



THIRTY
CLOCKS
STRIKE THE
HOUR

V. SACKVILLE
WEST



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THIRTY CLOCKS
STRIKE THE HOUR

And Other Stories

By
V. Sackville-West



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CONTENTS

THIRTY CLOCKS STRIKE THE HOUR

[3](#)

THE DEATH OF NOBLE GODAVARY

[17](#)

GOTTFRIED KÜNSTLER

[149](#)

THE POET

[215](#)

POMODORO

[233](#)

ELIZABETH HIGGINBOTTOM

[251](#)

UP JENKINS

[267](#)

AN UNBORN VISITANT

[283](#)

THIRTY CLOCKS
STRIKE THE HOUR



THIRTY CLOCKS STRIKE THE HOUR

I REMEMBER being taken to visit my great-grandmother.

This is no story. It is a recollection—a reconstruction. A wish to give shape to a fading impression at the back of my mind before that impression should become irrecoverable. It is not only a personal impression, it is an impression in a wider sense, of an age that I saw in the act of passing.

She lived in Paris, in an unfashionable quarter. Hers was a vast corner house on the Boulevard des Italiens; I remember I used to count the row of windows, and there were twenty each way, twenty looking on the boulevard, and twenty on the narrow side street. There was a vast porte-cochère in the side street; one rang the bell, the concierge pulled a string, the door clicked on its latch, and one pushed one's way through, into the central courtyard, where a great business of washing carriages always seemed to be going on; a business of mops and immense quantities of water and grooms clacking round in wooden clogs; patches of sunlight, birdcages hanging in the windows, and girls arriving with parcels. All round the courtyard dwelt an indeterminate population, for portions of the upper floors were let out in flats, but these tenants were kept severely in their place, nor did I ever hear any save one, Mme Jacquemin, referred to by name. Consequently they existed for me in a cloud of alluring and tantalizing mystery, so that I spent hours inventing the inner drama of their families, and wondering what they did when they wanted to play the piano, and how they managed their exits and their entrances. I was sure that none of them would dare risk an encounter with my great-grandmother, their landlady, who occupied the whole of the first floor.

The staircase was very dark and grand. One arrived on the first-floor landing, already awed into a suitable frame of mind. Of course the bell was not electric; one pulled a cord, which produced a jangle within. The door was

opened, with a miraculous promptitude, before the jangle had ceased, by either Jacques or Baptiste in white cotton gloves, white-whiskered and respectfully benevolent; at least, Baptiste was quite definitely benevolent, and often dandled me in secret on his knee, giving me meanwhile brandy cherries rolled in pink sugar, and murmuring confidences about his daughter, who had been guilty of some misdemeanour forever and perhaps fortunately enigmatic to me; but the benevolence of Jacques I had to take on trust, on the general principle that all the retainers in that house were benevolent. For Jacques was outwardly *grincheux*. In appearance he was like an old whiskered chimpanzee, and his hands, which I once saw denuded of their cotton gloves, were hairy. I never heard him make but one statement about his private life, but that statement he made with great frequency: “*Moi, j’ai mes cent sous par jour, et je me fiche du Pape.*” Whence Jacques got his “*cent sous,*” and what the Pope had to do with it, I never discovered.

But I linger too long in the antechamber, where Jacques or Baptiste closed the door behind one and relieved one of one’s parcels or one’s umbrella.

Great-grandmother’s apartment was on what in an Italian palace would be called the “*piano nobile.*”

This meant that, standing in the last doorway, one could see right down the vista of rooms; that is to say, down the rooms represented by the twenty windows on the side street, until the flat turned the corner and took on a new lease of life represented by the twenty windows on the boulevard.

It was an impressive vista. Parquet floors, ivory woodwork, tarnished gilding—it seemed they must be reflected in a halfway mirror, so endlessly did they continue. I was irreverent, of course. Whenever I thought great-grandmother safe in her bedroom, I used to slide along the parquet, or, more irreverent still, get her wheeled chair out of the dining room and trundle myself down the vista. I shiver now to think of the bruised paint and dented ormolu that must have marked my progress—for, unlike great-grandmother’s stately advance in the wheeled chair, my one idea was to go as fast as I could. But what did I know then of the privilege that was mine in being admitted to that beautiful house? Small and clean, with painfully frizzed hair, I would stand by, very bored, while visitors marvelled at the furniture under the direction of great-grandmother’s stick. Louis Quatorze, Louis Quinze, Louis Seize, Directoire, Empire—all these were names, half meaningless, which I absorbed till they became as familiar as bread, milk, water, butter. Empire came last on the list; for the life of the house seemed to have stopped there. As the door of the antechamber closed behind you, the gulf of a century opened, and you stood on the further side.

True, there was the noise of Paris without, motors, and motor horns, and clanging bells; when you opened the window, the roar of the boulevard came in like a great sea; but within the flat, when the windows were shut, there were silence and silken walls, and a faint musty smell, and the shining golden floors, and the dimness of mirrors, and the curve of furniture, and the arabesques of the dull gilding on the ivory *boiserie*. There was an old stately peace never broken by the ring of a telephone; shadows never startled by the leap of electric light. It seemed that the flat itself, rather than its occupant, had refused to accept the modifications of a new century. It had enshrined itself in the gravity and beauty of a courtly age, until the day when its very masonry should go down in ruin before the mattocks of the house-breakers.

Given up to its dream, in a sumptuous melancholy ennobled by the inexorable menace of its eventual end, few were aware of the existence of this fragment intact in the heart of Paris. A little museum, said the connoisseurs; but they were wrong. It was no museum, for it had preserved its life; its appointments had never been deposed from their proper use to the humiliation of a display for the curious; chairs that should, said the connoisseurs, have stood ranged behind the safety of red ropes, carried the weight of the living as well as the ghosts of the dead; the sconces and the chandeliers still came to life each evening under the flame of innumerable candles. It was then that I liked the flat best. It was then that its gilding and its shadows leapt and flickered most suggestively as the little pointed flames swayed in the draught, and that the golden floors lay like pools reflecting the daggers of the lights. It was then that I used to creep on stockinged feet to the end of the long vista, a scared adventurer in the hushed palace of Sleeping Beauty, and it was on such an evening that I saw my great-grandmother, as I most vividly remember her, coming towards me, from the length of that immeasurable distance, tiny, bent, and alone.

She was a rude, despotic old materialist, without an ounce of romance or fantasy in her body, but to me that night she was every malevolent fairy incarnate, more especially that disgruntled one who had so disastrously attended Sleeping Beauty's christening. I had often been frightened of her tongue; that night I was frightened of her magic. I stood transfixed, incapable of the retreat for which I still had ample time. I remember being wildly thankful that I had on, at least, a clean pinafore. Very slowly she advanced, propped upon her stick, all in black beneath the candles, pausing now and then to look about her, as though she welcomed this escape from the aged servants who usually attended her, or from the guests, deferential but inquisitive, who came, as she shrewdly knew, to boast afterwards of their admission into this almost legendary fastness. I realized that she had not yet caught sight of me,

white blot though I must have been at the end of that shadowy aisle of rooms.

Very leisurely she was, savouring the wealth of her possessions, stealing out of her room when no one knew that she was abroad; as clandestine, really, as I myself—and suddenly I knew that on no account must she learn the presence of an eavesdropper. It was no longer fear that prompted me to slip behind the curtain looped across the last door; it was a desperate pity; pity of her age, I suppose, pity of her frailty, pity of her as the spirit of that house, stubborn in the preservation of what was already a thing of the past, whose life would go out with hers; it was her will alone that kept the house together, as it was her will alone that kept the breath fluttering in her body. What thoughts were hers as she lingered in her progress I cannot pretend to tell; I only know that to me she was a phantom, an evocation, a symbol, although, naturally, being but a child, I gave her no such name. To me, at the moment, she was simply a being so old and so fragile that I half expected her to crumble into dust at my feet.

She crossed the dining room and passed me, flattened against the wall and trying to cover the white of my pinafore with a fold of the curtain; so close she passed to me, that I observed the quiver of her fine hands on the knob of her stick and the transparency of the features beneath the shrouding mantilla of black lace. I wondered what her errand might be, as she stood, so bent and shrunken, beneath the immense height of the ballroom. But it was evident that errand she had none. She stood there quietly surveying, almost as though she took a protracted and contemplative farewell, all unaware of the eyes of youth that spied upon her. Her glance roamed round, with satisfaction, I thought, but whether with satisfaction at the beauty of the room, or at having kept off for so long the tides that threatened to invade it, I could not tell.

Then, as she stood there, the clocks in the room began to strike the hour. There were thirty clocks in the room—I had often counted them—big clocks, little clocks, wall clocks, table clocks, grandfather clocks, and even a clock with a musical box in its intestines; and it was a point of honour with Baptiste that they should all strike at the same moment. So now they began; first the deep note of the buhl clock in the corner, then the clear ring of a little Cupid hitting a hammer on a bell, then a rumble and a note like a mastiff baying, then a gay trill, then the first bars of a chime, then innumerable others all joining in, till the room was filled with the music of the passing hour, and my great-grandmother standing in the middle, listening, listening. . . . I could see her face, for her head was lifted, and her expression was a thing I shall never forget, so suddenly lighted up was it; so pleased; so gallant; so, even, amused. She had, I think, her private joke and understanding with the clocks. The little

flames of the candles quivered in the vibration of the air, but as the last notes died away they steadied again, like a life which has wavered for an instant, only to resume with a strengthened purpose. And as the silence fluttered down once more, my great-grandmother drooped from her strange, humorous ecstasy, and it was as a little figure bent and tired that I saw her retrace her steps down the long vista of the lighted rooms.

THE DEATH OF NOBLE
GODAVARY



THE DEATH OF NOBLE GODAVARY

1. Monday

AT SEVEN o'clock on Monday evening my solicitors informed me by telephone of the death of my uncle Noble Godavary. They expressed their regret at the lateness and the delay, yet at the same time deferentially suggested that should I wish to take advantage of the midnight express I might find myself in the North by the following morning. My ear to the receiver, as I listened to this prescribing of my plans, I discovered that one's resentment of family claims is at least as strong as the bond which secures one to them. Nevertheless, this intervention tuned in with my inclination. For some weeks in the past a restlessness had possessed me, a floating desire to absent myself from London, but I had been too indolent to organize my departure, too diffident even to ask for the necessary permission at my office; the formula had hovered in my mind, had indeed tickled my tongue a score of times a day, whenever an errand carried me into my chief's presence—"Oh, by the way, would it be convenient for me to take a week off?"—ready-made words, but for some reason I could not bring myself to pronounce them; I had always gone back to my table to dream idly of sea or heather through the routine of work which continued to occupy my outward attention. And now, after three weeks of this hesitation, an unseen voice coming to me over the wires was forcing me into the decision I had been unable to make. I listened, nodding my head in that futile way one uses towards a telephone, and noting left-handed upon the blotting paper the hours of trains read out to me by the unseen voice from Bradshaw. The ravens had provided once more; I had, on the whole, throughout my life found them trustworthy birds. There remained now but little for me to do: a note to my chief, a telegram to the Grange, a few necessaries bundled into a bag, and I was in the street, my own shadow repeatedly overtaking me, racing on in front, and falling again behind as I hurried along the pavement beneath the lamps.

