that neglected person the farmer would be treated with sudden respect, and be cajoled and appealed to as a patriot, but not as a patriot who was expected to make profits. He might even find himself coerced into ploughing up grass and growing crops that were not part of his normal plan. I had a supreme distrust of the official world. It would mess us about, issue reams of regulations, change its mind, fuss continually, and probably lose its temper.

I did a great deal of thinking on the problem, when I was lying abed, and even in my bath.

I began with petrol and Diesel oil.

I had a 250-gallon tank and pump installed, after applying for a licence and receiving a visit from a gentleman who appeared to think that my tank might ignite anything within three miles. I had this tank filled, and I kept it full.

I bought in for storage three 40-gallon drums of oil for the Lister engine, and ten gallons of lubricating oil.

I purchased for storage a new 5 h.p. Multi-Culto, with spares, plough, cultivator, hoes.

We dumped ten tons of coal in a shed.

I bought in five tons of maize for storage in the granary.

Here are other items.

A spare circular saw blade.

Belting.

Five hundred yards of rabbit and poultry wire.

Ten tons of peat-litter.

A reserve of tools.

Nails, screws, bolts, of various sizes.

Fifty sheets of seven-foot galvanized roofing.

Ten rolls of Ruberoid.

Ten gallons of Creosote.

Paint.

Two spare poultry houses.

A fruit-spraying machine.
Mash-hoppers and drinking fountains.
More glass for cloches.
Heavy boots.
Fifty gallons of paraffin.
Chemicals for fruit-spraying.
Sacks.
A supply of reserve timber.
A set of spare tyres for our van.
Engine oil and gear oil.
A two-wheeled garden truck.
200 feet of hose.
Fruit netting.
Two 100-gallon tanks.
Spare bushel and half bushel baskets.
Five gross of 1-lb. and 2-lb. punnets.
2 doz. Egg-boxes.
2 spare Rick covers.
One new 12-bore Gun and 200 cartridges.

Phillida's list was more domestic. It included,

Extra sheets and pillowcases.
Blankets.
Towels, glass-cloths, etc.
An oil-cooker.
Kettles, saucepans.
Two new carpets.
Five gross of 1-lb. and 2-lb. fruit bottles.
A new Minor Milk churn, and a Little Lister
Buttermaker.
Cream pans, etc.

She asked me to make a guess with regard to the two commodities that were most likely to be curtailed, and when I hovered, she shook her head at me.

“Tea, my lad, and sugar.”

“A shortage of sugar would rather upset your bottling market.”

“I am not going to be short of sugar. I am a factory, and I have a right to my raw material.”

“And tea?”

“Yes, we’ll have plenty of tea, Grantie. What about your clothes.”

“A little bit ancient.”

“True, darling. Buy woollens and boots, shirts and pyjams. I’ll see that neither rust nor moth intervenes.”

Her store-cupboard was a sight, and so was the cellar. She held a reserve of tinned food in the cellar, and a good supply of water glass and egg pails. The store-cupboard shelves were packed with jam and marmalade and bottled fruit. She bought in two cases of whisky, and a hundredweight of soap. We turned one of the big old back bedrooms into a kind of warehouse. Phillida had all her stores listed as to dates and quantities. She knew just when the tinned goods would need using and replacing, and how much of everything the household would consume in a week.

“We should do pretty well, Grantie; our own milk, butter, eggs, fowls, fruit, vegetable, flour, dried beans and peas, oatmeal, jam, pork, rabbit, and logs to burn.”

I imagine that during those early days our staff must have thought us a little mad. Why all this fuss and foresight, even though it was quiet fuss? For, though we were quite frank with them about the future, I do not think any of them took it seriously. It was difficult to persuade Will to express an opinion now that Phillida was head of the house, for Will appeared to approve dumbly of everything that she did. When I explained to him why we were making these preparations, he stroked his beard and maintained with English obstinacy that these thur furriners were no business of ours.

Young Bill was more persuadable. He should have been a young Communist, yet, perhaps because of our régime and our paternal and maternal attitude to our staff, he appeared to be developing into a tough little Tory. Bill was individual, and you had to treat him as such. I think, good as the institution was in which he had been bred, he had enjoyed a sufficiency of such communal life. He reacted from it and not with it; he read and reflected upon what he read; he was passionately a person, a lad who, at times, had to work alone, in solitary places, and he liked it. He had the open air and not the workshop mind. As for Mary and Daisy they were just Mary and Daisy, completely and happily at Phillida’s service, though they liked their afternoons off in Guildford or Dorking, and a new hat or a new pair of shoes, or two hours in the local cinema. They did not appear to have

developed any social discontent, and sex did not vex them unduly. Phillida had a peculiar faculty for keeping our community sane and hard-working and wholesome.

Then—Munich!

Phillida and I were wanting to be hopeful about Munich, but we had to confess that we felt secretly shamed by it.

Chamberlain hurrying to propitiate the ex-house-painter!

The somewhat sinister activities of Runciman!

That worthless little bit of paper fluttering in an old man's hand!

We did agree that Chamberlain had gained us a breathing space, time to make good the follies of other old men.

The cussedness of Labour!

Baldwin hedging, because he did not believe that the country would face the truth. Votes, votes!

Churchill, like a bulldog, squarely confronting the grim future.

The jeremiads of the League of Nations clique!

Yet, I believe that a great part of the country felt like we did about Munich. It tried to persuade itself that this was peace with honour, while nursing a very unpleasant suspicion that we had been bullied and browbeaten, and that we dared not defy the bully. Our Old Man had done the best he could for us. But we were not happy or at peace, and I believe that much of England felt as we did. Labour too was suspicious and mistrusting the governmental clique, and I have to confess that my own mistrust grew as the crisis developed.

Then Prague! The insolence and the arrogance of this faith-breaking shocked me, and from that moment my feeling was that war must come, unless this England of ours was tame and finished. I did not believe it to be so, but I had not yet the vision of how great our England could be.

The doubling of the Territorials.

Then—Conscription.

Hitler had opened our eyes for us, but was it too late? Should we have to cringe before the Spirit of Evil?

We wondered what our Polish friend thought of our guarantee to Poland. It rather pleased me, for I was in a mood to say to our Old Men—“For God’s sake do something. Show the country we have some guts.” As for Phillida it did not please her at all. She was realist about it. She insisted upon keeping to the map. How were we and the French to help the Poles if Germany attacked them, with the Siegfried Line to be assaulted? I murmured something about Russia, not suspecting that the brutal and brilliant selfishness of a Stalin would fool us with a cynicism that made one’s blood run cold.

I think both of us realized that war would come. We hoped that it might not, but we prepared for the crash. Nor was Lady Furnival happy about our alliance with the French. She had friends who knew France intimately, and they warned her. “Do not put much faith in France. She is corrupt and rotten.”

A cheerful prospect!

And then Bill told me that he wanted to join the Territorials. I was worried, and for once I lost my temper with Bill.

“Don’t be an ass, Bill. We may want every ounce of food this country can grow. You may be twice as valuable on the land as messing about with a rifle.”

He sulked over it for some days, and then came to me like a son to a father.

“I don’t want to funk things, but—Are you wanting to keep me on the farm, for yourself, or for the job?”

I did not lie to him.

“Both, Bill, but take my word for it, our little individual wants will be sunk in the larger issue. I am beginning to see things more clearly. We may have to sweat our souls out here for the bit of the earth we call England.”

“Then I’ll stay, sir.”

WE pushed forward with our preparations, but they had ceased from being purely individualistic. My wife and I began to see the issue clearly. We might love our life at Blackthorn, but we were persuaded to look upon our farm as a little piece of England, sacred and sanctified to service. Our labours on the land would be doubly a labour of love, in that in helping ourselves we were ready in our small way to help England.

Said Phillida, “We may have played at being a Forsyte, Grant, but in being rather selfish we were wiser than we knew.”

“Isn’t that often the case?”

“Knowing your job and doing it because it is yours. After all, my dear, if you haven’t been careful to own good boots, you can’t go out in the mud. That’s what annoys me about the Urgists and the Gabblers. Always boosting their own fads and ideals, and trying to cram them down other people’s throats, and when the crash comes, they’re useless. No practical sense. You can’t talk or scribble a wheat crop into being, or make an aeroplane out of babble.”

I was always piqued by Phillida’s glowing pragmatism.

“Being intelligently selfish makes one a really useful citizen.”

“Say, efficiently selfish, Grantie. After all, if you can’t run your own show profitably, what use are you in a crisis.”

“Just a Wow.”

“Exactly.”

“If profit is the test?”

“Well, it is at present, isn’t it? But that doesn’t mean that you can’t switch over to service.”

I think nothing is more trying to the middle-aged than the boredom of the young, that flat, lackadaisical, drawled “Yuss” when some effort that does not pique it has to be made. I have often wondered why so many of the intelligent lads seem to find life dull and dirty. Maybe it is heritage, the stars, the thing we call temperament, or the eyes our parents gave us in persuading us to look at life sometimes as a fairy story. Scientific devilry may have

killed Hans Andersen, but at Blackthorn we were lucky in our young. They were neither dull nor dirty, nor bored with their jobs, and when Phillida and I talked to them about the future, and the urgent work we all should have on our hands, they were like bright young fish rising to flies. So, I was to find in Mary, Daisy and Bill that new England, so surprising to the doubters, so splendid and gay and courageous, that England of our airmen and our young sailors, and of the shopgirls who went back chic and trim to bombed stores. I know that we middle-aged folk were infinitely grateful to this young England, and proud of it when it turned to and held up our tired hands. To Phillida and myself it was a challenge from the future. We could not think of life merely in terms of personal profit, or even of security, when these young things would ask more of life. Their future, somehow, was our future, their adventure ours.

We acted as though war was inevitable. I have written of our reserve stores and equipment, and we added to some of them, wheat, maize, cattle-cake, sugar, tea, coal. I think both of us realized that if the world went into the melting-pot, money as mere money might be worthless, and that the realities such as fertile land, crops, manure, tools and machinery, and food, would be the only things of value. We had fitted out and loaded our ship, and were ready for the storm, for our ship might prove a Noah's Ark to ourselves and to others.

We cut down our luxury products, ploughed up our new land in the spring, and got in crops of potatoes barley, and kale. In fact we had begun to feel the pulse of our normal market both quicken and weaken, for trade and the city were under the shadow of the crisis, even though its inevitableness might be denied. Brandon and Whitebeam were worried and jittery, and confronting losses and possible catastrophic taxation. A hairdresser who had opened a shop in Whitebeam Market, and to whom Phillida went for waves, etc., told her that he could gauge the City's confidence by the number of heads he dressed. When the number fell the business world was feeling depressed, and the number of heads attended to, and the beauty products sold fell disastrously for him, poor man.

He was a Swede, and a highly intelligent person, and Phillida quoted him to me. Our experience marched with his, for we were finding that the ladies of Brandon and Whitebeam were cutting down expenditure, and that such luxuries as early strawberries and asparagus were being erased from the menu, but since we had planned to limit our output on such superfluities we did not suffer, save from some loss of profit. We were concentrating upon

grain crops, potatoes, eggs and table birds. Also, we decided to breed more pigs. We had our own butter and milk, and with our stores could be wholly self-supporting. I thanked God and my foresight for our equipment. We could plough, cultivate, thresh and mill without going to anybody.

1939 was a difficult year, the first part of the summer cold and wet. It rained perpetually, and it became a devil of a job picking soft fruit in such weather for market and for bottling. One had to rush out during a temporary lull in the perpetual piddle, and catch the fruit while it was dry. All of us picked like blazes. I was feeling worried about the harvest. If the season continued wet, we were going to have no end of a struggle in getting it in dry. And I was afraid of blight on the potato crop.

We had other surprises, but the incident that piqued me most forcibly was a visit from Harold Sleer. He turned up one Saturday afternoon in his Bentley, and found me picking our early apple Beauty of Bath. We never had much sale for this apple, but the name attracted me. Sleer, his hands in the pockets of his tinplate trousers, came strolling across the orchard with an ingratiating smirk on his face. He had very long and narrow feet, and the toes of his boots stuck out like his nose. I wondered whether he wanted us for Sunday tennis.

“Afternoon, Carey.”

I divined some urge behind the visit, and I went on picking apples.

“Don’t mind my going on with the job?”

“Rather not, my lad.”