Certainly among my vague plans of holiday that of returning to my old home had played no part. Many years had passed since I had left my native fells, so many years that I had long ago ceased to remember them as native. I thought of myself as a Cockney now, with a Cockney's idea of holiday; Cornwall, perhaps, or the Norfolk Broads; the last thing I had ever considered was a return to the dales where the figurehead that was my uncle had remained immovable though the members of his family were scattered separate and wide. A close little knot of people we had been once, so close through the ties of blood and of locality that I dare swear the inner landscapes of our minds were interchangeable with no difference perceptible to us. Yes, I might have found myself suddenly at the kernel of my cousin's mind, or my uncle's, or my brother's, and looked around me, and recognized the same scenery, the same fragrance, the same population, the same shapes and trends and proportions, as I was accustomed to dwell among in my own mind. Neither sex nor generation could vary the cast. I would go further: I would say that, had I been translated into the consciousness of a forbear, I should still have moved easily among the old familiarities. The dale had enclosed us; a single road led us into the heart of the dale, but there it stopped, and no road led away. There were only the sheep tracks by which we might penetrate deeper into the hills, but even these tracks led nowhere; either they faded out and were lost, or else they doubled upon themselves and brought the walker back to the point of his departure. And so with our thoughts; they strayed like the tracks, abortive, or doubled back, and left the thinker with no gain, but only the profitless fatigue. My hatred of the dale, as I believed it to be, came back to me as I remembered. It surprised me, moreover, to find how fresh and ready within me were those memories; the five and twenty years gone by since I had left the dale shrank to a day. This frightened and angered me, for I had not grasped until that moment how inescapably I was part of that place. My years of life as a man, then, were so blotted out, and the significance of my boyhood alone remained? alone was permanent? wasted, the intervening years? If a long-drawn homesickness had roped me to the dale, I could have understood better, but I had always been as thankful to remain away as I had been thankful to leave.

I went back to thinking of the close knot we had once been, a small tribe, with our dependents and our dogs, and that interchangeable landscape of mind. Not love had bound us, any more than love now bound me to the dale. Since our disintegration we had all lost sight of one another, but if I speculated as to the differences we all should find, still more did I speculate as to the bonds which should catch us up again into their coils.

2. Tuesday

AT KENDAL, where my train halted in the gray young hours of the morning, I was able to get a local paper. My uncle's death, of course, had been announced in another issue, but I found a kind of obituary notice in the shape of a letter headed:

THE LATE MR. GODAVARY

"A correspondent writes:

"As one who had been for many years closely associated with the late magistrate, I may perhaps be permitted to contribute a slight sketch of one who, though perhaps not very well known outside his own district, was within those limits universally respected and esteemed by his neighbours and friends."

Irritated, I exclaimed to myself that, as for neighbours, there were none within miles of the dale; as for friends, that lonely old wolf, my uncle, never had any; and as for respect and esteem, if Noble Godavary with his sly cowardly ways could delude men into respect and esteem, why, then, there was a chance for all of us. I read on, but the words had no more meaning than a tombstone epitaph. My mind skidded over the glib, accustomed words. *"The late gentleman, despite his age and the difficulties of the roads, was regular in his attendance at church."* May it profit him, I exclaimed, for I was out of patience both with my uncle and with the writer. *"Noble Godavary,"* the letter continued, *"was incidentally one of the best-looking men it has ever been my good fortune to meet. Tall and fine, with an old-eagle face, he affected a dress which was in keeping with his appearance while yet avoiding the charge of eccentricity. Those who have seen him, with his tartan stock, his riding breeches and gaiters, his suggestion of side whiskers, and his Glengarry bonnet, will not readily forget one who recalled that fast-disappearing type, the statesman of nineteenth-century England."*

I subscribed willingly to all this, much as I disliked the *Kendal Messenger's* vapid correspondent and his ready tumble into convenient journalese, for as I remembered my uncle he was indeed a lean and picturesque old man, and the comparison with the nineteenth-century statesman was not ill applied. The mutton-chop whiskers and the stock were no doubt chiefly responsible for this effect, but there had been something in the aquilinity of the features and in the assured carriage of the head that deepened the impression beyond the aid of mere externals. I softened towards him as I revived the memory of his good looks. But not for long. They had been fraudulent, like everything else about him; they had belied the man, had abetted him

throughout the whole of his hypocritical existence, had made easy for him his pious insincerity. Here was the *Kendal Messenger* writing up his devotion as a justice of the peace, his regular attendance at church, his “*type of the old English squire*”; all of which was, as to facts, indisputable, but as to the spirit completely misleading. Yet none, not even I, not even any member of his family, who knew him as we all knew ourselves, with secrecy and shame and disguise, none could have risen in the pulpit or by the grave to destroy the facts with a subtler knowledge. Perhaps even, so thorough had been the fraud, perhaps even Noble Godavary had deceived himself.

Be that as it may—and my own inclination was to believe it—he had very completely deceived the correspondent of the *Kendal Messenger*. “*An exemplary landlord,*” said the letter, “*neither the poor nor the unfortunate ever appealed in vain to his charity. Where crops or flocks had failed, or in any case of genuine distress, the tenant knew that payment of his rent might be deferred or even remitted, the shepherd knew that gifts of game from the Grange would relieve the penury of his family. The local hospital, on whose board of directors he sat as a prominent member, benefitted not only by the generosity of his purse but by the produce of his preserves and his kitchen garden. His sympathy and his income were ever at the service of those who claimed them. None ever found him otherwise than leisurely and courteous; his manner, which like his appearance was flavoured with the urbanity of a less hectic age, varied towards neither rich nor poor, gentle nor lowly; the impartiality with which he dispensed justice was equalled only by the impartiality with which he received either the deference of a friend or the petition of a suppliant.*”

This was more than I could endure, and I cut short my perusal in the middle of the period which, I felt sure, had given so much satisfaction to its composer. Passing over the panegyric, I sought the end of the article with some curiosity to see how the *Kendal Messenger* had dealt with my uncle’s practical affairs. “*Mr. Godavary,*” I read, “*was twice married. His first wife, a Miss Austen of Keswick, unfortunately deceased at the birth of her only son, the present Mr. Godavary; his second wife, happily still with us, is a lady of Italian extraction and the mother of the charming Miss Paola Godavary, well known to all frequenters of the local ballrooms. It is believed that the late Mr. Godavary was the last of the entail, but it is generally assumed that his son will inherit the considerable property.*”

For the first time since I had left London I put back my head and laughed. “*A lady of Italian extraction*” tickled me, when in common with everybody else I knew that my uncle’s second wife was a peasant woman he had picked

up in the vineyards near Pienza. I had never seen my aunt, as I supposed I must call her; I had never seen my cousin Paola, so well known to frequenters of the local ballrooms. She was a personality, no doubt, since the correspondent of the *Kendal Messenger* went out of his way to slip in that little reference to her charm and her social accomplishment. I was glad now that I had bought the paper, since it had reminded me of these two aliens, whose existence I had disregarded. What did my aunt think of Westmorland after Pienza? She was an odd episode to have happened in the history of our family. "Do the family good," my brother had said to me when we first heard of the marriage, "to have a dash of blood put into it," and that was as near as we ever came to a criticism on our family.

At Kendal I had left the main line, changing into a shaky little train that wriggled and rocketed along in hilly country, stopping at every station. The speech of my companions in the third-class carriage was stout and broad with the drawl of the North, and my own accents, when I inquired of them the number of stations to my destination, sounded thin to my ears, and I thought they looked at me with some contempt, not knowing that I was as indigenious to the county as they were themselves. But all the while I was thinking neither of the North countrymen nor of the autumnal hills, but of my uncle and of the strange appearance he must have presented at Pienza, with his long legs and his Glengarry bonnet, and I wondered what spirit had moved him to go off to Italy in that solitary fashion, and what chance or misconception had brought him to Pienza, which is not a town upon the itinerary of the average tourist. Was it possible that during an idle evening he had taken down a book in the library at the Grange, and, reading therein an account of the Grand Tour so fashionable in the previous century, had been stimulated to issue out from his dale, travel South, and embark upon the packet that should bring him to the coasts of Europe and to the launching of the roads that led to Rome? I determined that during the days I should certainly be compelled to spend at the Grange I would investigate the books in the hope of chancing on some clue—perhaps a slip of paper left as a bookmarker by the old man, perhaps a passage pencilled in the margin; and in any case I should surely come upon something to delight me, whether some line-vignette of ruins surmounted by a panoply of musical instruments, or of *amorini* sporting with a skull, or merely the fine old print and sonorous phraseology—something which might lead me to an understanding of why my uncle Noble had embarked upon this pilgrimage to the classic sun, equipped, as he habitually was, to confront the climate of the North; this pilgrimage which, above all, had sent him on his return journey with so incongruous a bride.

NO SOONER had I alighted at the little station of Haresceugh than I became aware of the difference in the atmosphere. That air which in London had been warm and pungent, here in the North was softened with a dampness which, I could imagine, stole not only into the pores of my skin but even into the recesses of my character. A slight rain was falling. I stood upon the platform while the train writhed away on its journey between the hills, and its tail vanished round the bend of the metals; the necessity of bestirring myself barely made itself felt through the languor which held me there soaking in the sensations of renewal. It was a luxury which enveloped me; even as one is glad to see again, after long separation, some person not particularly dear, nay, even definitely hostile, but welcome nevertheless for his reminder of the past. As I came through the night in the train I had hated the dale, yet now that I approached, and as the soft clammy air closed round me, an emotion took me, and I stood gazing at the hills for all the world like a wanderer returned to the haunts where he has left his heart. Yet it was not pleasure that I experienced, but familiarity—that deathly familiarity which held me trapped. Curse the dale, I said to myself; and I lifted my bag, whose leather handle was damp already with the morning mists.

Above the station the hills rose in the great stupid masses that I remembered. They permitted a little clearing-space outside the station, and they permitted a ledge where the road might wind, between their base and the lake filling the valley; but that was the extent of the level foothold they allowed to man. If he would leave the road, then either he must climb or he must swim. The speculations with which I had dallied during the last part of my journey now seemed frivolous, and the good-humour vanished which their amusement had induced; I could see now no element in my journey beyond the tedium of a duty undertaken for the sake of old family ties long since grown meaningless. I began to wonder, indeed, why I had come at all; and grew vexed as I realized that I had done so simply because my solicitor took my obligation so automatically for granted. I could still catch the midnight express, he had said; and the midnight express I had caught accordingly. Had I but questioned the necessity of my going, no doubt he would have acquiesced. “Well, perhaps, after all . . .” he would have replied. I wished myself back in my rooms, the receiver to my ear, more wideawake than to act so meekly upon my solicitor’s assumptions. Now, far from being in my rooms, I was outside a small gray station in the North of England, and twelve good miles between the Grange and me.

I looked round me, expecting, perhaps, a trap sent from the Grange in answer to my telegram, but instead of a trap I saw a motor, exceedingly old and high, with two seats in the front and two seats at the rear, whose backs were rounded on the outside, like a capital B, or like two armchairs placed side by side. At the same time I perceived my uncle Stephen coming towards me. He was so like his brother, my dead uncle, that for a moment I was startled. There were the same long legs, the same thin knees, the same old-eagle face—as the *Kendal Messenger* had it. He had grown old, my uncle Stephen, since I had last seen him: a frantic calculation told me that he must be seventy-five. And for his part it was clear that he approached me dubiously, his face clearing when I advanced to meet him, and, “Why, Gervase, my dear boy,” he said, clasping my hand, “I should scarcely have recognized you.” I pointed out to him that, whereas I had been a youth of twenty when he last saw me, I was now a man of forty-five. It made, he agreed, a difference. But I saw that he was absent-minded. Was there no one else? he asked, looking round, and it was only after my assurance that I was the only descending passenger that we clambered together into the crazy motor; a boy appeared from somewhere to drive us; we started off with a leap and bounded down the road clattering as though all the ironwork in the car must be shaken to pieces. I held my head bent down against the rain and kept my eyes fixed on Stephen’s thin knees and long meagre thighs; he wore, I noticed, buff whipcord trousers secured under the instep by a loop of elastic. This was so much the kind of thing that my uncle Noble would have worn that I had more strongly than ever the impression that he had risen from his deathbed to come and meet me.

“It isn’t much of a car,” Stephen screamed above the din.

“I didn’t expect a car at all,” I shouted back.

“We’re more up to date than we were,” Stephen screamed—rather pitifully, I thought.

Just then we reached the top of a hill, and as the boy shut off the engine we swept downwards in comparative stillness, like coming into sudden shelter out of a howling wind. Stephen had not been prepared for this, and his last word reached me in a strained falsetto. I laughed, but Stephen did not notice that anything peculiar had happened. Instead, he leaned sideways towards me, his hands planted on his knees, and began talking to me in a rapid voice about the political situation. This might appear strange for two relatives who had not met for five and twenty years, and whose meeting, now that it had taken place, was brought about by an event so momentous as the death of the head of their race; but accustomed as I was to the family dislike of ever coming to the point, I felt no surprise but only a rather sad amusement at this manifestation of an

hereditary trait. Full well I knew why Stephen aimed his opinions at me with that rapidity: it was to prevent me from broaching the subject of his brother's death. When did he die? What was his illness? When and where was the funeral to be? All these were questions which must be answered by definite statements, and if somebody had to be definite, my uncle Stephen was determined that, if he could avoid it, it should not be he. I was indeed surprised that he should expose himself by meeting me at the station, but it soon transpired that he had business at the village post office, though what his business was he did not explain, while I sat in the motor shivering inside my upturned coat collar. He presently clambered back into the motor, and we lurched off again, discouraged into silence by long grinding uphill. I was not sorry to be silent, for I did not in the least want to know Stephen's opinions; on the contrary, I was occupied in renewing my acquaintance with landmarks and turns of the road, which unwound itself before me with my mind leaping to forestall it, so that I received not so much the impression of renewing acquaintance as of never having left the dale—an impression too convincing to be pleasant. How vainly I had thought to sever myself by mere physical removal when all the time the dale held me by strands I could not loosen because they were intangible! There was the lake, a long pointed shield in the valley; there were the low clouds, drifting about the hilltops in the old remembered way. There was the road, rambling up and down between stone walls; there was the sense of enclosure. There was the absence of colour: all was gray and green—gray sky, gray water, gray stone, green slopes. Beautiful in its way, I supposed, loathing it; beautiful to tired eyes. The road ran level now, skirting the lake; the hills rose higher as we travelled deeper into the cleft of the dale. The valley narrowed; the surface of the road grew rougher, and the road narrowed too, as though the hills were jealous of even that little strip engineered for the uses of man; two vehicles could not have passed abreast, and the horn of the motor hooted continuously, for the corners were many, though what traffic we could have encountered on that lonely road that led to nowhere save to the Grange, our own destination, I could not imagine. Once we met a shepherd trudging with a black collie that fled at our approach like a snake between the bars of a gate, and once a weasel crossed the road in front of us, but for the rest we met nothing, not even a farm cart brushing its load of bracken against the walls on either side. Stephen sat silent now, bolt upright, as a man accustomed to drive in a gig rather than in a motor; he seemed satisfied that I had no intention of disturbing him with questions. We passed no dwelling houses, only a few rude stone shelters for sheep in the lambing season, on the lower slopes of the hills. The many becks poured down rushing between the boulders of natural waterfalls, but by reason of the noisy car I could not hear their sound; I could see only their tumble and torrent, which,

divorced from their music, seemed vacant as dancers gyrating when the band is inaudible. We were coming now to the head of the lake; the hills were closing in on us; a little further, and the valley would narrow to a spearhead thrust against the closed barrier of the hills. I became slightly excited at the idea that in another moment I should catch sight of the Grange. We came upon the farm, with its dirty yard where a litter of young pigs snouted about the midden and a sheep dog ran out and barked at us. We passed the great concrete dyke across the lake, with its central sluice. We circled round the end of the lake; a little boat moored there carried me back to my boyhood. Then the Grange itself came in sight, a gray house pushed close up against the hill, and the road ceased abruptly as it reached the porch, since there was nowhere further for it to go.

4

AS WE drew up before the porch, a man dressed in loose tweeds with a black band round his arm came out from the house to meet us. I recognized him as Austen Godavary, my late uncle's son. He took, however, no notice of me, but after scowling at the car said furiously to Stephen, "So they haven't come?" Stephen blenched, and replied in a voice so apologetic that I wondered whether he had indeed been at fault, "There was no one at the station, Austen—no one but Gervase," thus putting me forward in timid introduction. Austen, however, continued to ignore me, without offending me in the least, for I saw that he was full of anger, and said, still addressing himself to Stephen, "Well, the car will have to go again to meet the next train, that's all." I wondered why he did not give the order to the boy, since the car presumably belonged to him and not to Stephen, but he seemed reluctant to instruct his servant with a direct order, and said again in a louder voice, "The car will have to meet the next train—what a nuisance." He and Stephen, after this, both looked doubtfully at the boy to see whether he had taken in the sense of what they were saying, and Austen, speaking like one who hurriedly changes the subject in order to save himself from embarrassment, held out his hand to me over the side of the car, saying, "It's very good of you to have come, Gervase—thanks awfully," but I could see that his mind was not upon me, but upon his vexation at somebody whom he expected having failed to turn up. After this he said no more, but opened the door, lifted out my bag, and, containing his surliness, preceded me into the house. The old Grange struck me as poor and dingy, when I stood in the hall and saw the doors on either hand and the stairs opposite me, just as I remembered them. It had never been a cheerful house, but now, with its threadbare stair carpet and a broken blind hanging across half a window like a

patch over an eye, I perceived that it was more than ever shabby and decayed. Neither Austen nor Stephen seemed to know what to do next. Austen was brooding over his grievance, and Stephen—while evidently feeling responsible for my entertainment—hesitated to play the part of host in another man's house. So far as I was concerned he distressed himself unnecessarily, for I had been too well accustomed in the past to the ways of my family—though this he appeared to have forgotten, and to regard me as a stranger arrived amongst them—for me to take offence at the gawky incompetence of their behaviour. I was, had he but known it, secretly amused at things turning out so very much as I had expected; and, moreover, I found ample occupation in observing the appointments of the hall, which, to my eye, even in detail, appeared unchanged and as they had been on the day I had left. There were the caps on the table, a pair of oars and a fishing rod propped up in one corner, the stuffed falcon holding down a stoat on the top of the cupboard, and on the window seat a fishing net, an oilskin, and a pair of gauntlets. The little world of the Grange was receiving me back indeed. And through the window halfway up the stairs I could see the green of the hill that rose behind the house, and three sheep passed in single file as I looked, across the window from left to right.

Austen turned to me; he treated me now with a surly civility, as though he resented my arrival in the place of the person or persons he had expected.

“Well, come in,” he said, the invitation going evidently against the grain, and he pushed open the door into the living room and signed to me to enter. I chuckled inwardly at this ceremoniousness used towards me, who was certainly as much at home in this house as Austen himself, a ceremoniousness which had only the effect of increasing, instead of diminishing, the private intimacy between the place and myself. Nevertheless, I made no sign, for laughter would have been out of season, and Austen was in no mood to be chaffed or rallied. I went formally into the room he showed me, pressing back my hair with the flat of my hands and wondering whether Austen knew how much I should appreciate the liberty of a good wash after my night of sitting up in the train. Some such idea did presently occur to him, for he asked, had I, by the way, had any breakfast? and upon my telling him that I had had nothing but a cup of tea at Kendal, he went over and pulled the bell which hung beside the fireplace and which produced a far-off tinkle in the direction of the kitchen. I was almost surprised, so much had I taken the poverty and general abandonment of the place for granted, to find that there were any servants who might be expected to answer the bell. After a long pause, a jolly, stout, foreign-looking woman with black hair and red cheeks, wearing a blue-and-white check dress under an apron, appeared in the doorway. Her bright black eyes took me in immediately; she looked at me in quick and kindly inquiry, and

from me to Austen, who stood in the middle of the room tapping the table with a paper-cutter. I waited, highly entertained to see Austen confronted with the necessity of giving a direct order. But even now he avoided it.

“Julia, Mr. Godavary wants some breakfast—tell Julia what you would like, Gervase,” he said, turning his back upon us and going over to the window.

“Anything you have handy,” I said, smiling to Julia, in whom I divined something warm and sympathetic.

“Porridge, yes?—boiled aig-g?” she said with a strong foreign accent, rolling the r-r’s in porridge.

“That’ll do capitally,” I said, smiling at her again and nodding my head to help out the English I was not sure of her understanding.

“And coffee, yes, eh?”

“Julia makes good coffee,” said Austen unexpectedly from the window.

“Coffee, then, Julia, please.”

She smiled and nodded rapidly to me as to a confederate, to one who shares a secret.

“Julia!” Austen cried after her. She returned, interrogative. “The car is to meet the next train at Haresceugh,” he said; “will you tell Harry?”

I was no longer amused: I sickened. So *that* was the way he did his ordering, indirectly; he couldn’t look at Harry straight while he gave him a simple order! I hated him at that moment, I hated all my relations epitomized in him, and I felt, yes, I felt, absurdly, ashamed of him before Julia.

But the incident stirred me up wholesomely, as well it might, and for probably the thousandth time in my life I resolved to straighten out this ridiculous, degrading crookedness, this inability to be candid, which rotted all my family, and which—I recognized it with horror and fear and contempt—tainted me in common with the rest of them. What but that had prevented me from asking my chief for leave in the ordinary way? and what but that had caused me the faint relief of knowing that I was justified in taking a hurried departure, explaining the necessity by a note instead of by word of mouth? A little thing, but just the thing that tangled itself round all our steps and led us into sly evasions, grotesque complications. Already in the short time since I had been in the place—even, in fact, since I started with Stephen in the car from Haresceugh—I had felt the atmosphere gluey with it, and the worst of my relations—oh, curse them!—was that they were so damned ingenious at

getting themselves credibly out of ambiguous situations so created; there was never an honest lie one could lay hold of; only an aggrieved innocence—quite genuinely felt, half the time—an astonished plausibility. Never an actual lie, scarcely ever even a prevarication; only the cowardly omission, the avoidance of anything even faintly tiresome or unpleasant. A vague optimism, somewhere, that things would explain themselves if sufficiently allowed to drift. . . . And that was stating the case in its most innocuous light. But now that I was roused I had no desire to minimize, I had still less desire to spare Austen; I asked him bluntly who it was that he was expecting?

Still he did not answer, he muttered something about, “Oh, various people—relations—sent for”; and then, swift to distract me, said, “I suppose you knew, by the way, that Michael was here?”

It was months since I had heard anything of my brother.

“I knew nothing about it. Where did you manage to get hold of him?”

“He was staying with us. He does, you know, sometimes.”

“No, I didn’t know. If I see Michael once a year I may think myself lucky, and even then he isn’t communicative.”