If he had some proposal to make to me he was a little shy of making it. We had a fine apple crop, especially of Bramleys and Lanes and Cox’s, and Sleer pretended to admire it. He flattered me and was matey, and this friendliness roused my suspicions.

“Plenty of food here, Carey.”

“Yes, we are doing pretty well.”

“Wise lad. Something of a Forsyte, what?”

I should not have accused him of having read “The Forsyte Saga”, but I went on picking fruit.

“By the way, Carey, I’ve been wondering whether you would care to take on a contract with us.”

“Contract? What for?”

“Oh, food, you know, eggs and fruit, milk and butter and all that.”

“You mean a complete supply?”

“Yes, in a way, for the winter.”

So, Sleer had the jitters, and was planning to secure sure rations for himself and his household. But could one blame him? Had we not exercised foresight and laid in stores against a siege?

I went on gathering rosy-cheeked beauties and packing them into the pail.

“It’s rather a vague suggestion, Sleer. Your idea is for me to give you first call?”

“Well, in a way, old man, I suppose it is. You see, the wife’s rather worried. If London gets bombed we shall be having some of her family with us. Must help, you know, in a crisis.”

I asked Sleer a question.

“What does the City think of the chances of war?”

“Fifty-fifty, just at present.”

“I’d put it at a hundred to one.”

“Against?”

“No, for.”

His wet pink mouth went flaccid. He nibbled at me.

“Don’t be such a Jeremiah, old man. Some of us think Hitler is just a bluffing blackguard.”

“Blackguard certainly. But look here, Sleer, we are farmers and fruit-growers. We have a market to serve, and our regular customers to consider. I can’t very well give you an option on our food supply. It wouldn’t be fair to our customers or to us, would it?”

He hovered.

“Well, you know, old man, as between friends, I thought the suggestion might be good business. Of course I don’t want to corner the market.”

“Of course not.”

He must have been sensitive to my irony, for he fidgeted and shuffled his long feet, and then asked me if we could play tennis to-morrow.

“Sorry, I’m afraid we have too much on our hands.”

“Well, think it over, Carey. We’d be willing to pay a little more than the market price, you know, if you choose to meet us.”

I said that I would think it over, and he left me to my Beauties of Bath.

Phillida had seen the Sleer Bentley at the gate, and at tea she asked me what Sleer had wanted, and when I told her that Harold had proposed my insuring him against a food shortage, she laughed.

“What a dashed piece of cheek! You know that they get nearly all their stuff down from Garrods.”

“No, I didn’t know it. Do we sell them much?”

“A few eggs and table birds now and again.”

Phillida was keeping the books, and dealing with our orders. I was the supply branch, she the distributing centre, and we were sending out so much stuff, that I did not always know how and where it went. The producing of food is a sufficiently full time task for the farmer, and if the marketing and the distribution are taken off his hands, he is spared much worry, expense and waste time.

“I wonder he had the cheek to come to you, Grant.”

“The Sleer world is not backward in coming forward.”

“I hope you snubbed him?”

“I did.”

“What an idea? That we should cut our supplies to our regular people in order to feed The Cedars!”

But that was not the end of the matter. On the Monday morning I received a matey little note from Sleer repeating the proposal, and making yet another suggestion. Did I need a reliable man to drive my van? He, Harold, was being compelled to economize, and in the cause of economy he felt obliged to dispense with the services of his chauffeur. Thomas was an excellent man, and if I could find him a job, even a temporary job, Sleer hoped to be able to re-employ him when the crisis was over.

I passed that letter to Phillida.

“How does that strike you?”

She read it and frowned.

“What a rat!”

I wrote politely but curtly to Sleer and turned down both of his proposals.

I shall never forget that week-end in August when the pale-eyed, sneering Ribbentrop brought off his bargain with Russia. Stalin had fooled us properly, kept us fawning and chattering while he and his friends extracted all our military secrets and, I suppose, passed them as part of the bargain, to the Germans. My wife and I looked each other in the eyes and saw the end of a world there. Neither of us had any hope. I remember how we went out in the evening, a serene summer evening, and walked hand in hand round the farm. We were silent and profoundly sad. The wheat was in stook and looking lovely, for the weather had changed, and the sun was being kind to us, but over this little valley, sweet with its English peace, a blight of horror and of evil seemed to hang.

Phillida said, “Put your arm round me, Grant. I feel——Oh, the wicked silliness of it.”

I put my arm round her.

“I have you, my sweet.”

She pressed her head against my shoulder.

“Thank God, you won’t have to go, Grant. That poor hand. And you are too old. And thank God, we have no children.”

I bent and kissed her hair.

“The spirit of evil is loose in the world.”

And suddenly she flamed.

“That man, that liar, that monstrous mass of egotism! Grantie, if I could play the part of Charlotte Corday, I would, and gladly.”

“Thank God you can’t,” said I.

We stood in the midst of our wheat harvest, amid the piled, pale stooks and looked across the stubble at our beech wood. It was profoundly still and profoundly green. It was as though nature held her breath before the crash of some cataclysm.

“And to think,” said my wife, “that, in a few days, to satisfy the vanity of one man, bombs may be rained on London!”

“Only, maybe, yet, my dearest.”

“Grantie, I could kill!”

Friday and Poland!

It was difficult to concentrate upon one’s job during those critical hours. We kept running to the radio for news. Lady Furnival drove up during the afternoon and had tea with us. She said that Brandon was full of cars, family cars packed with children, and that every bedroom was let at the Crown. She was very calm and very sad. She was terribly frank about France, expecting that country to rat at the last moment, and I am afraid I thought her unfair to the French. Had I been able to foresee the treachery of that corrupt and craven nation, which was to shock us nine months later, I should have felt even more bitter than I did.

I remember Phillida putting a box of eggs in Lady Richenda’s car. They laughed and joked over it.

“Thank you, my dear. I hope there will be no broken eggs just yet.”

“We have a thousand down in waterglass.”

“I wish we had Hitler & Co. as museum specimens soured in spirit.”

“Not spirit,” said I, “but sludge!”

Sunday.

It was so serene and sunny that morning, with dew on the grass and white mist in our valley that, when I went out early to open up, the imminence of war seemed incredible. I had a moment of happy optimism. We had all been suffering from the jitters. We had all been bluffing each other. Now that our ultimatum was out Hitler would reflect and withdraw. It was unthinkable that one man should let this horror loose to satisfy a monstrous vanity. I don’t think we realized then that Hitler was but a symbol of Germany’s savagery.

I was in the garden, smoking a pipe, and feeling happy about our harvest that was both good and garnered, when Bill rode up on his bike. Bill had been down to Brandon. He looked white and tense, and his eyes had a curious gleam in them.

“The war begins at eleven.”

My stomach seemed to drop, and then to tighten.

“Rumour, Bill?”

“No. Mr. Chamberlain is going to broadcast.”

I turned from contemplating my peaceful valley, and walked to the window where my wife sat writing letters.

“It is going to happen.”

She looked at me steadfastly.

“War?”

“Yes.”

I saw her eyes lift to the sky, reproachfully, questioningly.

“So, the spirit of evil is loose in the world.”

We all of us gathered in the parlour to listen to the voice of a tired old man. It was the tired old men who had brought us to this pass, and it was youth inspired by a young old man who would rescue us. My wife sat on the sofa, with Mary and Daisy at her feet, like two good wenches at the feet of their lady. I stood by the window, Will by the door, a patriarchal figure holding a shabby brown hat, solemn and silent as fate. Bill, of the younger generation, sat alert on a Windsor chair, head cocked, nearer to us in his own estimation than Will was. We listened like figures in a tableau vivant. Bunter the Airedale, who had been excluded, snuffled and whimpered at the door.

Phillida’s eyes met mine.

“Let him in,” they said.

I let Bunter in, and he crossed the room, and pushing between the girls, leaned against my wife’s knees. He looked up and round at us with puzzled brown eyes. Why this strange stillness, this immobility, while a voice came from a wooden box?

I felt for Bunter. How was it possible for him to understand that fate was speaking to us with the voice of a tired old man?

We were at war.

It would have pleased me to set Bunter at the throat of the super-cur who had caused it.

XXXII

WHAT a first winter the war gave us, the grimmest winter for forty years, with its frosts reinforced by official fuss.

For us a paper war was added to the bitterness of the weather, and it caused one to wonder whether the world which sits in chairs has any conception of what life on the land means. Phillida and I used to joke on the subject, and make guesses at the future decretals that might be unloaded upon us.

We had to register and to fill up forms.

We were told that we must not plant any more fruit trees.

Then we were informed, graciously so, that we might plant them if we intercropped.

Maize went off the market, or nearly so, for the official mind had not forecast the problem of its import.

Whitehall appeared to have concentrated on wheat.

But we were not to feed wheat to our hens.

As we had grown our wheat, we ignored the order.

We were warned that the pig and poultry population would have to be reduced by two-thirds.

Feeding costs and wages and overhead expenses might rise, but our prices were to be controlled.

We were ordered to plough up more grass.

We were not allowed to sell our pigs to the local butcher, even though he was wailing for them.

We must not sell butter—beyond the ration.

We were visited by a representative of the Country Agricultural Committee, and to our joy and surprise we found him to be a sane and a knowledgeable person, who, when you were working your guts out and showing results, could shut one eye and say, “Carry on.”

But it was a grim winter, a black winter in more senses than one, and we had to go about our work at night with screened lamps or torches. I had

made screens of ply-board for the lower windows, but the cost of new curtains and linings for the rest of the house and for our staff cottage caused Phillida to curse the Germans. It all seemed so very unnecessary, and so stuffy. Yet, as life on the land that winter took on the shape of a primitive struggle with Nature, this silly, sit-still war seemed to become less important. Later, we were to look back on those more quiet days with regret and a longing for their return. Our pond became solid ice. Hens' combs and feet froze. We had to warm up by cutting wood before putting half-frozen hands to the cow's udders. The ground was like rock. We could do nothing on the land. Our winter-greens crop was frozen stiff and became a grave of standing corpses. Under the covered cloches some lettuce, spring cabbage and leeks survived. We had clamped our potatoes, and we cut masses of bracken and piled them on the clamp, also on our beetroot and our carrots. We had managed to prune some of the fruit trees, but spraying with winter-wash was impossible. Our circular saw supplied us with hundreds of logs, and we kept splendid fires burning. Drinking fountains were masses of ice, so that we had to empty them at night and fill up in the morning. Will's breath froze in his beard. My hand used to hurt me, for the bitter cold seemed to affect the nerve-endings. Even in our cellar the butter and milk were sometimes frozen. Every blanket we had was in use, and hot-bottles were served to everybody.

Yet I can say that I enjoyed this bitter winter. Not only did it stimulate me, and give me the joy of hunger and warmth and sleep, but it was a testing period in which I watched my crisis-plans in action, and found them good. We had food, fuel, light. We could stand our siege and stoutly so, and our old house, below stairs, was beautifully warm. As for the new and pretentious houses on the Whitebeam Estate, many of them were ice-boxes, and their owners and tenants found themselves minus coal. Transport was difficult with a shortage of lorries, and the roads ice-bound or blocked with snow. Frozen pipes and fireless grates were not Blackthorn, which stood up to the weather like John Ridd's Exmoor homestead. We received wild appeals for logs, and since we had inherited five acres of neglected woodland with our new property, Will, Bill and I went forth with felling axes and the cross-cut saw and steel wedges and a rope, and felled scrub oaks and moribund trees. One huge beech which was dying gave us thousands of logs. An edict had gone forth that the felling of timber had to be licensed, but we ignored the order, and had we suffered interference I was ready to point out that we were obeying the laws of good forestry. Dead, diseased and dying timber should be removed, and the ground replanted.

It was a profitable business selling logs. We improvised a sledge and dragged the stuff to the barn for our saw to deal with. We loaded our van and toured Whitebeam and Brandon. My price went up to fifteen shillings a hundred, and I could have sold double what we cut. The Sleers had fled and taken a flat in London. They fled back again to Brandon when the war began in earnest.

I enjoyed those timber days. Phillida would come out to us at eleven with a jug of hot tea, and bread and cheese, and we would sit on felled trunks and make a picnic of it. Will and I worked the cross-cut, and young Bill cleared branches and tops and was taught to faggot them. We did quite a good trade in faggots. Where there was coppice we saved the hazel for peasticks, and in the spring they made money for me. Phillida would join us for an hour, gloved and flashing her own particular billhook, and I liked to have her with us. She was a stimulus, and we male creatures quickened our pace and showed off our muscle.