Austen said casually, with the air of planting a little barb into me, though I might not notice its presence until it began to fester, “Yes, he comes quite often. I’m surprised he hasn’t told you.”

I retaliated; I said, “Well, we’re not, as a family, particularly outspoken, are we? Besides, Michael isn’t accountable to me for his movements. It was different when we all lived together here in a heap.”

Austen stared at me with a new interest, attracted and repelled. “I suppose that, *then*, you all told one another where you were going whenever you moved away any further than Haresceugh? Of course, I was too young to notice. God, how I should have hated that! It was bad enough . . .”

“. . . when Father was alive,” I think he was going to say, but he stopped himself.

“Well, as a matter of fact, we hardly ever did move away further than Haresceugh,” I said, to cover up the blank in his sentence, “but when one of us did, yes, then we had to say where we were going, and for how long, and that sort of thing. The theory applied to all of us. It sounds intolerable now, but I daresay that in those days we took it as a matter of course. It was just a part of communal convenience.”

“Godavarys aren’t made for communal life,” said Austen, with the first

gleam of humanity I had detected in him, and I liked him accordingly a little better.

But almost immediately he seemed to remember that our conversation had started with an inconvenient question from me, and lest it should be repeated he slid briskly down from the table where he had sat swinging his legs, and announced that if I would wait there till Julia brought my breakfast, he would go out and look for Michael. I was no longer angry with him; my small spurt of anger had subsided, leaving me with at most a discouragement, too weary even to be annoyed at his pitiable excuse for escape. I was left alone in the room, which I certainly found more agreeable without my cousin's company, and here again I dwelt with something extraordinarily familiar. There were the same old sofa with the broken springs, the same faded old blue covers, the same litter of pipes, the same notices of local meets and cattle shows stuck up on the mantelpiece, the same view out of the windows, obscured by the now driving rain, over the lake and away to the monotonous hills. Here I should spend two or three days, a curiously complete and isolated experience, after which I should probably never see the Grange again, for I thought it unlikely that any growth of friendship would bring my cousin to desire me as a guest, or me to desire him as a host. My uncle's will, when opened, would, I assumed, confirm him as the heir, and—— But here my reflections were cut short by the return of Julia with the tray.

It struck me as characteristic of the house that breakfast should be brought to me on a tray in the smoking room rather than laid in the ordinary way on the dining-room table. The house had always, even in the old days, been run on such happy-go-lucky lines, and with the importation of Julia no doubt her own inclinations had exaggerated the existing disorder. But I found such refreshment in the mere sight of Julia that I was not disposed to criticize. She rested the edge of the tray on the edge of the table while with her free hand she swept aside the pipes and tobacco pouches and cleared a space for my breakfast; after that she set a chair for me, giving it a wipe with her apron, and invited my appreciation of the creamy porridge and smoking coffee. Instinct told me that Julia was not a servant to be noticed with a plain "Thank you"; therefore, although I wished not at all to release the flood of her garrulity, I said, "I am afraid I am giving a lot of trouble."

But Julia's mind, I speedily discovered, worked by short cuts, and she replied that if I found Mr. Austen black I must not take any notice.

"Is he black, then?" I had no right to ask it, but I was tempted. "Is he often black?" I was frankly amused.

"Black or gray—like that," said Julia, jerking her thumb over her shoulder

at the heavy sky. "Never light," and she made a comical gesture of despair. But her solicitude veered again to me, and she inquired whether I would not like to wash before eating my breakfast, for she had learnt enough of the English to know that their minds turned always towards hot water.

There was nothing I should like better, I replied, but she was not to bother about hot water—except a little pot for shaving—and I knew my way to the pump.

She was horrified, of course. *Chè!* a guest! the pump! no, she had already put hot water in my room, and if I would please to follow her . . .

I assured her that I could find my way to any room if she would but indicate the one reserved for me. The room overhead? Why, that was my own old bedroom; very well, but I made sure first that Julia's sense of geography was not misleading her, for I did not at all want to burst mistakenly into the room where my uncle was lying with his jaw bound up and pence upon his eyes.

Out in the hall I recovered my bag and set my foot upon the lowest step of the stair. I was wondering whether that almost uncanny sense of never-having-been-away would assail me as vividly upstairs; and I was beginning to wonder, too, how many inhabitants the house comprised, beyond the three that had already been revealed to me. There was my brother Michael that I knew of for certain, and I could fairly assume that my late uncle's wife, the "*lady of Italian extraction,*" and her daughter "*so well known to frequenters of the local ballrooms,*" must also be stirring somewhere in its depths. That the house was elastic and ramshackle I knew well enough, for in the old days we had stowed ourselves away in varying numbers, yet without rubbing elbows, and leaving always a surplus of room for birds of passage. Besides, there were the unknown people awaited by Austen, whose identity I could doubtless have discovered had I stopped to question Julia. It was then that I looked up and became aware of a girl standing on the stairs with her back to the window, so that the hill rose behind her, and the rain slanted wildly across the panes behind her head.

Although I had never seen her before, I knew she must be Paola, that star of Westmorland ballrooms. I could not distinguish her features, since she had her back to the light, but I could see the shape of her small dark head to its especial advantage, and of her shoulders, which, slightly as she was made, had that dimpled roundness peculiar to women of Latin blood. Slender though she was, her body was all curve, no angle, and this, with its accompanying felinity, made up both one's first and one's ultimate impression. I could well believe that she was an instinctive, a beautiful, dancer. I went up the stairs towards her

and saw her better. She wore a black skirt and a close gray jersey, wearing her clothes—for all that they had probably been bought in Kendal—with extraordinary simplicity and elegance. I can't describe the precise quality of Paola Godavary beyond saying that it was a quality of *line*. Her face was not beautiful—a red, sulky mouth, rather wide; a short straight nose; dark eyes and a pale complexion—but with her smooth, rounded grace, her simplicity and her composure, she would assuredly draw the eyes of men away from the untidy prettiness of Englishwomen. It speaks for the crispness of her effect that I should have received at the first glance this strong and accurate impression. Her hair was parted down the middle, sleeked until it shone, and coiled in neat round snails over her ears. Her brow and temples, which alone in her face could generously be called beautiful, were, I saw, very white and smooth, and her hair grew low, parting thickly, and so close that it might have been a cap of satin.

She was not in the least disconcerted by being confronted by a stranger. On the contrary, she surveyed me calmly, as one who intends to arrive at some considered judgment, some basis for approach, before entering into conversation. And I, who had gone up the stairs meaning to explain myself and so to relieve her of any embarrassment, found that she, and not I, was the one already in control of the situation; yes, from the first moment she kept me in my place, with that woman-of-the-world poise of hers that made everybody else appear inexpert, provincial. She surveyed me, and I remembered with discomfiture that I was unshaven. And she, on the other hand, so exquisitely kempt, so conspicuously *sure*, looking down upon me, detached from the poor rough hill behind her and from the arrows of the rain. A faint scent came from her, less a scent than a general fragrance; and her hand, when at last she gave it to me, was soft as a prisoned pigeon.

“Gervase?” I acknowledged my name. “You came from the station?” I acknowledged it again. “Alone?”

“Stephen met me.”

“No. I mean—did Tom and Rachel arrive by the same train?”

So it was Tom and Rachel that Austen had been expecting.

“No, there was no one but myself. I think your brother—I think Austen has sent the motor back.”

She appeared to consider with amusement. “Austen was angry, was he?”

“He certainly seemed annoyed. I didn't know why.”

“Well, he is in love with Rachel,” she said in her direct, even voice. “He

will be like a bear until she arrives, and when she does arrive he will be nervous and jealous, not letting her out of his sight—as intolerable when she is there as when she is not there. Have you had anything to eat?”

I answered her, but I was thinking less of my waiting breakfast than of the contrast she presented to the Grange and to all that I was accustomed to find therein. Here in a few phrases she had made clear a situation which my blood relations would have left dubious for days—or, had that been possible, forever. I was grateful to Paola, I was refreshed by her candour in that environment, but I did not like her. I recognized that her candour was not so much the outcome of a desire for truth as of a constitutional crudity. I don't know why I was so prompt to recognize her crudity; of one thing only I am certain, and that is that I did, there and then, recognize it; that I do not write thus, informed by any later knowledge. Perhaps I can only explain it by saying that everything about Paola was so definite as immediately to become manifest. But that I neither liked nor trusted her was equally clear to my mind—though to remark that I did not trust her may, in the light of all that I have said, seem contradictory. So let me here explain that it was not her capacity for frankness which I mistrusted, but the innate coldness I divined in her, which made me afraid—which made me mutter inwardly, Heaven help the human soul that surrenders itself into her hands! Crude and cold—and my imagination raced off upon the devilment which that combination might accomplish.

Her next observance was to urge me to wash and breakfast without delay, and though she thus sped me towards my comfort, I felt that the words proceeded but emptily from her, and that she cared nothing either way, whether I ever washed or ate again. I left her gladly, proceeding upstairs while she proceeded down, but when I returned to the smoking room, shaven now and brushed, I found her there, and found that she had set my porridge and coffee before the fire, and was turning over the pages of an illustrated paper with the evident intention of waiting for me and giving me her company. She took no notice of my return, however, but continued to stand, looking at her paper and humming a little tune beneath her breath. I was determined that I would not be the first to speak, beyond thanking her for her attention in warming my coffee, so I embarked upon my breakfast in silence, and very excellent I found Julia's cooking, and notably out of tone with the rest of the house. The crockery was all disparate; the forks and knives matched neither in size nor in pattern; there was a large triangular hole torn in the napkin, and I did not particularly relish a meal laid among the litter of other men's pipes, but with Julia's contribution I had at least no fault to find. I was wondering, however, as I ate, how on earth I was going to put away my time. I supposed that the business of burying my uncle, opening his will, and settling his affairs

could not, at the most optimistic estimate, take less than three days. How was I going to spend the days? Heaven knows I didn't want to spend them in the society of Stephen or of my brother; Paola repelled even while she—in a sense—attracted me; Austen, mercifully, would be taken up with Rachel; and I saw myself thrown back upon the society of Tom, who was as much of a nonentity as any man well can be. Should I be thought heartless if I took myself off to my old occupation? I liked fishing; it was one of the few things I had regretted at the Grange. The rod and net in the hall had shown me that it played as prominent a part as ever in life in the dale. I thought I would ask Paola, upon whom I could depend for an unequivocal answer, but she forestalled me by opening the conversation herself.

“And so Father is dead,” she said, at last throwing down the paper.

It was the first reference that anybody had made to the fact.

“I know—I am so sorry,” I replied inanely.

“You needn't be. He was very old, and besides that, he had been only half alive for years past. It was time for him to die.”

“But I remember him as remarkably hale,” I said in surprise.

“Oh—in body!” said his daughter with contempt. “Yes. He was out riding, you know, the day before he died—straddling over his pony with his feet nearly touching the ground. But he didn't *live*, he was frightened of everything, of Mother, of Julia, of Austen, of me. It's better to be dead than to live like that.”

“I read an account in the *Kendal Messenger*,” I said, as severely as I could, to see what she would answer, “of how greatly he was respected and how much work he did in the neighbourhood; he had a full life.”

“Oh, you read that, did you?” said Paola. “You'll probably see the writer here before very long: he rides out from Haresceugh. But I shall be out of the way before he comes.”

There seemed to be a significance in her remark; I asked why she should take the trouble to be out of the way.