When the frost was at its hardest we received a peremptory command to report upon how much of the additional arable we had ploughed.

I replied, "Damn all. Come and try."

The official mind always has puzzled me. It is rather like a cuckoo-clock that emits the same sound at regular intervals and under every sort of condition. It cannot take note of exceptions or variations. I suppose that anything off the schedule is a nuisance and cannot be tolerated, so when both nature and man protest the official clock just repeats its cuckoo-call. I should imagine that it has God and the Devil card-indexed, and that whenever it takes a census of Adam and Eve, the Serpent and the Tree of Knowledge are ignored.

We received a peremptory notice ordering us to plough at once. Phillida concocted the reply.

"Delighted. If you will supply mobile furnaces for thawing the land we might manage to scrape the surface."

We received no more exhortations, but I guess we were in Bumble's bad books.

Phillida's bottled fruit was booming. She kept a wise brown eye on the prices that were being charged by the London stores and she linked her price to their level.

Brandon and Whitebeam appeared to be short of everything, or were unable to get delivery. "Capri", who was now a client, told my wife that she had lived for one whole day on stale bread and carrots. We sold masses of vegetables from our clamps, potatoes, beet, carrots, turnips. Also, onions. I could have disposed of double the number of eggs we had for sale, and as we were producing our own food, the profit was excellent.

We had allowed some of our customers to run bills, and it was during this winter that we discovered how desultory is the conscience of certain suburban ladies. They were only too ready to take our goods, but we were tradesmen, and could wait for our money. The insensitive selfishness and impudence of some of these people were beyond belief. They would demand daily supplies, grumble if they were not forthcoming and, I suppose, stuff our bills away somewhere and forget them. A tradesman can be paid, not at all, or when you please. It was the old, rotten, snobbish tradition, that class dishonesty which made a joke of a tailor's bill, and kept little frightened milliners guessing and hungry. The grocer was just a cad, so why worry!

We were in a pretty strong position now, years ahead of any local competitor in our planning, thoroughly equipped and well stocked with produce. Some of the local shops were so short of vegetables owing to the hard winter that they offered us extraordinary terms to supply them. Hundreds of thousands of tons of potatoes had been frosted in the clamps, and greens were non-existent. I did allow one or two shops to purchase potatoes, beet and carrot, but we said that it was not to be an affair of five-pence to the retailer and a penny to the grower, but the other way about. To keep their custom they accepted our terms.

Meanwhile, we set about educating the casual ladies of Whitebeam in the elements of consideration for others. Our van passed "Capri" on three successive days without calling, and on the fourth day we received a peremptory note from Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith, demanding instant attention.

Phillida replied, enclosing a three months' account, which had been rendered twice previously. If Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith paid her bill, further goods would be supplied to her. Otherwise, there would be nothing doing.

We received by return a cheque and a haughty letter.

It was Phillida who dealt in person with "Capri". I should like to have been present. My tall, serene, stately Phillida was the very woman for such occasions, calm and unflurried, and the mistress of her tongue. I gather that she was completely frank with Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith. She asked her to remember other people's necessities, and to answer three questions.

Did we have to pay the wages of our staff?

Were we supposed to live on the produce of our land?

And if we were expected to deliver it promptly, why should not payment for it be equally prompt?

Phillida had no further trouble with Mrs. Ponsonby-Smith; and sundry other ladies, stimulated by deprivation to consider the needs of those who laboured, discovered that we were not content to be remunerated once a year. We had a few bad debts, not large ones, and one or two of them we did not press when we learnt that the debtors had been badly hit by the war, but to the completely and selfishly insensitive households we arranged for the delivery of a lawyer's letter in lieu of eggs and vegetables. In only one case did we have to county court the offender.

Nor did we suffer by insisting upon receiving the proper respect of prompt payment. I know that many producers and traders dare not adopt such a stringent attitude in dealing with the impertinently thoughtless and selfish. Certain ladies, when pressed for payment, will go about slandering you, and trying to persuade other ladies to withdraw their custom but, as I have said, we were in a strong position, both economically and socially. We were persons and my wife so much more the gentlewoman than most of those whom we served, that the high-horse of selfish snobbery would not canter.

Our one other problem during the winter promised to be the housing of two mothers and four children evacuees. I cannot pretend that we welcomed the invasion, though we made ourselves be kind. Yet, our kindness was superfluous. The women were shiftless and discontented, the children dirty specimens, stupid and mannerless. In three weeks the women were bored and rebellious, resenting Phillida's domestic discipline and her insistence upon their working for their keep. Neither mothers nor children appeared to appreciate wholesome country food. There were no buses, no cinemas, no public houses round the corner, and at the end of three weeks, women and children left us without a word of thanks for all we had tried to do for them.

They found the country awful.

My wife said that her experience of them had been like turning up a stone and discovering blanched, crawling, larval life beneath it, things that shocked you and made you shudder.

She said that, in the future, a communal conscience should see to it that such things did not happen.

Never, I think, had I yearned for the spring as in the early months of 1940. We were both bored by the war, and perplexed by it, and deceived by the facile optimism of our governmental gang. I cannot say that I was wholly happy about the situation, this stagnant complacency, the assumption that Germany would rot if we just sat still and waited. What were the Germans doing? Lady Furnival was worried by the country's easy-osy attitude. Did our people think that the most industrious country in the world was just starving and freezing?

I laugh a little grimly when I think how we gloated over our early lettuces and broccoli. We brought on hundreds of lettuces under our cloches, and when they had hearted and were marketable, we obtained eightpence a piece for them. Broccoli were fetching one and fourpence. We scooped in a nice sum over those baby crows, as we did over early potatoes. The war and the hard winter seemed to be serving us very well.

The spring. It was a late spring, and for that reason all the more lovely and mysterious. It had a poignancy, a beauty that was bitter-sweet. I marked down Feb. 19th in my diary as the end of the great frost which had lasted for sixty days. Our lowest temperature had been twenty-one degrees, but our little valley was sheltered and warm of soil. There were more frosts, but during the plum and cherry period they were absent. The white crocus was in flower on March 2nd, and winter aconite a little before it; snowdrops a fortnight earlier. Phillida and I were sentimental about those flowers; we held hands as we stood and gazed at them, and especially at the little sundisks of the aconites. Sun and light, not the accursed black swastika! Yellow and purple crocus began to bloom on March 5th, and the squills were showing blue points. The first daffodil flowered on March 21st. The almond was late this year, pink budded about March 15th, but not petal-wide until the last week in the month.

How we watched the first green shoots, and the grey frost-scorched grass recover. I do not dote upon the elder tree, but it was the first to break. The larches began to colour; the hazels showed a tinge of green about their pale catkins. I heard the first dawn chorus of the birds on March 17th, and it was, in the main, a blackbird choir. As for the fruit-blossom it promised to be a marvellous year. Plums and cherries were like snow. Our orchard and plantations were a lovely sight, and in the evening Phillida and I would

wander through them, and give thanks, and hope for a happy setting. We sprayed thoroughly in the white and pink bud and the petal-fall stages. Our cereal crops too were lovely to the eye, the oats lushing green, the wheat a trifle yellow in patches, but a dressing of fertilizer put that right. Our valley was a valley of beauty and hope, rich and burgeoning with the fruits of the earth.

Yet, as I have said, the spring of 1940 had a poignancy for us both. It was as though a stage had been set for a tragedy, a Guinevere's Maying, with the thorns vivid against sunset and thunder. Even this quiet valley of ours sometimes seemed to hold its breath and forefeel the menace of evil. One would wake in the morning and hear the birds singing, and see the sunlight edging the blackout curtains, and that war should be with us seemed incredible. Yes, more than incredible, preposterous and fantastic and brutish. The Donkey's Head of Germany horribly fouling a Mid-Summer Night's Dream! I noticed that Phillida kept the house more flowery. It was the woman's and the artist's protest against the prevalence of the Evil Thing. We were much together. We drew closer to each other, both in the spirit and the flesh. We did as many things as we could in company. I was never quite happy when my wife was away from me.

I think she had more courage than I had, more serenity, more faith in some essential good, and I like to think of her as I remember her that spring and summer, steadfast and loving to me when disaster seemed very near. She was Shakespearian, one of those great and glowing and big-hearted women who make the whimpering small boy in man look up with eyes of wonder and of faith.

She believed in England, because she was England in its Elizabethan mood.

"It will be all right, Grantie. I have a feeling in me that this country cannot fail."

Will, too, was good English, like some yeoman of the long-bow who had seen Crécy and Poitiers, and I was glad of his strength and his steadfastness. He had the calm eyes of a man who slept well, and woke each day to his labours, a tawny, bearded British lion.

XXXIII

I WAS one of those who, when the Nazis invaded Holland and Belgium on that day in May, thought that Hitler and his Germany were mad. If we and the French and the Dutch and the Belgians, some four million trained men, could not smash him, well, something was rotten in the state of Europe. It was—France. A second debacle, a second Sedan. I remember a cold tremor running down my spine when the almost incredible news came to us. The French army was fighting magnificently and the Hun had reached Arras and Amiens! The statements did not tally. I mistrusted that adjective. When a censored Press states that an army is fighting magnificently, you may infer that that army is running away.

Of that tragedy and its gangrene of corruption and of cowardice I do not wish to speak. The memory is too bitter in its associations. Nearly all that we suffered subsequently we owed to our treacherous allies. Vichy! I cannot think of France now without hatred and bitterness. It was France, craven and crapulent, and fawning upon its conqueror, to whom I owed so many of the bitter things I had to bear.

When I heard poor Reynaud's wail to Roosevelt I became wise as to the worst. We were sitting in the dusk, and almost one had the feeling that the black wings of an inexorable tragedy were darkening our valley.

“Gosh! The French are going to chuck!”

We looked at each other, wide-eyed.

“Grantie, they can't!”

I had had visions of a France fighting amid the ruins of Paris, fighting behind the Loire, fighting behind the Garonne. Such was the France of a tradition. They had their colonies, their fleet, but no fight left in them. There followed that miserable procession of betrayals, their fleet at the mercy of Hitler, their German airmen prisoners handed over, their cowardly efforts to sacrifice the Czechs and Poles. Yes, anything that would make slobber with which to polish the German boots! We—had become the enemy. Even their few brave and honourable men were outlawed, sentenced to death. Never, I imagine, in all history has the essential rottenness of a country so revealed itself.

Those were grim days. We had been cheered by the desperate epic of Dunkirk. We were angered and saddened by the treachery that accepted our new troops, and deserted and sacrificed them. We—England—were one against the world, and we found a splendid solace in our very peril. To hell with allies and neutrals! We were to stand alone as in the Napoleonic days, free from exploitation by the meanest and most selfish country upon earth. France! Pah!

Said Will, “Let they furriners rot like a muck heap. We be free of they,” and he spat, and in the spirit I spat with him.

Work! I suppose none of us had ever worked so fiercely as during those summer months. We started at God knows what hour and went on till dusk. “Go to it”, was the cry, and we went to it, master, man, mistress and girls. I read nothing but the daily paper. The job was the thing, all jobs and any job.

Will, Bill and I became Home Guards, and took our duties in rotation. I remember the finest of Priestley’s broadcasts, and how it gave a word-picture of English countrymen gathered at night upon a hilltop, parson, shepherd, blacksmith, village shopkeeper. Such were our vigils. We set up larch tripods in our fields to prevent Hun aeroplanes landing, and kept our spraying-machine ready as a fire-engine. England was in peril and we worked like devils. We stuffed cabbage and kale and sprouts into every conceivable corner, and double-cropped every available strip of earth. The marvellous weather held, splendid for cereals, but rough on greens and rootcrops. We trundled water round in a barrow, and nearly emptied our pond.

What cheered us most during those dark days?

The disappearance of Hoare, Simon and Burgin.

Chamberlain’s descent from his pedestal of obstinate optimism.

Churchill’s leadership. Here was our man of destiny.

The joining up of those big boys of the people, Morrison and Bevin.

We were sick of the gentlemen gang.

The ruthless smashing and impounding of the greater part of the French fleet. Over that we exulted. This was Nelson come to life.

England was up and doing. I felt that my country had entered once more upon one of its great and heroic periods. Grim and gay. Yes, by God! We would beat these devils, even if we had no shirts left on our backs.

Food, food, food, and yet more food, that was Blackthorn's war-cry. And if German louts were to descend upon us from the sky we English countrymen would meet them. Will had a twelve-bore gun of his own, and one evening I found him refilling cartridges with buckshot. Deadly stuff buckshot at a closish range, and Will had a preference for it, despite his Home Guard rifle.

"A dose of buckshot in t'belly, ssir."

I found that the older men were much more fierce and grim than the youngsters. Many of them belonged to the "No Quarter Brigade", and there was a Cromwellian ruthlessness in them that was refreshing.

But the summer was not all blood, sweat and tears. By no means. Life had quickened. Every simple incident had a more vivid significance. So had the beauty of the earth, our fruit, our wheat and barley, the green clouding woods, the brown eggs from the nests. We had a young grove of giant sunflowers in one corner, and the seeds were to be added cautiously to the grain-feed in order to richen it in oil. We were all of us eating more, and sleeping more, and drinking more. I found my peg of whisky at night growing more generous, and my wife applauded it. We were meeting things hand in hand. The beauties that we saw we saw together, and I loved that tranquil half-hour when the day's work was done, and we wandered out to look at our world as one should look at things that are good and lovely. I could feel tired, happily relaxed, contentedly weary, while the spirit transcended the flesh.

I remember Phillida and I going to look at our oats in stook. They were lovely, with their little silver pannicles, the sun shining athwart them on the pale stubble. Phillida took a spike between her hands and rubbed it, and smiled at the slim seeds. It was a heavy crop, and we needed it for ground oats.

"What will it work out at, Grantie?"

I put my arm round her.

"You are not thinking of that at all, you know."

"Yes I am."

"And other things?"

"Perhaps."

“Will’s guess is sixteen or seventeen hundredweight per acre. I hope the beasts don’t unload incendiaries on us. And all the dear old platitudes.”

“Seems as though we shall have to recultivate some of them, dear lad. Corn in Egypt, and the mother idea. Why did God give that nasty little urchin man a horrid new toy to play with?”

“Well, he gave it first to a German.”

“For our chastening? Is it that some race or country must always be a curse to the rest of the world?”

“The Germans think we are that!”

“Wretched people! I know I ought to pity them.”

“And you can’t?”

“No, I can’t.”

As a man of the soil I would have described 1940 as a wheat and plum year. Never have I seen such a crop of plums. Early Rivers, Deniston, Victoria, Czar, Giant Prune trailed their burdened branches to the ground. We had to stake and support the tired limbs of the trees. It was a most beautiful sight, so rich and luscious, that one was startled when the vulgar word glut crawled like an evil maggot into the picture. Why—glut? Just because we had mismanaged things.

I was determined, and so was Phillida, that none of our plums should rot on the ground. Every day of the week, including the Sabbath became a Plumday. We dodged and squirmed amid the blue and purple fruit, and stood on stepladders, and cursed wasps, and almost I cursed that plum crop. We carried them in bushel baskets and weighed them on the granary scales, and by the time we had picked the last red Giant Prune the tally had mounted to 1 ton, 7 cwts. Incidentally, the Giant Prunes were a marvellous sight, like green crowns thickly studded with great fat rubies, but such a static simile is inadequate in its application to a thing that grows and flowers and fruits.

The shortage of sugar was most people’s bane, but Phillida, using half her reserve store, filled every bottle she could lay her hands on. She persuaded Brandon to bottle in water, in the hope that when the bottles came to be used, sugar would be once more plentiful. We sold plums, we gave away plums, we jammed them, we ate them in tarts and as dessert. We tried drying them, but the experiment was not a success.

Apples were more patchy, especially so the late-keeping sort. We had a glut of Worcester Pearmains, but the Coxes were poor, and the Bramleys and Lanes carried a meagre crop, but they were of fine size and well coloured. We were to gather them delicately and put them, paper wrapped, carefully in store.

But I am ahead of my time-table and my tragedy. Maybe, I like to linger over those last days, especially those before the full foulness of the German spite became obvious.

Invasion?

We used to ask each other, half jokingly, "Will it happen to-day?"

The days passed, and nothing happened, and we wondered at the fallacious sense of peace.

Will and I belonged to the party that wanted it to happen. We were sure that our lads would tear the guts out of the Germans. I wanted to hear of the English Channel looking like soup with green and grey peas floating in it. I wanted the white cliffs of England splashed red with German blood. I wanted to think of them rotting and stinking on the beaches. I smiled when I saw Will polishing his gun. Buckshot in the swines' bellies! We were grim and gay.

Also, we were tired and a little stale, and with our early harvest over, and the potato and main apple crop not yet ripe for lifting and gathering, I decided that we all would take a breather. The girls and Bill were to take three days off each in succession, but Will was to have a week when I had given Phillida her short rest. Even her glowing strength had gone pale, like a candle burning dim. Will was to have his week when I had had mine, and I wondered how he would spend it, and he told me. He was going to visit the place where his wife and child lay buried, and tramp the familiar lanes, and look at the faces of old friendly cottages. He would put up at the village pub, The Green Man, and like some wandering Odysseus, speak with the old men who had known him as a boy.

I took Phillida to London, as yet an unscathed London, for, in those tragic days the old City had for us a strange lure. We wanted to see London as it was, before it became what it might be, for it was like a city near to a volcano, and some day, any day, the eruption might submerge it. We stayed at an hotel in Bloomsbury, because it seemed more in the centre of things and nearer to the City's heart, redolent of Thackeray and Dickens, and the sentimental peacefulness of a more tranquil age. We went everywhere like a

couple of children, to the Zoo, Madame Tussaud's, the Tower, St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, the British Museum, the National Gallery, Chelsea church, Regent's Park, the Tate Gallery. We took a boat out on the Serpentine, and saw "Rebecca" and two or three films. Yet, I believe that both of us were all eyes and ears, spiritually so, and conscious of an impending tragedy. I noticed that we spoke quietly to each other, like two people wandering round a beloved and familiar old house which had been condemned by progress, and was to be at the mercy of the house-breakers.

We knew that there was fierce air-fighting over the Kentish coast, and we were exulting over the R.A.F.'s smashing victory over the Louts of the Air. Yet, London remained inviolate. We could sit by the Serpentine, and see children at play, and dogs, and the light upon the water. We sat too in St. James's Park and watched the water-fowl, and saw the familiar silhouette of Whitehall and Westminster clear against the summer sky.

Could it happen to London, and if it did, how would London meet it?

"I somehow feel it can't, Grantie," she said to me.

I was not feeling like that. I was sure that Hitler would perpetrate any beastliness if he believed that it would pay him. Terror was a psychological weapon. Had he not terrified France into abject surrender?

"He will bomb London if he thinks London will crumble."

"But it won't," said she.

"I wonder?"

Her Elizabethan mood was stronger than mine. She indeed was like Queen Bess at Tilbury. Let the whole world come and this England would stand fast and shock them. Besides, was not any thought of surrender impossible? Surrender to what? The Spirit of Evil embodied in the strutting, swaggering bum of a Lout's Progress.

"I feel sure, Grant, somehow."

"Go on being sure," said I. "I love you for it."

There was nothing very original in our reactions. We were just two simple souls up from the country, but I do believe that simplicity is the sap of life, and the clever little people can be a curse in a crisis. "Pulling septic wings off psychological flies" was how Phillida described much of what she read, and had now ceased from reading. We preferred the Book of Nature. I would rather see England Will and his Bible than a kind of Freudian Club in which to be squalid and dirty is to be superior. We had come up by car, and

we returned to Blackthorn by car on one tranquil morning, and I confess that I was glad to escape from the splurge of progress in the new suburbs. What would happen to all these little houses if bombs fell; how would their people live? For one sinister moment I saw them as maggots and London as a carcass. But that was inhuman and inaccurate. These people, clerks, shop assistants and what not, were to prove their courage. But when I saw the English woods and stubbles and the Downs I felt happier and more secure. Blackthorn was oak, and that other England ply-board.

I said so to my wife.

“Why not cardboard, Grantie? But can they help it?”

Of course they couldn’t, and I humbled myself before her.

“I’m sorry, my sweet, but I can’t love that part of England. Hanover Square, yes, and Pall Mall and Hampstead, but not Tooting or Surbiton and the new suburbs. I can’t help it.”

“Perhaps you had vision, Grantie. You refused to starve your soul in streets. Perhaps that is why I married you!”

“I ought to call you Ceres. The wheat-headed one.”

“Look, there are our old eternal hills! Just chunks of chalk according to the geologists.”

“But alive, still, darling. All the dead things become live things in other ways. I would rather have Ceres than your schoolma’am.”

“Don’t be unfair to schoolma’ams! they do things we should hate to do.”

“But they must like doing it.”

“I wonder!”

I remember as a child my father saying on our way back from a holiday, “I wonder what worries I shall find at home, and what mess some fool has made of things?” but I had no need to worry. I have found that if those who work with you are your friends, and you have chosen wisely, your trust is not misplaced. Coming home to Blackthorn was coming home to all the things one loved, with no shadow of suspicion to darken them. Strange but true, in spite of the cynics. We did not suffer from petty pilfering, or from the “Cat’s Away” cunning. Will had too much pride and integrity for that sort of knavery, too much love for the land, and young Will had developed a healthy scorn for all slackers. We just drifted in on that serene evening, to be met by Will with a face as serene as the sky.

“All’s well, ssir.”

It was. Even the lawn had been mown and edged and the flower=beds weeded. Will had no untoward news to report.

“It always is, Will,” said I, “when I leave things to you.”

His very blue eyes looked me full in the face. He was dumb when praised, but I knew that good words pleased him.

As for the girls they had the house like a show-piece. They were kissed by Phillida, and I guessed that those kisses were no cold salutations. Mary and Daisy were glad to have her back, which is about the happiest tribute a housewife can claim from her staff. Tea was ready, and a dish of scones made from our own flour and larded with our own butter. Mary had made me one of her famous jam-rolls, and the raspberry jam oozed from it. We fed well at Blackthorn, and our staff fed as we did. Phillida had always scorned that meanness which leaves the leavings and the scrag-end to the kitchen.

After tea I lit a pipe, and we went out to look round. Looking round the place you love after you have been away from it, is one of the pleasantest things I know, always provided that you have left someone with a head and a conscience behind you. The cows had to be caressed, and our breeding sows hailed; they were friendly beasts and came to us with gruntings, and liked to be rubbed with my stick. Bunter, who had met us with a great hullabaloo, went everywhere we went, save into the pig-pounds and chicken runs. We looked at our Rhodes and Leghorns, and the little flock of geese in the orchard. These watchful, aloof, and stately birds would come to Phillida, pluck at her skirt and shoe laces, and put their bills into her hand.

We inspected our apple and pear crop. Not much Brown Rot, thank heaven! Some of the Bramleys looked like weighing eighteen ounces, and the blackbirds had been less busy than we had feared in this dry season. Always we were torn between our love of the songster and our condemnation of the inveterate thief. The bird view must be so very different! Will had a monster marrow to show us, and a bed of great yellow Ohio squashes which would keep till Christmas. Young Will also had a surprise for us, a potato-grader of his own designing upon which he had been working after-hours in the workshop.

It was all so very peaceful on that late summer evening with the sun going down into a Tennysonian daffodil sky. The zenith was a greenish blue. Woods and hills would be very black against the afterglow.

“I do love it all,” said my wife.

We did not know then that the Evil Thing was very near us, and that our peaceful nights were over. We could look at a black velvet sky throbbing with stars and not fear it. Other throbblings were to come, the snorings and hiccouhings of the German air-monster, sounds that were to make me rage and long to be up there pouring bullets into German bellies.

And next day Will went off on his pilgrimage to the place of his memories. He would be back for the potato lifting and, had he known it, to other things.

XXXIV

IT was on the next night that we first heard the German planes coming over. We were turning in after a long day, and both of us were tired.

Phillida was sitting at her dressing-table combing her hair, and I was in bed, reading the *C.G.A. Journal*. I remember seeing Phillida's hand pause with the comb still in her hair. There was a sudden rigidity about her figure. She was listening.

“Hear it, Grantie?”

I sat up in bed, and out of the night that sinister, broken, snoring sound came to me, somehow possessing and defiling the whole immensity of the sky, a sound that was to fill all England with an undying hatred and a ruthless anger. The Wings of the Evil Thing were over us. That abominable stridor had the strange quality of making you feel that the menace was over your head, directed at you, searching for you. It chilled me.