“He bores me, Gervase,” she replied in an excess of irritation; “to tell you the truth, everybody bores me—all those old faces. The dale bores me, and the hills—always a climb before you can get anywhere—what sense is there in a hill, except to get stupidly in the way? I hate them. You don't know—or, rather, you must know, since you used to live here, didn't you?—how one comes to hate them for shutting one in.”

“Wordsworth,” I said, although I agreed with her, “found the contemplation of mountains extremely elevating.”

“Wordsworth—he was a poet, wasn’t he, who lived at Grasmere? They sell postcards of him—a great forehead; I remember. Carlyon quoted him once.”

“Carlyon?”

“The man who wrote that letter about Father to the *Kendal Messenger*. The man who bores me—oh, worse than the others.”

“What was it that he quoted?”

“How *can* I remember? Something about a girl who lived near here.”

I quoted at random, though as I quoted I thought how singularly inapplicable were the lines to Paola, into whose face no beauty had passed but the beauty of things and places she had never seen—of cosmopolitan restaurants, and the subdued splendour of Roman palaces:

*“And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face”?*

“That was it. How did you know? I told Carlyon that if he spoke poetry to me again I would never see him any more. But how did you know?”

“It struck me that perhaps Carlyon might have thought those lines suitable—to you.” I was furious with myself, for she had led me on—I didn’t quite know how—to speak to her with the oblique flattery I supposed she usually wrung from men. I could see, indeed, how imperturbably she received the implied compliment, tossing it aside as a gift not worth having, and I made haste to exclaim, “But I don’t admire Mr. Carlyon’s discrimination. I can’t imagine anybody to whom those lines would less well apply.”

“Explain. You seem to have more sense than Carlyon.”

“Well, you are scarcely the Kilted Highland lass, are you?—scarcely the incarnation of the fells? You don’t haunt the tarns. I see you in Paris, I see you at Cannes, and most vividly of all I see you in Rome. . . .”

“Always in towns, then?”

“Well, perhaps a day’s excursion in motors to Albano. But where I don’t see you is on the fellside. Poor Mr. Carlyon, he has gone badly wrong. Yet he has seen you in ballrooms, where you should have been slightly less of a fish out of water. That ought to have given him his cue.”

“At Kendal! Thank you. But you seem very sure about me, Cousin

Gervase. And half an hour ago you didn't know me by sight. Here is Michael—you can ask him what he thinks.”

“What about?” said my brother. He stood in the doorway, his collar turned up, the water dripping off his mackintosh, and a sodden cap in his hand. Everything about him was wet, his face streamed with rain, and a little pool began to form round him on the floor. How well I knew that aspect of the dale!

He was so intent upon Paola that he forgot to greet me or show any interest in my arrival. I saw to my dismay that Paola had got hold of him—poor Michael, she surely had no use for him; he was a toy; Carlyon was probably another, and who knows how many more, in varying degrees?

“We're an affectionate family,” sneered Paola. “How long is it since you've seen Gervase, Michael? Nobody here has taken any trouble about him, except myself.” Michael nodded to me, but we were well used to meeting casually and passing again upon our separate ways. “Gervase and I were talking, Michael, not about you; we were talking about Paola Godavary and the braes of Westmorland and Kenneth Carlyon. Cousin Gervase has imagination, Michael; he has discernment; we were getting on very well when you arrived and interrupted.” She looked at him insolently, and he cut a ridiculous figure, dripping in the doorway; even his hands hung down wet, drops falling from his fingers. Paola, opposed to him, looked more than ever sleek, warm, well cared for, like a little animal. I would have left them but that Michael was in no fit state to come into the room, and that I was myself but halfway through my breakfast.

“It's a blessing to have anyone fresh to talk to,” Paola went on. “I told Gervase I was bored with everybody—sick of the sight of their faces. I know exactly what everybody will say. I know their ideas. I know how they will behave. I know, for instance, that after luncheon Mother will begin to cry; she cries every day now from three to four. I know that Austen will be in a temper till Rachel comes, and that after she has arrived he will be in a worse temper every time she speaks to Tom.”

“Paola, Paola,” said Michael, glancing at me, “you shouldn't say such things, really you shouldn't.”

“Gervase isn't a stranger, and if he were, I shouldn't care. He knows about Austen and Rachel; I told him myself. Why should it be covered up? He's devoured by jealousy of her, you must know, Gervase, but neither of them has the courage to brave it out. Oh, it wasn't for nothing that Rachel was born a Godavary. I hate them all, I despise them,” and I was really horrified by the scorn that poured acid into her voice.

“You’re one yourself,” said Michael gloomily.

“Am I? Am I? Well, even if I am, nobody, thank goodness, would think so. I was glad, really, when Father died, because there was one less of the brood. The sooner they die out the better.” Her pronouncement was the grimmer for the tone in which she uttered it, for she spoke now without vehemence, weighting her words with the calm of a pondered judgment.

“That’s your considered opinion?” I said, recoiling from her. But I was sorry for Michael; I had never seen him look so distressed.

“Yes,” said Paola, and could no doubt have added a great deal more, but left it unsaid. I had finished eating; I looked at my watch and found that it was only half-past ten. Half-past ten on the morning of my first day! and I felt already that I had been for weeks at the Grange. Outside I heard the sounds of life—Julia at the back door calling to the chickens, and the eager bark of a dog heading off cattle: all the small everyday life of the Grange’s small world, pursuing its way quite indifferent to the death of its master or to my own insignificant arrival. I felt myself in a curious mixture: on the one hand completely and instantly installed as part of this microcosm; on the other hand, ignoring many details which sooner or later I must learn. But indeed I anticipated not one tittle of the unique and horrible experiences which in three days we were all to undergo.

5

I WENT out presently with Michael and Paola, for in the dale it was not the custom to regulate our outings upon the indulgence of the weather. We went through the rain, walking at a round pace along the road beside the lake. It came as a minor surprise to me to find the sleek Paola confronting the rain in this English fashion, when I should have expected her to spend a contemptuous and peevish morning near the fire. But, granted that she *had* acquired the habit of going out in all weathers, I was not surprised to find that she dealt with its problems in the most becoming and competent manner possible. In her black belted oilskin and black oilskin cap she trudged between us, incomparably neat. With her garments shining from the rain, she looked like some small warrior clad all in black armour, oddly demure; and from the frowning glances which Michael constantly turned upon her I read transparently enough his state of mind. She held him in an angry slavery from which he would not lightly escape. And she did not want him; he was temporary in her life, just as the dale was temporary; she was in the dale but not of it; near Michael but not with him; and I imagined, as well as if I had witnessed them, his moods and his

despair.

We walked up the road as far as the sluice which cut off the lower end of the lake with its great concrete barrier. There were many who maintained that the sluice destroyed the beauty of the lake, but I, for one, liked its power; I liked the wall rising flatly out of the water, and its calm when the lake was ruffled. It reached from shore to shore, here where the lake was narrow; one could walk along the broad top; it was the only thing that was of man in the whole great heaped landscape of fells. In the middle of the wall was the sluice, with its tarred uprights and planks and pulleys, and wooden doors that would gape slowly open, with the water pouring between, when the doors were made to revolve upon their hinges. I liked to see the defeat of the lake, two thirds of it held back at man's will, or allowed to advance, till its levels were reestablished at his discretion. The hills had things too much their own way; ever since the convulsions of a dwindling planet had hoisted them up or wrinkled them into valleys, there they had been, huge and obtuse, with the stupidity of the oversized; sleepy things blocking the way; and there, until Earth turned cold, they would remain, till the grass shrank from their slopes, and the rock came out like bones from the shrinking flesh of a corpse, and like the mountains of the moon they would remain, casting their shadows, spur upon spur, long after the colours of nationalities had become meaningless upon a map, and the map—if maps there could be upon a world from which life had vanished—would revert ironically to the physical. But with the lake it was different: the mobile water must submit; man reasserted himself. We stood looking at the wall of the sluice, and Paola said:

“That's the one thing here which gives me any satisfaction—the one thing which doesn't oppress me and leave me feeling as though a feather bed were sinking upon my head.”

The waters of the lake were iron gray and pocked by rain; a few sad sheep moved along the shore. Paola detached herself from us and walked out along the wall till she reached the middle of the lake and stood there, looking down upon the sluice doors. Her small, black, belted, shining figure cut the gray with its black relief. Michael said uneasily, “Why doesn't she come back?” but he did not move to fetch her, and we both stood watching her from a distance as she hung above the gray waters of the lake, in the middle of the wall, near the tarred uprights and the orderly tangle of pulleys. Again her oilskins turned for me to armour: the armour of a coldness and hatred. “Why doesn't she come back?” muttered Michael. “One never knows what whim will seize her next.” I could not believe that twelve hours ago I had been in London. The whole foreground of my life was blocked by the dale; I had known Paola always;

there was nothing strange in seeing her standing there, so black and shining, between gray sky and grayer water, motionless, looking down at the sluice as though some intercourse passed between them. And Michael's concentration seemed to me equally a part of life; I had no need to communicate with him; I knew already all that there was to be known. Lantern jawed and saturnine, I knew he took it hard. There was the blood bond between us, though in some ways we were less intimate than acquaintances. No doubt he knew that I knew, and did not care. He was indifferent to my presence, as one is indifferent to the presence of those who are negligible as a part of one's self.

I saw Paola quite objectively. Her father was dead, but she was untouched; she carried her life very deep and secret within her. It had never been tapped; no doubt it never would be tapped, for she was one of those scornful souls that can find no master, and that confound and mislead by their perversity and ignorance of compassion. I bore her no grudge for what she had done to my brother.

Still she stood out on the dyke, and Michael called to her, "Paola! Paola!" but although his voice carried easily across the water she did not respond at once, but in her own good time turned from her contemplation and came towards us along the top of the wall as she had gone. She appeared to be quite indifferent to the rain that pocked the lake and stung sharply against her oilskins. Michael went to meet her; he accompanied her back to me, fussing round her; I heard him say, "What were you seeing out there?" pecking his questions at her, and pecking again when he got no answer. But she remained immersed in herself.

6

WHEN we got back to the house we thought that Tom and Rachel had arrived. The motor stood outside the porch, very muddied, and the lanky Harry was lifting out a suitcase. The name was painted on it: R. Godavary; Rachel had not troubled to alter it since her marriage. No doubt she was right: Godavary she had been born, and Godavary she would remain: it wasn't an inheritance so readily thrown off. We went in and found Rachel with Austen in the smoking room. She had missed the connection—I don't know what explanation Rachel was giving, only that she was giving it at great length, going several times over the same ground minutely, because she wanted to fill up with words the vacancy in which she and Austen moved when they were together. She jumped up and kissed Paola and crooned over her to show a sympathy which Paola received with disdain. Quite another preoccupation

engaged her. She was civil beyond reproach, but cold—how cold she was! She glanced all round the room and inquired for Tom.

Tom—Rachel rushed into explanation. Tom could not get away; at the last moment he had been obliged to fail. And, after all, he was only a cousin by marriage. She, Rachel, hoped Paola would understand—hoped Paola’s mother would understand. But Paola already understood perfectly. She turned to Austen with that cold and irreproachable civility. “You knew this, of course, Austen?”