“Is it ours or theirs?”

“Old Nasty, for sure.”

“London?”

“I suppose so.”

She went on combing her hair, and I lay back on the pillows and listened, for I could not concentrate upon the printed word. The sound passed, but other snoring followed it, until the whole sky seemed full of the sound of the Evil Thing. It had a strange, disturbing, physical effect upon one. My stomach seemed to tighten.

“Poor old London,” said my wife, “I am glad we saw it. But do you think they will really do that monstrous thing?”

“If it pays him the German will do anything. We have to thank the beastly French for this.”

With the deliberate steadfastness that challenged fear my wife went on combing her hair. We heard no bombs dropped anywhere near our world, but next day——!

There were no letters, no morning paper, and as though to emphasize our suspense the battery of our wireless set suddenly died on us. We had hurried in for the seven o'clock news, and all that we could get were a few splutters, and then silence. There seemed to be something menacing and terrible in that silence. We felt like people marooned, shut off from the world. No news, and we children of modernity who expected our news served to us with our bacon and eggs, wondered whether London had died like our wireless. The unknown always magnifies itself, and we remembered fat Goering's ferocious threats, and were dreading lest he had proved less of a Bombast than we had believed.

All of us had turned in so early that we had not seen the red glow in the sky.

I sent young Will down to Brandon on his bike. We were at breakfast when we saw him ride up to the garden gate.

We went to the window.

"What news?"

Bill had a bleached face. He had some news, and of course it was exaggerated.

"London got it. All the East End and the Docks done in, so they say."

"Good God! The swine!"

"We could have seen the blaze, sir, if we'd been up on the Downs. Some of our chaps saw it."

I am afraid we finished our breakfast in gloom and sadness. It was like the French horror all over again. The Battle of Britain was upon us, and what its ultimate end would be who could tell? What if the German boasts proved more than boasts, and London and our industrial centres and our transport system were reduced to chaos? Would there be starvation and panic and surrender? It was unthinkable, and yet we were alone in the world, and Germany victorious, with the French aerodromes and ports at her service.

I confess that I felt scared and depressed, and all the more bitter against our late gallant allies.

"We owe all this to the damned French."

I caught the appeal in my wife's eyes.

"Let's try not to be bitter, Grantie."

“Sorry, dear. Fine me sixpence every time I curse the Frogs.”

Work was the thing, to sweat out your worries in labour. Bill and I started lifting the potato crop, beginning with the Great Scots. We took a row each, and forked and tossed the tubers into drifts to dry. Phillida and the girls were to come out later and do the picking up. Our Multi-Culto and its trailer would carry the crop to store. Young Will and I worked in a kind of tied up silence. I wondered if the young felt as worried as I did, and how long it would be before the news reached us.

And would it be the truth?

Were we told the truth?

I was a poltroon and a pessimist that morning.

It must have been about eleven when Phillida came into the field. I was just straightening a stiff back, and looking along the lines of tubers and telling myself that we had a clean and a bumper crop, when I heard my wife’s voice.

“The baker has just brought us a paper.”

I looked at Phillida’s face.

“Much damage?”

“Not so bad as we feared. Big fires at the docks, but they are under control. A lot of poor people killed, I’m afraid.”

She passed me the paper, and I stuck my fork into the soil, and read. Young Will came and looked over my shoulder. I was deep in the news when he made a remark that both startled and heartened me.

“Well, if they do knock London down, we can build it up, can’t we, and better?”

Was that the spirit of our young? Well, if so, thank God for it!

The days passed, and old Will returned from his pilgrimage to pick up a fork and join us in lifting the potatoes. I gathered that Will’s pilgrimage had not been a happy one, and that the disillusionment it had produced was fundamental. He did not say much about it, and I divined a kind of secret

anger in him against people and things, or both. Very rarely did Will use strong language, for he was a Cromwellian creature, but he did tell me that his old cottage had disappeared, and in its place he had found a nice new Council Estate, very full of evacuated children.

“Not a stick nor a stone left, ssir. And, they kids! Little devils!”

Almost I was shocked, for this was strong language for Will. Had they mocked him as the rude children had mocked Elisha? He was sufficiently hairy. And one afternoon he told me what had angered him. He had gone to look at a particular grave, and had found a swarm of these urchins rampaging all over and round the graves. A small girl and a boy were wrestling on Will’s sacred mound, and when he had reproved them, they had cheeked him.

“I took off my strap, ssir, and I belted they. And I went back and packed my bits o’ things and came away. Places ben’t what they were.”

“Nor children, Will?”

“Maybe not, ssir. Where was t’parson? Wasn’t doing his job.”

Will’s God seemed rather out of the world.

So was the God of Peace. Nightly those foul machines droned over us, carrying death and destruction. There seemed to be no answer to this menace. Mary and Daisy, who had proposed taking their holiday in London, went to a south coast town instead, and after three days came back frightened. The days had a strange unreality, and even the perfect weather and the cloudless nights seemed tainted, and dedicated by some evil Divinity to our enemies. Maybe God, if there were a God, favoured force and ruthlessness and slaughter. We tamer folk were not to His fancy.

We witnessed two or three air battles and, during the last of them, we saw one of our Spitfires bring down a Hun in flames. We cheered and waved, and I for one exulted when no parachute appeared. The swine up there were dead, or too hurt to help themselves. The flaming machine fell beyond Brandon, and I gave young Will leave to go off on his bike and find and see the wreckage. He came back at the end of an hour, looking rather white and set.

“All of ’em dead, sir.”

“How many?”

“Four.”

“Splendid,” said I.

Our dear friend from over the water dropped his evil eggs in strange places. I have seen white craters on the green Downs, and brown pits in ploughed fields, with chunks of chalk or clay flung out in frozen eddies. We did not expect trouble at Blackthorn, and we had no guns near us, but one night he unloaded incendiaries round us. Most of them fell in the open fields, but one crashed close to the barn. Luckily Will was awake, and both heard and saw the thing from his window, and we all turned out with a rush, extinguished the bomb, and searched for others. After that the staff took turns at staying awake, Phillida and the girls sharing the vigil. There were six of us, and an hour or so apiece sufficed. Also, we three men had our Home Guard duties, and young Will would begin the day’s work at times looking puffy-eyed and peaky. Will and I needed less sleep than he did.

Then came the day when a cruising blackguard appearing out of a cloud machine-gunned the farm. We were apple-gathering in the orchard, and the bullets zipped among the trees. I shouted to everybody to lie down, but I did not lie down. I was suddenly and furiously angry. I stood and shook my fist at the beast.

“Go back to Hell, and Hitler, its master.”

It was then that I saw that Phillida too was standing, looking up into the sky, and in my anger I scolded her.

“Why didn’t you lie down?”

She smiled at me.

“Oh, just pride. I’m not going to prostrate myself before the Devil.”

The fellow did us no harm, though one bullet broke some tiles on the roof, but he went off and dropped a bomb on Brandon and killed two kids who were playing in Mill Lane.

The exodus from the South Coast towns began to increase our population. The Crown was full of fugitives from London, and old people and children were being billeted everywhere, in the cottages and on the Brandon and Whitebeam Estates. Many of these houses had filled themselves up with relatives and friends, and so escaped the advent of strangers. Lady Richenda had turned the Dower House into a children’s hostel and, at the end of a week, her staff gave notice. She described to us

how she had them all into the library, and talked to them as Queen Bess might have talked to a crowd of unseemly scullions. She told them that they could leave if they wished to, but that any references she gave would contain the statement that they had ratted and shirked their war-job. Apparently she shamed them, for they came to her afterwards and asked to be allowed to stay.

We had an old couple sent to us, gentlefolk, sad, quiet old people. We gave them the dining-room and lived in the parlour. They were not self-pitying parasites, but were eager to help. The old chap potted in the garden; and the old lady did all her own chores.

The old fellow had tales to tell. He said that as far as his own experience went our authorities lied like the Germans, or concealed things, and he hoped the mendacity was not too universal. Officially his town had had a few bombs dropped on it; actually the number had run into hundreds. Defences were non-existent, and they hardly ever saw an English plane.

“I’m not grumbling,” he said; “we make no munitions. We’re just an idle pleasure resort full of more or less useless old people. So, they can’t bother about us. I quite understand. Other things are more important.”

While they were with us they heard that their small house had received a direct hit, and that everything in it had been destroyed.

This influx of strangers made the supply problem more complex, and yet it was astonishing how our transport system managed to carry on. Goods that were ordered somehow arrived, even if they loitered on the way. Some things, of course, were unobtainable, or practically so, silk, woollen underclothing, timber, and the humble onion. Egg prices were controlled, but with the moulting season, and spring pullets not in full lay, the official control exercised itself once more upon a negation. Phillida told me that the average ration in some shops was one egg per week per person. We were lucky, as I had March birds that came on early in the autumn, and I could have sold every egg ten times over, but since the controlled price was hard on the producer, we kept most of our fresh eggs for our own household. As for onions I’ll admit we did a little profiteering, or rather we made those people pay who could afford to pay. We had a grand crop, round about a ton, and selling them at the shop’s price of eightpence a pound we netted some eighty pounds.

We had hundreds of lettuces under cloches that had hearted well, and I foresaw that we should obtain a pretty price for these in the early part of the winter. Also, we expected to have a fine crop of All the Year Round in the

spring. Lettuces went to tenpence a piece in the early months of 1940. Our cloches were serving us well.

We wrapped all our green tomatoes in oiled paper and stored them in sawdust to ripen. Our white beans and Dutch beans had cropped to a weight of 2 cwt. a piece. We held on to these; they would sell well to supplement soups and stews. Our one trouble with these crops was that the thresher would not deal with them efficiently. They bounced all over the place, and we had to put the dried pods between sacking and beat them out with light rods. Endive and winter spinach, leeks and celery looked like being in great demand, and I gave our old friend Ballinger the first call on such produce. The plan that I had worked out years ago had come into full function, and if I had been something of a Forsyte, I was supplying a national need.

Phillida was much more realist than I was on these matters. No one could be more generous than she, but my wife had a divine eye for humbug, or rather for that cynicism which has to function while weaving patriotic garlands. She had not forgotten her father's tragedy, and I know she resented the fetters that are placed in every national crisis upon the producers of food.

When I argued that food was a national necessity, and that the powers that be had to keep the people in a good temper, she smiled at me like a mother.

“No profiteering, dear man, what!”

“Well.”

“Aren't we as important in our way as the munitioneers, yet they are allowed to profit up to three times their normal pay. They can make trouble, we can't, or not so seriously. So, a part of the population has to be bribed at the expense of another.”

“Isn't that rather——?”

“No, darling, it's just policy. I know it has to be. Man is no angel, in spite of the urgists. I guess that even your Communist keeps a pretty keen eye on the pay sheet. That's why I'm not sentimental about it. The official world doesn't allow us many chances, but when there is a chance I'm ready to take it. Our great men often have to put on surplices and talk through their noses.”

“At us?”

“Of course. To everybody, while shutting one eye. We don't get the shut eye, only the open one.”

Eggs were controlled as to price, were they? Oh, very well! If we had been buying our feed, there would have been precious little profit in egg-selling. And what about the price and shortage of petrol, and the additional costs of transport? Phillida created her own solution. She charged sixpence a dozen for delivery. People paid it without a murmur, and so far as I know we were not contravening any official mandate.

When the leaves began to turn colour, I found myself in a mood of growing depression. Maybe it was prophetic, and yet I was prophesying to myself on the war in general, and not as the tragedy was to affect that which was dearest to me.

In spite of the protestations of our Press it seemed to me that Germany had won the war. Hitler's word ran all over Europe. These were not days when a country could rise again and make a fight of it with muskets and cannon. The aeroplane and the tank could pounce upon and crush any such mob effort. If Russia came to terms with Germany, we should be helpless.

Stalemate! Yes, but what should we be left with? Frustration, a vast debt, the menace of the future, an embittered and semi-communistic country. Yes, I had a gloomy period, and I began to set my plans to meet the future as I saw it.

Something that was nearer and more tragic for me I did not see.

We had bombs dropped casually about the country-side. One hit the main Brandon road, and blew a laundry van to blazes. My wife had been driving our van as usual, but it began to worry me, and I insisted on taking over. She was not very willing to give way until I made my appeal an emotional one. Then, she surrendered.

"Well, if you are going to be unhappy about it."

"I am."

I suppose I was being selfish, and cherishing my most precious possession, but she did not point out that I was transferring the anxiety to her. After all, the risk was infinitely small, but I was under strain, and not very tolerant of opposition. A whim might appear as law. If a thing was to be done, it was to be done instantly and without argument. I realize now that Phillida understood my state, and humoured it.

Early in November I went down with flu. It was a mild attack, but Gibson put me to bed and told me to stay there for three days. Phillida took

over the van, though I wanted her to let young Will drive it. She answered that Will was more necessary on the land than on the van, and that she would be driving only for a day or two.

She laughed me out of my jitters.

“Darling, do you think Old Nasty has a special mission to bomb one particular farmer’s wife?”

“Oh, well, I’ll be up in a day or two. If you hear one of the town sirens, stop and take cover.”

“Yes, if you——”

“Promise.”

“All right, I promise.”

XXXV

IT was Phillida's last day out with the van, a mild and dim day early in November. My temperature had been normal for twenty-four hours, and Gibson had given me permission to get up on the morrow. My wife came to kiss me good-bye, and she kissed me on the forehead, for I did not want to give her flu. I think I have never seen her look more comely and well, with the glowing comeliness of a rich maturity. She had happy eyes had Phillida.

"Good-bye, old thing. I have a little argument on with 'Capri'."

"Late with the cheque-book, as usual?"

"Yes, and wanting more than her share."

She turned at the door and smiled at me.

"No tricks, mind."

I smiled back at her and nodded.

I heard the van turn out into the lane, the diminishing purr of its engine died away past the cross roads in the direction of Whitebeam Hill. The morning paper lay on the table beside my bed. I picked it up, and read it, but it was not very cheerful reading. War, war, war! Nothing but those boring reports of mutual bombings, terse and rather crude accounts of destruction, casualties, deaths. There were the usual exhortations to work and to save and to restrict every possible human activity that was not necessary for the prosecution of the war. The presidential election in the U.S.A. was very much to the fore. I was bored and sick of the whole silly business, and my bout of flu had depressed me.

I dropped the paper on the floor, closed my eyes, and tried to doze. It was then that I heard the plane a distant droning rather like the sound one heard at night. Was it one of ours or one of his? The thing seemed to be circling round above the low clouds and I thought—"After this war will any sane person ever want to hear the sound of a plane?" Presently, the machine came our way and appeared to be almost overhead. The noise of its engine seemed rather harsher than ours, and I was beginning to suspect it of being a Hun, when that beastly stridor gathered sudden intensity and came pouring out of the sky. I sat up in bed. The damned thing was a German, and was diving on its objective, to bomb or machine gun the village, and then sneak

off in the clouds back to France. I heard a rush of feet, and the girls calling to each other. I was out of bed and at the window, and I saw the plane as a dim dark shape streaking downwards. I heard the bomb crash, and saw a column of dirt soar into the air. The old house shook. I was trying to judge where the bomb had fallen. Somewhere short of Brandon? I saw the plane veer off, and the stutter of its machine gun as it swooped still lower and seemed to touch the hill. I shook my fist at it.

“Damn your foul soul! May someone blow you to hell.”

The machine-gun fire ceased, and the noise of the machine drifted away. There was some pother in the chicken runs, and Bunter was howling. I heard young Will shouting to old Will, and his language was lurid.

“The swine’s dropped a bomb on the village.”

Then, there was silence. I don’t know why, but that silence agonized me more than the noise had done. I was shaking; I was cold. I got back into bed, remembering that Phillida was out there. I tried to reason with myself. After all the chances that one bomb had fallen anywhere near Phillida were thousands to one, but I could not stop shaking or assuage my panic. I got out of bed again, opened the door, and shouted.

“Mary, Mary.”

She came to the foot of the stairs.

“Tell Bill to get on his bike and go and see where that bomb fell.”

“Yes, Mr. Grant. I think——”

“Never mind what you think. Tell him to go at once.”

I got back into bed, pulled the clothes up to my chin and shivered. I could not reason away my fears. It was as though something in me divined disaster, and I lay and waited with a feeling of foreboding.

I suppose that about half an hour must have passed, and the old house seemed unusually silent, like a house that was holding its breath. Then I heard voices somewhere below, young Will’s voice and the girls’ voices, a half suppressed scream, a kind of muttering, someone sobbing. I lay stiff and terrified, and suddenly my terror turned to anger. If something had happened, why the hell didn’t they come and tell me? I raged out of bed, and to the head of the stairs, but I heard no voices now. There was utter silence.

I shouted, “Hallo, there! Where the devil are you all? Has Bill come back?”

Silence. I turned back for my dressing-gown, put it on, and had reached the stairs when I heard footsteps. They were familiar footsteps, deliberate, solid, and they belonged to Will. I seemed to divine the truth. Those three young things had rushed out to the old man who was my friend.

I stood gripping the banister rail, and shaking.

“That you, Will?”

“It be, ssir.”

He came to the foot of the stairs, his hat in his hand, and his face, with its dog’s eyes, somehow the face of doom.

“There’s bin an accident, ssir.”

“Mrs. Carey?”

“Yes, ssir.”

“That bomb?”

“Yes, ssir.”

“She’s dead?”

The brittle anguish in my voice seemed to strike Will’s face. He blinked, and winced.

“No, ssir, but——”

“Dying?”

“Terrible hurt, ssir. They’ve took her to the cottage hospital.”

I stood staring down at Will.

“Not her face, Will? Tell me, it’s not that.”

“No, they do say it be her back, ssir. The doctor’s with her. He’ll be coming up.”

I half tumbled down the stairs.

“Will, I must go to her. Tell Bill to get the small car round.”

I was leaning up against Will, and he had his arms round me. He withstood me; he bore me up.

“What can ’ee do, ssir? Leave she to the doctors. You ben’t fit.”

My face seemed to be in Will's beard. There was a buzzing in my ears, a blackness, a sense of things dissolving. They told me afterwards that I fainted, and that old Will and young Will had to carry me up the stairs. I was a heavy man, and it took them two minutes to do it.

I was up and dressed when Gibson came, and sitting by the parlour fire, feeling like a man must feel when waiting for the death sentence, for sentence of death it may be when your one most precious comrade passes out. All anger had gone from me. I was conscious of nothing but an infinite emptiness shot through with pangs of pity. How damned silly and fatuous the whole war seemed, just utter and miserable waste, a gangster's orgy, a sacrifice to the Swine God of Germany. Even if I had had one of those super-beasts in the room with me, and at the mercy of my naked hands, I don't think I should have touched him. Such unclean creatures do not seem worth touching when the thing you love lies dying.

Gibson came into the room with a face that looked both tight and crumpled. He did not comment upon my being up and dressed. This was a difficult business for him; it hung like a grey cloud in his eyes.

I was sorry for Gibson. I wanted to help him out.

"Any hope, Gib?"

He looked at me sharply, and then went and stood by the fire.

"Yes, some."

"What, exactly——?"

"Back, spine, low down, luckily. I'm trying to get Dyson down. Look here, Carey, can you stand a Dyson fee?"

"Damn it," said I, "I can stand anything, sell the whole place if it were necessary. You mean an operation?"

"Yes. Broken bone and pressure, you know. I'd put it to Dyson. He's not Citadel."

"Get him," said I, "whatever it costs."

"A hundred guineas, probably."

"What's it matter? Is there a chance?"

Gibson picked a cigarette out of our silver box, and lit it.

“A considerable chance, but——”

“But what?”

“I’m afraid she’ll be paralysed.”

“The legs?”

“Yes.”

“Permanently so.”

“No use blinking it, Carey. I’m afraid, yes.”

My anger began to return. It seemed such a monstrous thing that this strong and happy creature should be struck down into helplessness by some evil lout who looked on the distributing of death and anguish as a he-man’s game. Also, the prospect shocked me profoundly. My wife, even if she lived, a permanent invalid, perhaps bed-ridden! That strong, brave spirit a prisoner in the flesh!

“How utterly damnable. By God, if I could lay my hands on Hitler!”

“Same here, old man. I’d like to have him under the knife, without an anæsthetic. But what would you? That’s the exasperating part of it. We shall never be able to make that man writhe as he ought to writhe.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Is she conscious, Gibby?”

“Quite.”

“Then I can see her.”

He looked at me kindly.

“Let’s be honest, old man. I’d rather not. You see, when the flame’s so feeble.”

I felt desolate.

“Mayn’t I, just for a moment? I won’t say or do anything to——I just want to say——”

He watched me in silence.

“I want to say, though it sounds silly—‘You were my right hand. I’ll be your legs’.”

I looked up at Gibson. He was frowning and fiddling with his cigarette.

“Just that?”

“Just that, and no more. But perhaps she doesn’t realize. Would it be better to keep it from her?”

Gibson glanced at me with a little quip of a smile.

“Your wife’s the sort of woman you can’t keep things from. I think she knows.”

“Then I must say that to her, Gibby.”

“Yes, I think it’s good.”

He took me in his car, making me put on a scarf and my heaviest coat, and wrapping a rug round me. This man was kind and gentle and strong, and I knew now why people loved him. Fortunately a private room had been vacant in the Brandon cottage hospital, and my wife lay there with a screen round her bed.

I shall never forget the smell of the place. All hospitals smell like that, but this was a clean smell, and seemed to speak of help and healing. Gibson nodded the nurse out of the room, and went round the screen. I heard him say, “Grantie has just six words or so to say to you.”

He beckoned me, passed me and went to the door, and I took his place. I saw a white face, honey hair on the pillow, two beloved eyes.

I bent down and kissed my wife’s forehead.

“Beloved, you must stay with me. You were my right hand, you know. If needs be I’ll be your legs.”

I saw her eyes light up. Her pale lips moved.

“Darling, don’t be afraid.”

I felt that I was going to weep, so I kissed her again on the forehead and fled.

XXXVI

THEY operated on Phillida that same afternoon, for Gibby managed to get hold of Dyson on the phone, and that exasperating instrument and its sometimes exasperating attendants were kind to us. I had quite forgotten that I was supposed to be in bed. I sat by the parlour fire and waited, or walked up and down and looked out of the window. The world and its war seemed utterly unreal to me that day. I felt as though I was out of my body, and that natural things were unsubstantial. The only reality was the acute suspense that I suffered.

Dyson came up to see me. Gibson brought him in his car. He was a sallow little man in spectacles, not impressive to the eye, but when he began to speak he was a different person, deliberate, confident, kind. He stood on my hearthrug, and I could not help noticing his hands. They were very quiet hands, long fingered, delicate but strong.

“The news is good and bad, Mr. Carey.”

“Is my wife going to live?”

“In all human probability, yes, but——”

“That is all I need to know.”

The brown eyes behind the spectacles were searching and compassionate.

“You can stand the truth then?”

I nodded.

“I’m afraid the bomb splinter severed the spinal cord. The bones will unite, but——”

Again I nodded. I was seeing it all with strange and poignant vividness, the prone figure, the wheeled chair, the helpless trailing feet. That strong and vital body in chains, immobilized, tantalized. What a tragedy! And yet I had no fear. The love that was in me confronted a dozen pitiful problems and transcended them.

“You mean she will never walk again?”

“I’m afraid that is so. I may be wrong. I hope I am wrong.”

I believe I smiled at him.

“Well, I am a strongish beast; I shall have to carry her.”

I remember Gibson, who had been silent, coming across and putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Great stuff, old man. After all, the thing that matters is——”

He did not get any further, but became suddenly inarticulate and dumb. I was thinking. But of what was I thinking? A dozen different things. I remembered that I owed Dyson my gratitude and a fee, and I got up to get my cheque-book.

“I can’t say what I owe you both. But I owe you something else, Mr. Dyson. What is——”

He appeared to become stiff and formal.

“You mean my fee, Mr. Carey?”

“Yes.”

“Twenty-five guineas, and when you please.”

I looked at Gibson.

“I don’t think that you are——”

Gibson shook his head at me, and suddenly I understood and was silent. I went to my desk, found my cheque-book, and prepared to write.

“I’m sorry, but your initials, Doctor?”

“G. P.”

I wrote the cheque, put it in an envelope, and passed it to him almost apologetically.

“Just a bit of paper, sir. I owe you something that I can never repay.”

He looked me full in the face, and smiled.