How could he have known? he replied; had he not told Paola that both Tom and Rachel were expected? Had he not ordered two rooms to be prepared? But Paola didn’t receive his bluster well; she didn’t say, “Of course,” or “I see,” or anything to give him adequate help over his unpleasant moment, even while by her tone she conveyed her frigid criticism. That was the way in which Godavarys criticized—marked their disapproval. They never went further than that. Paola, however, said quietly and directly, “Don’t trouble, Austen. Of course you knew he was not coming. I might have guessed. But don’t trouble to explain.” She held him, like that, writhing. I wondered how many times, during these years, such incidents had been multiplied, and laughed to think of Paola’s unaccommodating presence in that house, and of her sword passing through the veil of poor Austen’s pitiable cobwebs.

Presently the two women went off together, and the men were left; there was an unpleasant tension, and for my own part I felt acutely conscious of the various strands all braided in this house, and conscious too of the dead presence upstairs, which dominated us all, but to which so far nobody but Paola had referred in my hearing. Michael and Austen both looked at me with the same gloomy, shifty eyes—the family eyes—and I wondered whether my own were as gloomy and as shifty. It seemed to me dreadful, these pairs of eyes all looking into one another with their damning resemblance. I found myself regretting Tom’s eyes, that were different and blue and ordinary.

Austen startled me: it was so unexpected, so improbable, that I didn’t believe my ears. He said, “Do you want to see Father?” I suppose he had been hunting round for an excuse to get out of the room. He took me upstairs and opened the door into the room where my uncle was lying. Laid out, he looked very pale and fine and high; death suited the grand bony architecture of his face. It was very still in the room, and the blinds were down. I did not know what comment to make. We stood by the bed until the absolute stillness became oppressive. Austen said, throwing it off in a detached and casual way, “The funeral’s to-morrow.”

“At Mallerstang, I suppose?”

“Yes, at Mallerstang.”

“I suppose the property comes to you, Austen?”

“I suppose so. Nobody knows yet. The lawyers are coming to open the will to-morrow evening after the funeral.”

So it passed off, quite simply, and I was informed.

7

LATER in the day the coffin was brought, and we could hear the men upstairs, nailing. Paola alone remained detached and serene: such things seemed to have no power to touch her. The others were taken up with their own preoccupations: Austen and Rachel with the devouring secret of their liaison; Michael with his hungry and tormented pursuit of Paola; Stephen with a general nervousness and desire not to get in the way; and through it all beat the hammers nailing down the coffin. We had lunched together in the dining room, with the exception of Paola's mother, who remained upstairs. Julia brought in the food, having previously cooked it; she observed us all, I noticed, shrewdly and perhaps sarcastically, as we sat round the circular table, but she bustled backwards and forwards with the trays, thinking possibly that we should become less morose if she comforted us with good food. She had the wholesome Latin standpoint: if you were dead, you were dead, but your survivors must eat—a standpoint begotten of strong sunlight. She was not troubled by the subtleties begotten of our Northern mists.

The appearance of Paola's mother was not the worst thing of the day. Like Julia, she confronted death without subtlety though with a loud distress. Dressed in a black blouse and skirt, she emerged from her seclusion during the afternoon, and on being presented to me burst into tears. Paola shrugged and turned away, but Julia, who arrived as by instinct on the spot at the critical moment, took her mistress into her arms, rocking her to and fro and consoling her with a great deal of good sense in their common language. We stood round, helpless and embarrassed. But the two Italian women, mistress and servant, seemed to understand one another; they seemed to push us all away, and, creating a little circle in the midst of which they isolated themselves, dealt with their business in their own fashion. We were all thankful for Julia's capable presence. I made out a little of what was going on: she did not so much mind his being dead, if only he could be got out of the house—taken off—securely buried—then she would resume life quite equably—it was this suspense that enervated her—the knowledge that he was still upstairs—she

couldn't stop thinking of the stiffness of death—his arms hard now, no longer flexible—his fingers like bits of wood—his eyes like a fish's eyes, glaucous . . . “*Ma sono chiusi,*” said Julia, patting her, and still gently rocking . . . his poor clothes, empty; they must be burnt or given away, anything so long as they were kept out of her sight—all trace of him must be done away with—then she would be good—she would forget.

She quieted then, disengaged herself from Julia, and surveyed us, still shaken by an occasional sob. She was not in the least ashamed of her breakdown. She signed to me to come and sit near her, and talked to me without drawing breath for half an hour about the deceased, how unaccountable he had been, how bored and unsympathetic when she was homesick, how passionately she had loved him for his long legs on the day when they were married before the mayor of Pienza. She spoke in headlong but inaccurate English, with an accent at times unintelligible. Fortunately for me, she allowed no pauses in which I could make any comment. At the end of half an hour she sighed, rose, and withdrew, after pressing my hand and saying that I was a *caro giovane*.

No, that experience was not the worst of the day. The worst was the horrid furtiveness of Austen and Rachel, and to escape it later in the evening I went out of the house by myself, for I could no longer endure the overwrought atmosphere of those decayed rooms. Not that I objected on moral grounds to their liaison, but their stealth sickened me, and their weakness—for I read quite clearly into their minds that they conceived it their duty, in the name of all seemliness, to set their passion temporarily aside, but were too weak to do so. I had read this in the glances they turned upon one another, in the wrenching away of those glances, and in the anguished return. I had no pity for them; only contempt. I could endorse what Paola had said of the Godavarys: better to let them die out, feeble, uncontrolled, degenerate, doomed.

I took the track that led away from the lake, up the little stretch that remained of the valley before the hills closed in and blocked it. The rain had ceased with evening, leaving a pale sky washed into lovely purity. Above the hills to the west floated the rose and saffron of sunset; above the hills to the east, that clear-washed blue, most luminous: how gentle the place was under such an aspect; the hills big and kindly with their beautiful shadows, the little rushing becks sporting over their boulders, frisky as chamois, the ground moist under my feet, springy with peat and heather, the air soft as a caress. Down in the valley a girl, her head cowed in a shawl, drove before her the file of pale, creamy cattle, wandering through the dusk. Bats were about, and somewhere in a stubble field partridges were calling. I was glad that I had strayed from the

uneasy house, out to receive the balm of this hallowed pause, this quiet earth.

SURELY, thought I, of all unsought ills, that oppression which comes from the imposed and unwelcome kinship of blood is one of the most subtle and the most disturbing. It saps our pretension to freewill, it binds us in our reluctance to those we should never have chosen for our friends. It arouses in the least superstitious a qualm as to the probability of predestination. Luck? no such thing; the only luck lies in the character that was our birthright—and forthwith we recognize in the men and women of our blood the selfsame traits that we had thought our disadvantage or our privilege. So they labour, too, under our own familiar burden? they know our weakness as their own? That which we most would keep concealed—those beggarly meannesses—are to them transparent? A common heredity stares at us through their eyes, unforgivably impudent.

Already I was unwilling to look at my kinsmen, for the resemblance that I found to myself. Our name was not the only thing that we shared. They were morose and shifty, even as I was. I had the honesty to confess it in my secret heart, even as they, no doubt, confessed it in theirs, but where was the virtue of such confession, where the strength of will was lacking to organize a remedy? There we were, all five of us; and our eyes, our so terribly similar eyes, avoiding one another. We had come together, at the Grange, our point of focus, bringing each with us the traits that accompanied us everywhere, upon our separate lives, range where we severally might, bringing them back to the hub of the family wheel upon which we were the spokes, radiating but always fastened. No, I couldn't look at them. I kept my eyes upon my plate while we sat at dinner, and afterwards, when we adjourned to the smoking room, I hoped that I might be forgotten behind a book; but I had reckoned without Paola.

“Play backgammon with me, Gervase.”

Well, I could look at Paola; her eyes were not ours, and indeed she hadn't a single trait that recalled my detestable family. But Michael, who as usual was hovering near her, said, “He wants to read. I'll play with you.”

“Come along, Gervase,” she said, disregarding him. “Bring a table over to the fire.” Michael followed us; he was too intent upon her to have any pride. He sat upon the arm of my chair, so that he could stare at her across the table. I felt and suffered acute discomfort; his desire for her was so indecently proclaimed; it ate her up; and her indifference was so cruel. Paola, I thought,

would die murdered by some lover. Would she retain her imperturbability looking down the barrel of a little revolver as blue-black and glossy as she herself?

Yet I could understand the obsession she would become, once she took hold.

She was dressed this evening in a gown of soft sheathed black, with long sleeves coming, mediæval fashion, to a point over her hands. Dressed, did I say? no, so calculated a word could not be fastened upon her. She had that quality, rare in women, that her garments seemed to have grown upon her, to have surrounded her, to have crept up and clothed her as though with a mood, to have—how shall I say it?—*happened*. Her clothes, though but that moment arrived from the shop, could not look new upon her; they would simply be there, a part of herself, ineluctable; the very idea of a shop jarred; rather, an effortless magic swathed her slowly, as she stood critical before her mirror, and saw herself merge, in the dark reflection, to a new grace, a new perfection, as soundlessly as Daphne into the metamorphosis of the laurel. I grew fanciful; but Paola, the more strangely for the chill of her severity, induced fancy. Such depths of suggestion dwelt in her as led me constantly astray to trifle with some new, tempting, and always romantic conception. I might become, I thought with amusement, the dilettante of Paola; almost the impresario, playing showman to the audience of my single self; but it would be an academical game, and I should remain personally inviolate. Look at her now, I thought, as she sits there with the backgammon board between us; look at her as she cups her chin gravely in her hand; mightn't she sit to Leonardo? mightn't she sit to Whistler? and wouldn't the one enjoy the curve of her head, with the snails coiled over her ears, like little handles to some exquisitely shaped amphora, and the droop of her attitude over the leather board with the queer red and yellow spikes, and the falling cubes of the dice?—she might be an Este, listless gambler for a duchy—and wouldn't the other enjoy her creamy pallor, her coolly provocative youth?

Now Austen rose and came to stand behind his sister, looking down at the board and the thrown dice. I knew already the hostility that separated, or should I say bound them? for I had always declared, even in the old days, that a peculiarity of the Grange was to distribute its inhabitants into groups small and fatal, joined by some mystic alliance, or divided by some equally mystic and deadly antipathy; but whether joined or divided, connected without escape. Here Paola, even the indifferent Paola, was caught in the toils of enmity: an atmosphere, almost tangible, surrounded her and Austen; but where her alliance was given, were it given at all, I had not yet discovered. But here I had

already groupings enough to content me, in Paola and Austen opposite within their halo of hostility, and in Michael perched beside me, the desire in his eyes streaming like the beams of a searchlight across to Paola. I was sorry for myself, hung between them. "Poor Gervase," thought I, "you're sadly out of it—your emotions sadly disengaged," and I shook the dice and consoled myself grimly with the reflection that although no individual concerned me here, it was with the whole dale that I was entangled—with the whole heredity and locality that my quarrel lay.