“You can take your medicine, Mr. Carey. That’s good business.”

Weeks afterwards I was looking through my pass-book, and I found no record of my cheque having been passed through. Dyson must have torn it up. Most certainly he was not Citadel.

Did the prospect of a paralysed wife appal me? Frankly, it did, but my compassion was stronger than my fears, for it seemed to me such a pitiful thing that this vital creature should be doomed to lie through the rest of her

life with her back broken. The bones would unite, but the silver cord never. I knew that Dyson had been kind in telling me the worst. Yes, what problems confronted me! I could not sleep much that night, but lay and pondered those problems as they rose and gathered round my bed. I did know something about the daily devotion that was needed in the care of such cases, the helplessness, the ministrations, the washings and treatment of the skin, the danger of sores from constant pressure. How did I know all this? I cannot say. I must have read such a story somewhere in a book, but it all came to me vividly as I lay there in the darkness. But if love is lasting and profound, what of it?

Those damned German planes, the Birds of Evil, were passing overhead, but I don't think I heard them, or heard them in any way that mattered. What mattered was that the spirit of my wife would be with me, that brave spirit which now would have so much to bear. I should have her dear face, her eyes, her hair, her hands, all the essential goodness of her; and if life is more than the flesh, then Phillida would still be Phillida.

I am no hero, but vulgar man, yet I began to plan and contrive as I lay there. I had good people round me, loyal people, and I believed that they would not let us down. To Mary and Daisy Phillida would still be the beloved mistress, and perhaps more so. Women can be wondrous kind to each other. I should have to give more of my day and of myself to Phillida, contrive things for her, carry her with me, plan so that she could still share in Blackthorn's life.

I was at breakfast when the two girls came in, Mary first, Daisy following. That they had something important to say to me was evident.

“Can we see the mistress, sir?”

Mary had puffy eyes, but they were not the eyes of a girl who was going to rat on us.

“I'm afraid not, Mary. I doubt whether I shall be allowed to see her yet.”

“Is it true, sir, that she won't be able to walk any more?”

“The doctors fear so.”

Now, how had the girl learnt that? Had a soft heart been listening at keyholes?

Mary turned and looked at Daisy, and Daisy nodded.

“We’d like to say, sir, that we’ll do all we can. She’s been so good to us. She’s——”

“Thank you, my dears. I’m sure you will. We’re all friends, here, and that helps.”

Then, Mary burst into tears, and the more self-controlled Daisy put her arm round her and led her away, and I felt a little thick in the throat. Good girls, and God bless them. My wife’s bread would come back to her.

So too it was with Will. He had run the car out ready for me.

“Don’t ’ee fret about t’farm, ssir. I can look to things. You’ll be wanting to be more free, I reckon.”

I put my hand on Will’s shoulder.

“You are a good man, Will. I’ve blessed the day you came to me. And I shall bless it more.”

And the big old booby began to snivel.

“That it should happen to her, ssir, and she so pitiful to everybody.”

I got into the car, for all this emotion made me thick in the throat.

“We’ve all got to help her, Will.”

“We’ll do that, ssir, sure.”

They would not let me see my wife that morning. She was still somnolent after the anæsthetic and the dope that had been given her, and Gibson wanted her to lie like a fly in amber. I did not mind. I did not mind what was denied me for her sake. I asked the matron to give her a message, or rather I wrote it on a piece of paper and put it in an envelope.

Just three words—“I love you”.

Richenda came to see me that afternoon. She kissed me, and her, “My dear, don’t talk of it if you don’t want to”, made it easier for me to say what I had to say. Unhappy I might be, and yet exultant in my contriving tenderness, but I felt like a great lout of a fellow, and I wanted a woman, especially a woman like Richenda, to tell me things. She had tea with me in front of the parlour fire, and she listened to my rather disjointed confessions as to how I foresaw the future, and as to how one could best meet it, for

Phillida's sake. Richenda had been allowed to see Phillida for a minute, and when she told me this I was a little resentful.

She was pouring out a second cup for me.

"My dear, don't feel jealous. I don't matter to her as you do. That is why they let me see her."

"You mean, seeing me might upset her?"

"Go on with what you were telling me."

She listened, and when I had told her certain things, and that I did not fear the future for my own sake, but for Phillida's, and that the essential person called Phillida would be with me in every corner of our lives, she held up a hand and stopped me.

"Is that how you see her, Grant?"

"Why, yes."

"Not as a poor paralytic, but as someone who is going to share everything, if perhaps, a little differently?"

"Why, of course. My darling's face and eyes and self will be there, and her courage and her cleverness. I shall just have to take her about with me."

"Not grow impatient and shut her out of your life? Remember, every day she will be——"

She paused, and I did not quite get her meaning.

"She will be wanting to share?"

"She will be a little afraid."

And suddenly I understood and the shock of it caught me like a spasm.

"Good God, you mean, she will be afraid of my becoming——"

"Bored, my dear, and impatient. And she will feel so very helpless, and perhaps because of her fear and her love for you, she would hide things, not complain. But she would watch for that fatal day when she might see you resenting her helplessness."

"Good God," I said again, "that will never happen."

"Are you so sure, my dear?"

"Sure? Why, what a poor, cheap beast I should be! I'm as sure as I have no fingers on this hand. Did she fail me then?"

Richenda put her cup down on the tray.

“You are a good man, Aloysius Grant Carey. Come and kiss me.”

All this must sound very sentimental to the little clever people, but perhaps I was more than a poor ass in blinkers fooled by the carrot of faith in the essential beneficence of things. I have come to believe that as you make your garden, so you create your life. There is the ground plan, the permanent setting, form and background that are more or less changeless, trees, grass, hedges, old walls, a statue, a stone path, flowering shrubs, a sundial on a pedestal. Your flower beds are the colours with which you play, lovely but not lasting, like a mood or a fancy. You spread these colours on your palette, and they may represent the emotions, temperamental tints and perfumes or whatever your fancy may choose to call them, but the essential planning and order of your garden is the frame of the picture, and the picture. It must have balance, proportion, rhythm, restraint, subtlety that may ape simplicity, and if your scheme of living has been conceived and carried out like this, you may count yourself among the wise.

I walked round the farm on the morning before I went down to see Phillida. The news of her was good, and this little world of ours seemed fair to me. It had soil and sap, meaning, usefulness, a beauty that was rooted in the earth. No poor brick and mortar world this. Winter might be with us, and the Evil Wings of a Black Monster, but spring would come and corn grow, and my beloved be spared to me with voice and eyes and soul. What else, in the name of the good God, mattered?

I was shown into the waiting-room of the cottage hospital and there the matron came to me. She was a protégé of Richenda's, even as the hospital itself had been a Furnival inspiration. She was of a pleasant plainness, ample, wholesome and cheerful, and I could tell by her bright face that the news was good.

“Dr. Gibson has just been, Mr. Carey. He says you can see Mrs. Carey for five minutes.”

“That means——?”

“A good night, no temperature.”

“Thank God,” said I.

She crinkled up her kind eyes at me.

“Shall I tell you when the time is up?”

“No, I’m a responsible person. I’ll keep an eye on my watch.”

There was no screen round the bed this morning, and I saw my wife’s hands come out to me. They were live hands, and to me like birds flying back over dark waters. I kissed Phillida’s hands, and I kissed her forehead, and then I knelt down beside the bed. She had a cradle over her to take the weight of the clothes.

We looked at each other in silence. And then I saw something in my wife’s eyes, something deep down in them that moved me to quick compassion. Phillida was afraid. Phillida had been confronting the future.

“You mustn’t think that,” said I.

“Think what, Grantie?”

“Just that.”

Her eyelids flickered, and her forehead puckered. I passed a caressing hand over her forehead.

“Take that away. No need for it.”

“You mean, darling?”

“You leave the thinking to me. I have got all sorts of plans, a new kind of game for both of us.”

She caught my maimed paw and held it.

“Oh, my dear, I’m going to be such an incubus.”

“Nonsense, darling. Who taught Tom Thumb to carry on? I’ve got you, and we’ve both got life. But don’t think, Phill, that I don’t feel what frightens you. It’s damnable and cruel and hard, but if I can’t make some of it good to you then I must be a poor, rotten creature.”

She closed her eyes, and held on to my hand.

“Are you sure, Grantie?”

“Quite sure.”

“Oh, but, my dear, it’s going to try you. Let’s face the reality. When I knew, I wished to die.”

“And the one thing I did wish was for you to live.”

“Like this?”

“Why, of course! It’s going to give me a great game to play, and tricks to learn. Aren’t you still you?”

She opened her eyes at me.

“I’ll try so hard not to be a bother.”

“What if I should like the bother as you call it?”

“But, months, years!”

“I’m a rather simple, affectionate sort of ass. Hasn’t the land taught one certain things.”

She pulled my head down to hers.

“You’re good soil, dear comrade.”

I do not suppose that there was a more healthy woman in the kingdom than Phillida. Dyson had done his job well, and thanks to excellent nursing and her own courage and sound texture, my wife’s wound healed, and there were no complications. But I knew that all that part of her below the pelvis was brittle china, and that she would have to be kept in cotton wool. I was using my wits while she was at Brandon. I had to persuade our old evacuees to go elsewhere, for the downstairs room would be my wife’s, since stairs were out of the question. I had the sash window taken out and replaced by a french window so that her chair could be wheeled in and out of the garden. I had a new path laid from her window to the gate. I did not tell her when I drove up to bombed London, and found in Wigmore Street the shop that could supply all that I needed, a long wheeled chair, special mattresses, an adjustable bed-rest, a swing-table with a stand for a book. I did not see much of devastated London, for I’ll admit that I was completely windy, and in no mood to loiter, for I was feeling horribly responsible about my new job. If I got knocked out by a chance bomb, what would happen to her? I had started at eight in the morning, and in spite of two air-raid alerts, I was home again by twelve. No one knew where I had been, and I did not tell them.

I knew that expert nursing was to be an urgent necessity. I talked the matter over with Mary. Trained nurses were difficult to come by, and the expense would be heavy, nor did I feel that I wanted a permanent nurse hovering around the house. Mary was only too ready to help. I went to see Richenda and the matron, and they arranged for Mary to go down to Brandon every day for practical instruction in the routine handling of such a case. I knew I could do the lifting, but I thought that there were things that a

girl could do for a woman, which to a fastidious creature like Phillida, would better be left to a woman's hands. She would have to be washed and dressed most carefully, and wrinkles and all foreign substances kept out of the sheets. She would need simple massage for her muscles. On no account must the skin be allowed to become inflamed and to break.

Richenda managed to buy three silk nightgowns for her, or said that she bought them. I discovered later that they were a present from a little hoard of luxuries she had in store.

Dyson came down twice to see his patient, and I met him at the hospital. He was both a tired and a tense man these days, for he was overworked and under nightly strain in London. When I asked him whether he could give me any hope of Phillida recovering the use of her legs, he snapped at me,

“None at all, Carey. The spinal cord was pulp.”

I felt how it was with him, and I confessed that I did still hope that some life might return to her legs. I did not want to worry him, but when could I move Phillida to Blackthorn?

He lit a cigarette and I noticed that his clever hands betrayed a slight tremor. Dyson was living on his nerves, but he was a man determined to stick it out.

“I suppose you have some idea, Carey, of the problem before you?”

I told him what I had done, the preparations I had made, even to the training of Mary. He looked at me consideringly, and sniffed the smoke from his cigarette.

“Sorry I was a bit sharp, Carey, but——”

“I know. You must be having a devil of a time.”

“Yes, rather. Our hospital was hit last week. But to return to the case in point, you seem to be a capable sort of cove. Thought of most things, apparently.”

Even in Dyson I could discover the passing of all pose. He spoke in the vernacular, and professionalism had departed even from Harley Street. We, all of us, were more male, and had cut out the feminine pretty-pretty.

“Well, you see, sir, when one cares rather much, it seems to stimulate your ingenuity.”

“Good man. You can take her home next week. Women seem to be happier at home.”

“I hope she will be.”

I do not think any house ever prepared itself more whole-heartedly for the return of the mistress than did Blackthorn. The girls had collected all Phillida’s particular treasures, her dressing-table, mirror and trinket boxes, even her shoes and her frocks. There were flowers all over the place, and a fire well up the chimney. The bed-table stood by the bed. There were gay, flowery curtains over the new french window to mask the blackout, and a new eiderdown quilt on the bed. I had housed and concealed the long wheeled chair in the kitchen, for I did not think this tribute to her helplessness would be a happy welcome.

Phillida was to come to us for tea. I walked down into Brandon, and found the ambulance ready outside the hospital. The whole staff seemed to be in Phillida’s room, for, as always, she had made and gathered good friends round her. The nurse in charge was coming with us to help put my wife to bed. She was a rather autocratic young woman, and I can remember her saying to Mary, “Mind, the water-bottle must never be too hot”, and Mary’s flushed flash-back, “I’m not a nit-wit, Nurse, thank you.” I felt rather one of a crowd, or like the stage-father at a christening, and I was glad when we had my wife on her stretcher in the ambulance. I sat on the bunk opposite her beside the authoritative nurse, who was not a woman who could remain silent, and like Mary I wanted to flash out at her.

“Now, Mrs. Carey, do remember——”

I saw my wife wince. This was her home-coming, and she did not ask for her helplessness to be emphasized. I’m afraid I snubbed the young woman.

“I’ll do the remembering, Nurse,” and I wanted to add, “This is a festival, not a funeral.”

We might have been the hero and heroine returning to the ancestral home after the honeymoon, for all our retainers were waiting for us. There was a happy air of affectionate fuss. Will assumed it to be his right to help the ambulance man in with the stretcher.

“Well, Will, it is good to see you again.”

“We’ve bin aching to have you back, madam.”

Old Will was so natural with his Madam, and gave it Phillida as her due. The two girls were fluttering round her. I saw Mary and the nurse barter hostile glances. Young Will stood a little aloof, wearing his best suit and a bright blue shirt, and the air of a rustic Hamlet, for Will had become a very serious young man deeply concerned with the wickedness of the world and the ugly face modernity had given it. Will was something of a poet, the dark child to whom beauty and the beast were vivid verities. He stood and gazed upon Phillida as though he saw her as a symbol, Dea Mater wounded by the vulgar hand of the world's superlative lout.

I walked backwards into the room, watching my wife's face and the stretcher. I was ready to guide it, but there was no need for me to fuss. I heard the nurse ask, "Is there a bottle in the bed?" and Mary's retort, "We grow heads in this house, Nurse." The room was bright and warm and flowery, and as I watched my wife's face I saw it light up. She smiled, but I think her smile was near to tears.

We men left the women to put her to bed. I had arranged to sleep on the parlour floor, so that I should be near to Phillida if she needed me in the night. I offered the ambulance driver a mug of beer, and he did not refuse it, though he admitted that he was not supposed to drink while on duty. I went down to the cellar to draw it for him, and bumping my head on the particular beam that lurked for the chance of working off its joke on a man of my size, I said "Damn" gently and contentedly. The driver drank his beer in the kitchen, but he kept an eye on the passage, and the possible appearance of the nurse.

"Good luck, sir."

"Cheerio," said I, "don't worry about the lady."

He winked at me.

"Bit spiteful and bossy some of these wenches, sir. If you ask me I'd say that women have been getting too much rope. Sort of running the show."

"Why not flourish that mug in her face?"

"Mug to mug, sir! That's an idea."

I heard Phillida's door open, but my hero held his ground, and it was only Daisy who came to us.

"I'm getting tea, sir. The mistress says——"

"Yes, I'll have mine with her, Daisy."

“Nurse says she’s ready to leave.”

“Righto,” said the hero, and tipped the last of the beer down his throat.

I carried in the tea-tray and placed it on the table by the bed. There were scones fat with butter, our butter which we were not permitted to sell. Phillida was lying flat with her hair in a lace cap; she looked a little flushed, and her eyes were bright, and her lips like rich red fruit.

“My sweet, how lovely you look.”

She put out a hand, and I kissed it.

“You look happy, Grantie.”

“Happy! Of course I’m happy.”

“My dearest dear. It’s good to be back.”

I was preparing to serve her, and then I voted myself a complete ass. How could a person lying flat in bed drink comfortably out of a cup? All of us had forgotten that.

“Silly fool,” said I. “Wait a moment, darling.”

I barged into the kitchen where the whole staff were gathered round the fire like a small crowd loitering to gossip after a procession has passed.

“Oh, Mary,” said I; “we’ve forgotten something. Can you find a small teapot?”

“Teapot, sir?”

“Yes, you see, we ought to have had a feeding-cup ready.”

Mary appeared to make a noise with her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“Tach! Of course. Glad Miss Nosy Parker didn’t catch us out over that. I’ll get one, sir.”

“I suppose one couldn’t buy a feeding-cup in Brandon?”

“Not likely. Wait a bit, there’s the new chemists at Whitebeam. I’ll go down there after tea.”

Phillida smiled at me when I returned with the teapot.

“Poor lamb, I must have caused you much guessing.”

“Guessing’s a good game when it is played with a purpose.”

“Was this table one of your guesses?”

“It was.”

“And the lovely mattress I’m lying on?”

“Yes.”

“And the flowers?”

“That was the girls. Guess what’s behind the curtains.”

“New too? Well, I suppose a window.”

In defiance of the blackout I went and pulled back both sets of curtains and showed her the french window.

“Easy to get in and out.”

There was a slight frown on her forehead.

“Darling, you think of everything, but——”

“Oh, your state chariot’s all ready. Where I go, you go, you know. And I have an idea about the van. If we rigged up a sort of couch in it, we could do our rounds together.”

I passed her the scones, and swung the table across the bed, with her plate and improvised feeding-cup on it.

“Grantie,” said she, “you won’t ever feel, will you, that you are trailing a dead thing round with you?”

I bent down and kissed her.

“It simply couldn’t be possible for me to feel like that.”

I was sitting by the fire, and I had turned the bed-lamp so that the light was not on her face.

“Smoke your pipe,” she said.

“Not in your room, Phill.”

“Oh, please.”

“But with you sleeping here!”

“My dear, I haven’t had the smell of a pipe for weeks. Do you think I expect you to sit in the passage?”

“What about a cigarette?”

“I’d love one.”

I brought the box into her room and parked it on the bed-table with matches and ashtray.

“Well, if you foul the air too, my sweet, I don’t mind. I have just started two new pipes, so they won’t reek.”

She lit her cigarette, and I could see her savouring it.

“Grantie.”

“Yes.”

“Where are you sleeping?”

“In the parlour just across the way. I have a nice bed on the floor. Not funk, my sweet, but just to be near in case you want me.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, “You are rather a wonderful person, dear man.”

I laughed.

“Well, that’s splendid, isn’t it? Just what a man wants, you know. We are rather like vain little boys who must show off.”

She laughed with me, and her laughter was good.

“Is that woman’s part in the new world?”

“Not completely so, I think. I’ll tell you what the ambulance driver said.”

“And what did he say?”

“That women had got too busy, and seemed to think they were running the whole show. Treating man, you know, like an urchin who has to be asked whether he has washed his neck and cleaned his teeth. Funny, but that bears out what I read in an extract from an American magazine.”

“What was that?”

“That France, and England and the U.S.A. less so, had gone soft and feminine. Germany, of course, had gone too much male. Something in it, I think.”

She laid the stub of her cigarette aside.

“Ought I to drop this?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Tell me, Grantie, have I ever been like that to you?”

“Well, no, I think we have managed to strike a pretty good balance, moderation, compromise, the middle of the road; dull but workable!”

“I have never felt dull.”

“Nor I.”

She held out a hand.

“Move the table and come and sit by me, Grantie. That’s good. Hold my hand.”

I held it.

“Let’s try and do as much as we can together, dear. Don’t cut me out of things. I’ll think you wonderful, and say so, but, oh, my darling, I don’t want to be a dead thing. I shall want to help, I shall want it terribly.”

I bent over and kissed her.

“I know that I shall want you to do everything with me.”

Presently, that other sound came to us as we sat in that pleasant room, with the fire burning brightly, and the soft colours gently glowing. Phillida’s hand was still in mine, and I felt her fingers contract in a sudden spasm. Had this tragedy of hers burned fear into her, a fear that was organic and inevitable? I was conscious of a sudden groping within myself for the right answer to this accursed thing. One should not frown and tremble as those evil men wished us to tremble, but look skywards and laugh, and cry, “You wait, you blighter. We’re preparing for your ultimate education. You wait!”

I turned to Phillida.

“Here comes the Hiccoughing Hun!”

She too had been listening, with fixed eyes and a little knotted shadow on her brows. It was not fear perhaps, but the fine lines drawn by vague apprehension and strain, yet when I got out that phrase I saw her eyes light up, and her mouth grow live.

“What a lovely phrase, Grantie! Where did you get it?”

“Just made it up.”

I laughed, and she laughed with me.

“Yes, we shouldn’t let ourselves be put down by the wretches. I’m not afraid, dear.”

“He won’t drop one here,” said I. “We’ve had our packet. He may have dropped us a pamphlet, but our lads are going to unload whole parcels on him. The literature of the new education.”

She drew my hand to her, and pressed it against her cheek.

“You are a stout old thing. I shan’t mind anything so long as we are together.”

“Well, there won’t be anything to mind, because we are always going to be together. You’ll come out into the fields with me, and out on the roads. You’ll arrange flowers, and shell peas, and keep the accounts, and mend my darned old socks. I’ve thought it all out. Why, if I put you between the raspberry canes in a hand-propelled pram you could pick fruit. There are dozens of things I want you to do, dozens of ’em. Above all, my sweet, I want your headpiece and your courage, and your lovely nature. That’s what is behind me and Blackthorn.”

She held my hand to her cheek.

“You are a wonderful person, Grantie.”

“I’m just what you’ve made me, my dear.”

Later, when I went out to make my round I found the stars shining in a frosty sky, and threading them like some invisible and evil thread was the sound of a German plane. “Oh, go to hell,” I said, “to the place where you and your super-blackguards belong, and where we are going to put you in the end.” And I laughed. I had a torch with me, and I switched it on and waved it at the sky. “Sucks to you, you lout!” What if young Will, who was up on the Downs on duty with his Home Guard post, saw that little point of light, and fell in fury upon the suspicion that some traitor was selling England? Well, such fury was good and wholesome, and it would give them something to get busy about, and to gossip over in the pubs.

I made my round, and found that all was quiet and secure. So, must many a husbandman have made his round, with lantern or torch, or by the light of nature. I was part of an old and steadfast world, part of time. This

little valley would be here, fruitful and good, long after my feet had passed, and the evil genius of man had tired of its foul new toys.

I returned to the house, and stood in the garden, with my back to the french window. The plane had passed, and peace reigned upon the earth and amid the stars. And I thought, "What of the future? What of her poor, broken body, and my love? Am I afraid?"

I was not afraid. An indescribable calmness descended upon me. It was as though I felt God in the heavens.

"Be not afraid, my son," said He, "love casteth out fear and evil."

I turned to the porch of my house and opened the door. I had more than a feeling that she and I would find our way together, stricken though she might be in a world that was in travail.

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE DARK HOUSE

DOOMSDAY

THE MAN WHO WENT BACK

SORRELL AND SON

SHABBY SUMMER

SUVLA JOHN

FANTASIA

THREE ROOMS

THE MALICE OF MEN

THE SECRET SANCTUARY

THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR

ORCHARDS

BLIND MAN'S YEAR

LANTERN LANE

NO HERO—THIS

SECOND YOUTH

SACKCLOTH INTO SILK

COUNTESS GLIKA

TWO IN A TRAIN

UNREST

THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE

THE PRIDE OF EVE

SEVEN MEN CAME BACK

THE KING BEHIND THE KING

TWO BLACK SHEEP

THE HOUSE OF SPIES

SMITH

SINCERITY

OLD WINE AND NEW

FOX FARM

THE ROAD

BESS OF THE WOODS

SHORT STORIES

THE RED SAINT

EXILES

THE SLANDERERS

ROPER'S ROW

THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT

OLD PYBUS

A WOMAN'S WAR

KITTY

VALOUR

BERTRAND OF BRITTANY

JOAN OF THE TOWER

UTHER AND IGRAINE

MARTIN VALLIANT

THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE

THE RUST OF ROME

THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE

THE WHITE GATE

APPLES OF GOLD

THE SEVEN STREAMS

THE LAME ENGLISHMAN

MAD BARBARA

MARRIAGE BY CONQUEST

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

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.

[The end of *Corn in Egypt* by Warwick Deeping]