But before long I was released, for Julia appeared, and with ceremony summoned me to attend Mrs. Godavary in her room, and quite meekly I rose to follow Julia (seeing Rachel slip immediately into my place), for no occurrence, however improbable, seemed to me out of the way. It was, however, somewhat to my surprise that Julia accompanied me upstairs, ushered me into Mrs. Godavary's bedroom, and remained in the room herself after shutting the door, standing in a dark corner with her arms rigidly folded across her breast, immovable as a sentry or a duenna. I had, indeed, absurdly, the feeling that in this unexpected visit to a lady's bedroom Julia remained to safeguard the proprieties much as she might have remained had her mistress been some young beauty in a palace of Pienza and I a suitor too ardent to be trustworthy. We were away from the Grange, away from England. The room itself was a little bit of the gaudy and ramshackle country of its tenant's birth. An oil painting of my late uncle stood upon an easel, draped in damask; the bed was ambitious, under a *baldacchino* of dubious lace; the floor and every available surface of furniture were embarrassed by an incredible litter of cardboard boxes, ribbons, ornaments, holy images, and photographs. Mrs. Godavary herself, divorced, in this seclusion, from her black, and bundled into a pink dressing jacket over what was only too transparently her petticoat, had the appearance of some old actress in her dressing room—some old harlot in her flat. And there was Julia, testifying to the innate conventionality of such people. I could not imagine what Mrs. Godavary wanted of me. She received me almost with enthusiasm, coming forward to meet me and taking both my hands in hers, drawing me after her towards the fire—the room was oppressively stuffy; the Latin peasantry detests open windows—and having pushed me gently down into a chair, she seated herself opposite me and bent forward in a long and disconcerting scrutiny of my face. What she found there evidently satisfied her, for she turned to Julia and made some remark in a motherly tone of voice; almost compassionate; I scented the "*poverino*," the "*simpatico*," in her tone. Then she returned to me, and in that strange gabble of English began to speak of Paola—of Paola's beauty, her accomplishments, her power over men—all extravagantly and yet with a certain nervous hurry, as

though I might secretly be disagreeing with her, and she didn't want to give me the chance of saying so before she should have completed her work of conversion. It was quite clear to me now that wherever Paola's alliance might be given, Mrs. Godavary's was given to Paola; here was a passionate partisanship, a blind idolatry, the animal mother with her young. Yet through it all I could see that she was afraid of Paola; Paola was far beyond her understanding; she idolized, but she cowered. She was afraid of me too, though for a very different reason; she wanted my support, she wanted a confederate in the house, and was afraid only of not securing me. Didn't I agree with her? she asked once, and wasn't I of her opinion? but as soon as the query had slipped out she hastened on, lest I should answer ambiguously or not at all.

She had espoused, naturally, Paola's one antagonism; she hadn't a word of good for Austen; he was lying, treacherous, contemptible; and then she piled on a heap of abuse which I didn't, even with my own antipathy, think Austen really deserved; he was a schemer, she said, only waiting till he should be the master to turn on Paola and herself and pay them out for years of grievance; up till now he had endured them, sullenly, like an animal that dares not bite. I puzzled as to what she might be coming to. There was something at the back of her mind, but although she whined and asked me what would become of her and her daughter when their home passed definitely into Austen's hands, I suspected that her whining was half put on and that she dreaded Austen less than she pretended. I was at a loss to understand her. She was evidently troubled and insecure: that was genuine enough; but I was not convinced that fear of Austen was the real explanation of her insecurity. There was something else, and I thought she would enlighten me, else why should she send for me in this ceremonious manner? But either I was mistaken, or else she had changed her mind in mid-discourse, for her speech gradually became less precise, she lost herself in vagueness, as though trying to mislead me, to put me off a scent she had originally intended me to follow, by a confusion of reminiscence, more or less unintelligible to me, and by renewed eulogies of her daughter, when she could think of nothing else to say, that broke from her with really lyrical ecstasy and brought back the note of conviction into her now uncandid utterance. I was, I confess, inquisitive—disappointed, and, under my disappointment, vexed with myself, for I knew that by a little clever management one could get whatever one wanted from this stupid woman. I wasn't clever, though, any more than she; and, moreover, the situation was rapidly becoming ludicrous, for we were at a deadlock, and I saw that she did not know how to get rid of me. I had a little revenge on her then, for instead of getting up of my own accord and wishing her good-night, I remained obtusely seated; however, although it briefly amused me to tease her thus, and to

observe her growing discomposure, I presently tired of my own game and came away from the interview as dissatisfied as, no doubt, Mrs. Godavary herself.

9. *Wednesday*

ON THE following morning when I woke it was raining again, and I lay for a while remembering that I was at the Grange and that, whatever my disinclination, I must that day follow my uncle's funeral. There was already a stir about the house, and looking out of the window I saw a group of men assembled near the porch: dalesmen, they were, shepherds with their dogs, fine mountain peasants standing about, come down from the hills to pay their last tribute. They looked like men who had known all weathers; men whose energy had been turned wholly to supporting hardships; not a softness amongst them, save perhaps for an animal in pain. They looked like men who didn't often meet with their fellows, at least not collectively; men who led separate, hard, solitary lives; for now that they had the chance they edged together, speaking in low tones with glances up at the windows, and keeping their dogs, who also tried to slink sociably towards one another, imperatively to heel. So that each of these men, with his dog, made a little group of two, for all the attraction that drew them into speech; it was the same little group of two that had tested each other's loyalty so tautly out on the fells, in hours they never mentioned afterwards, hours of blizzard and anxiety that brought dog and man closer together than most human beings. The men had lined faces, knotty hands, sinewy knees sheathed in breeches; the dogs were slim, pointed, sensitive beasts, rather snaky, and always alert, alert, nosing about, on light, nimble paws, looking out for danger, anxious immediately to understand and carry out a command.

They made a little crowd, standing out there in the rain, leaning on their sticks, conversing in low but continuous voices. Sheep-dog trials, cattle-shows, they were discussing. Presently Julia, a mackintosh flapping round her and an umbrella held over her head by Harry, appeared with a tray of steaming glasses full of hot punch. I should never think of Julia except as administering creature comforts. She seemed glad, in spite of the rain, to remain amongst the men, receiving their chaff and giving back as good as she received, and there was a good deal of laughter, subdued after apprehensive glances at the windows. I dressed and went downstairs, where I found the others gathered in the smoking room. Rachel was crying quietly in a corner; Austen scowled into the fire. I knew that they had yielded to their passion, and were now ashamed; I was certain of it. Overhead, footsteps sounded, moving backwards and forwards.

Paola, in the same gray jersey and black skirt, incorruptibly sleek, turned over the pages of that illustrated paper which she must surely know by heart.

Her mother was not there: a relief to all.

After a long while, during which nobody spoke, the footsteps overhead became more definite, heavier; a door was opened and a weight put down, as though to prop the door open; voices were heard in confabulation upon the stair. Rachel dried her tears and sought Austen's face with a hunted look; he pretended not to see. There seemed to be some hitch overhead. Before very long there came a knock upon the door and a man in a carpenter's apron showed apologetically in the doorway. He addressed Austen. "Beg your pardon, sir, but we can't get the coffin down the stairs."

"You got it up," said Austen angrily.

"Yes, upright, sir. But lengthways it won't get round the bend."

"Bring it down upright, then," said Austen at last.

The man hesitated. "'Tisn't usual, sir. It tips the gentleman. We like keeping 'em flat."

"Well, what do you expect me to do?" said Austen. "I can't widen the stairs."

"No, sir."

"Let it down from the window."

"The windows don't open at the bottom, sir."

"And it won't go down any other way?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, you must bring it down upright."

"As he walked," said Paola suddenly.

"Very good, sir."

The man went off. We heard the noise recommence, a steady noise now, and a voice, "Careful, careful." The steps descended, reached the hall, and came to a stop. They were setting the coffin on the hall table.

"We must have something to eat before starting," said Austen.

We followed him across the hall into the dining room, passing the coffin on the way, and the men wiping their brows, and opening and shutting their hands, cramped from the handles. In the dining room we ate sandwiches,

standing, like Jews eating the passover. After that, with the remainder of the sandwiches in our pockets, we went out into the hall again. The men were there, waiting.

“We are quite ready to start,” said Austen.

The coffin was lifted up once more and carried out into the porch. There stood a pony, held by Harry, with a sort of flat table instead of a saddle on its back. As the coffin appeared, feet foremost now, the little group of dalesmen moved nearer, removing their caps; the rain poured down, plastering their hair over their foreheads, but Austen made no sign, and they continued to stand bareheaded, bowing their heads with a kind of strong humility. One of the dogs began to growl, in a frightened and ominous way, but his master stooped and put his hand over his muzzle. The farm labourers were there too, in a separate group; and two or three women, black shawls over their heads, not crying, but curious. Julia was at an upper window, her arm round her mistress’s shoulders; Mrs. Godavary was not dressed, but in a pink dressing-gown leaned weeping against the window.

The coffin was hoisted onto the pony’s back; the pony started, tossed out his head, and neighed, but Harry soothed him while thongs were thrown over and the coffin secured. A wreath was brought out of the house, composed of fern, moss, and heather, and laid on the coffin. “That must be tied or it will fall off,” said Austen: it was tied accordingly. We ourselves went back into the house for our raincoats and caps; Paola alone, who had remained behind, stood there ready belted into her black oilskin, black gauntlets upon her hands; I had heard her speak once only that morning. We went out again, all of us, Austen ahead, Stephen and Michael and Rachel and Paola and I in a group, together. At Austen’s signal we set off, Harry leading the burdened pony, Austen following, the rest of us behind him, and the group of dalesmen with their dogs at a little distance. There was no road to Mallerstang church, so we must travel on foot the seven miles over the hills.

As soon as we had passed round the corner of the house we began to climb. Once, as boys, Michael and I had walked to Mallerstang behind the pony carrying our father, as Austen was walking now. For all the burials in our family took place at Mallerstang, and a pony’s back was the only means of transport. The track was known locally as Heaven’s Way. It clambered straight up the flank of the hill, scorning to wind at a more accommodating angle. It was too narrow for two to walk abreast, so our groups split up into single file, and it was now a long instead of a compact procession that straggled upwards, headed by the pony. Looking back, I saw the lake in the valley already a long way below, the sluice wall cutting across it as straight as a line drawn with a

ruler.

Nobody spoke; the dalesmen trod with their deliberate gait, more accustomed to a slope than to the level; the dogs, with lowered noses, followed mournfully to heel, each to each; man, dog; man, dog; man, dog. The dogs were like little hyphens, separating the men.

10

HE HAD been the master of these hills; he had had power of life or death over their wild creatures. This company had assembled to do him honour. The rain wept upon his bier; the mists rolled on the hilltops as a shroud. A leveret bounded away across the poor short grass. Ears flattened back, it fled, and the sheepdogs stirred slightly to interest. We climbed, and the track circled round the ridge above Black Tarn; an ancient crater, the tarn lay, a dark round shield of water in a basin at the foot of unscalable rocks. The rain glistened on the black rocks; the tarn was a black hole, of unplumbed depth, a well sunk down into the centre of the earth. Volcanic rocks, sundered by the force of their ejection, lay strewn upon its shore, derelict, half in, half out of the water, of an age transcending the granite crags in antiquity. They were strangers cast out among the granitic masses, spewed up from the foundry of a retching planet. Desolate enough, this highest ridge of Heaven's Way. The pony led us on, circling above the still dark cauldron of the tarn.

Here upon the high passes the wind blew draughtily; we had climbed far beyond the shelter and the heather. Our long, straggling procession trailed its way through the defile between Rough Crag and Mallerstang Knap—a narrow gorge, pressed close by the twin mountains. Here as boys we had often mocked the echo, but now it was in silence that we went, following the bier. From the summit of Rough Crag a mass of rock had fallen in past ages, split down the mountain side in a débâcle of stone that the shepherds called the Giants' Stairway. What a thunder had attended that avalanche on the hills, between a silence and a silence! Stones obstructed the pass, and amongst them, with its delicate, hill-born feet, the pony picked its way. The dogs writhed in and out, snaky, following their masters.

We emerged from the pass, and the track led us now over a rude, boulder-strewn fell, swept by the wind and by torrents of rain. We came upon a drove of the wild fell ponies, feeding there in the open. Whinnying with fear, they stampeded; we heard their little hoofs drumming across the turf, and saw them watching us, manes and tails wildly blown and streaming, from the top of Rough Crag, whither they had scampered. But we left the ponies and came

down into Mallerstang Valley, where the solitary church bell tolled, and the sea gulls rose and swept on their planing wings, crying above the yews and the tombstones and the open grave.

THE curtains were drawn in the smoking room, and the lamp placed lit upon the central table, when we assembled there on the evening of the same day to listen to the reading of my uncle's will. The dark red lampshade and the burning fire cast an air of ruddy comfort over the room, for which I think we were all grateful; and grateful too for the early dusk that allowed the curtains to be drawn and to shut out the valley, forlorn under the now drizzling rain. The atmosphere between us all was relieved of its strain. Ever since we returned from the funeral I had especially observed a change in Austen. He carried himself more erect, walked with a heavier assurance, and had lost his peevish scowl; he felt himself, I suppose, at last the master. He had civilly welcomed the lawyer, come out from Haresceugh, and had installed his stepmother in an armchair by the smoking-room fire with courtesy and even a show of affection, fetching her shawl, asking her whether she was comfortable there, whether she would not like an extra lamp. Mrs. Godavary received these attentions with complacency. In her, too, the change was ludicrously apparent: from the voluble, bewildered foreigner that she had been the day before, she was transformed into a personage with a sense of her own dignity—the widow, the relict, entered upon the second lap of her life, ennobled with memories that in course of time, and under the erosion of much repetition, would wear away to an illusion surpassing the original reality in comeliness. Towards Rachel also Austen's manner had altered; he no longer avoided her, nor, when he was compelled to address her, did so with a sort of angry off-handedness; on the contrary, he sought her opinion freely, and she for her part answered him without her hunted, harried air. I suppose he felt himself free, with his father decently put away, and in the husband's absence, to make the most of his opportunity. There remained Stephen, who was still apologetic and negligible; Michael, who throughout had been affected by nothing but Paola; and Paola herself, who, I was beginning to believe, had never been and never would be affected by anything outside her own rapt concentration.

The lawyer was nervous; not so ourselves. We wanted the business over; we wanted, once and for all, to be rid of uncomfortable and conventional hesitation as to who was the master. We waited, in a word, for Austen to be officially nominated. The papers lay on the table: not many of them; a long sealed envelope with a few words on it in my uncle's handwriting—most

ghostly manifestation of the dead, I always think, that survival of a familiar writing after the hand that traced it is gone. Of course we assumed Austen to be the heir; we had never queried it. We were almost merry to think that we had got through the painful part of our duty and left it behind us and might now proceed without offence to the pleasanter part—satisfaction, congratulation, albeit decently subdued, a sense of winding-up and of a new start, with all the optimism attendant on a new start, so pitifully soon to stale and to shrivel back into its proper perspective. And I remember wondering whether all families in similar circumstances passed through the same phases as ours, or whether our constitutional dread of the unpleasant rendered us particularly susceptible.

We sat round the table. Paola's hands lay forward on the table, loosely clasped. I saw her face, pale and deep shadowed, opposite me, and as it were a long way off. I remember watching her in a sort of suspended fascination and thinking that thus might a witch have looked—not the conventional presentment of a witch, haggard and evil and old, but of greater subtlety and peril, a young witch and smooth, without pity. And if I seem to contradict myself, calling her now crude, now subtle, it is because she indeed was both, blending in the thickness of her nature every inflection of danger. I remember too that Austen also watched her now, his preoccupations with welcoming the lawyer and establishing his stepmother being over, and he at leisure to isolate himself in the contemplation of his sister across the table. I say, to isolate himself; for so it appeared to me: the pair of them were isolated, shut off from all other people in the room; I was an onlooker, an observer, but the others didn't exist. So, at least, it appeared to me; though of course I may have imagined my impression since; there's a world of difference between the state of a mind uninformed and of a mind informed, and it's a ticklish task to get back from the latter state to the former. So when I say, "I remember," I ought perhaps to say "I think I remember"; perhaps the very vividness of my recollection tricks my conscientiousness; I don't know; I can only record, as scrupulously as may be.

Of one thing I am certain, and that is that when the lawyer's voice read out the facts—the facts as they were, not as we had imagined them to be—the effect was as the sudden rending of a world of silence. I had not realized until then how gravely, how securely, in what a suspension of activity, we had awaited the pronouncement. The effect, I declare again, was as of a noise loud and sudden. Yet Paola had not moved—Austen had not moved—no one had moved. I think our incredulity held us fixed. And when Austen spoke, it was to say, bending forward a little, in a very quiet, deathly voice, "Would you mind reading that again?"

The nervousness of the lawyer had now increased; he looked at us in a scared, puzzled way, as though he himself were to blame. He hawked his throat and pushed the document further forward under the lamp, so that the parchment and his hands came into strong light. And he read again, while we listened, returned into the same suspended, dispassionate void which had been so briefly broken, "My estates and properties, unconditionally, to my daughter, Paola Godavary."

MORE dramatically, more tangibly even than before, Paola and Austen were isolated in the room. We others were simply spectres, privileged to overlook, privileged even to comment, but our presence was insignificant and our voices hollow. Even the clamour which arose from the Italian woman by the fire rattled only as a stone thrown into a bowl. For she made a clamour; she got onto her feet, and, standing there, pointed a derisive finger at Austen and laughed—laughed uproariously as only a Latin can laugh whose sense of farce is tickled. She laughed as she would have laughed had she seen a man sit down on his hat or fall over a pail at the bottom of the stairs. But Austen was unmoved: he looked at her coldly, and the sound of her laughter died away, and she sat down again, a little flat, a little empty. I could guess now what she had wanted to say to me, or at least to hint, or at least to sound me about. Paola, too, looked coldly at her, making her disturbance. Nothing from outside could touch either Paola or Austen; they were concentrated upon one another. Even when Rachel laid her hand on Austen's arm and spoke in a queer, choked voice, he looked at her as though she had been a stranger. "It's not fair," she said, protecting him, "it's not possible," but he gave her no answer, and she was silent, seeing him to be beyond the reach of her proprietorship or her protection.

Brother and sister turned now to one another; they turned so gently that they might have been entering into a caress. It was very horrible. Their gentleness was deadly and born of the most profound mutual understanding. There was no explanation, and no—oh, least of all!—recreation. They were simply conquest and defeat incarnate; the years were fulfilled in them; they accepted their parts in absolute quiet. The one was not triumphant nor the other abashed; simply fulfilment had taken them and set them down. Austen, I say, was not abashed; but he might as well have been dead. And, when you come to think of it, I suppose, upon my soul, that he had been living for this moment for so many years of his life as he could remember.

I have very slight recollection of what passed between him and Paola; little enough, I think; they exchanged a few words, but words were frothy to them whose information was so deep. I know that we all, spiritually, withdrew and left them to themselves; they were as alone as two persons sharing a disaster. Our respect was impartial; this was their business. And when they had done with one another, we were still withdrawn; our reverence was immense; we confronted two who, strangely and suddenly, in our presence, had passed through a rite of initiation.

Most noticeable of all was the sobering of Mrs. Godavary. She sidled up to Paola, almost fawned upon her, and accepted without resentment the complete disregard of her daughter. Rather, she seemed honoured that Paola should not actually push her aside. Rachel hung upon Austen with the same beseeching eyes. But it was evident that neither of the protagonists desired our comments, for, having emerged now from their brief and intense seclusion, they, as by common consent, unspoken, adopted a brisk off-handedness, speaking to the lawyer, who, poor man, was conscious of nothing but his own relief at the affair having passed off so well. What he had expected I can't say; murder, almost; and in the place of murder he had had to notice no unpleasantness beyond that one disconcerting laugh from Mrs. Godavary. For my own part, I was inclined to think that murder would have been preferable.

13

AND, as the evening went on, I realized that Austen had, in fact, been murdered. I never saw resilience so completely crushed out of a man. He had, simply, no life left in him. No life, no pride, not even vindictiveness. I said, before, that he was not abashed, and I stick to what I said. He was merely empty; limp. And he was slavish before Paola; it was perfectly clear that he was frightened out of his wits, frightened of what she might yet do to him—though, in his limpness and lifelessness it struck me that a dead body might just as well fear the infliction of an extra wound. He went after her when she moved; he tried to forestall her wishes. He deferred to her: it was a horrible exhibition. Of course she received it all with such coldness that I asked myself whether she had noticed; several times I caught myself wondering how far she was conscious or unconscious, so icily detached was she. Whatever the extent of Paola's awareness, there was at least one person who had noticed, and that was Rachel; she met me in the passage upstairs and dragged me into her room; I saw her in the light, dreadfully changed, pale and drawn and shivering. She clung onto my arm; "Oh, Gervase, what's to be done? We can't stay here, we can't *watch*. Isn't there a train to take us away to-night?"

“There spoke Godavary: we always run away.”

“Yes.” She contemplated this for some time; sighed; and acquiesced. “Yes. But this is different. It’s to spare him. His subserviency. It’s degrading—oh, Gervase—to Paola and that woman!”

“Paola is his sister, after all.”

“She’s not one of us. We know each other, and it matters less. We all know each other’s faults—we share them. But Paola’s a stranger, really—a foreigner. She ought not to know: an eavesdropper, searching us out. Amongst ourselves, nothing would matter. We haven’t anything to learn.”

“My dear Rachel, Paola knows Austen as well as any one of us knows the other. Believe me, she took his measure long ago.” I didn’t attempt to speak more leniently than I felt. I was in no mood to spare the feelings of anyone with Godavary blood in them. “Besides,” I added, being thoroughly sickened by tacit conventions, “if anyone could influence Austen—rescue him, I mean, from himself, particularly at this moment—surely it would be you? Isn’t your place, rather than in the night train to London, just now, by his side?”

She shook her head, mournfully. “He’s gone away from me—right away.”

“Get him back—you love him,” I urged.

“Dear Gervase! Aren’t you remote, really, with all your imaginings, from life? You’ve got such a tortuous, fanciful mind—and yet, at times, you’re so simple. ‘You love him: get him back.’ Tell me, Gervase, you’re a lonely creature, aren’t you? Is it in self-defence? or in self-mistrust? You always seem so separate—keeping yourself apart. What’s your life outside the Grange? I believe you haven’t one.”

But I had no wish to talk about myself to Rachel, and I knew quite well that this brief interlude of interest in me had no relation to her real thoughts, which were all misery and Austen. I dismissed myself with some impatience.

“Do you think,” she asked, easily switched back to her preoccupation, “that Paola’s mother knew beforehand?”

“I think she had some inkling.”

“Not more? Not certainty?”

“No. I think she mistrusted Uncle Noble. I think she had some inkling—and considerable hope. But I’m sure she didn’t trust him not to play some trick on her.”

“Even after death?”

“Especially after death. He wouldn’t have been there, you see, to bear the noise of her rage.”

“Well, instead of that, it’s on Austen that he has played the trick. Why—oh, Gervase, why—did he always mislead him?”

“Cowardice, of course.”

“Sly cowardice. How he must have chuckled. Knowing all the while! Paola’s mother persuaded him, naturally.”

“Paola’s mother would stoop to anything for Paola.”

“Well, between them, they have killed Austen.”

“Killed Austen—yes, that’s what I think.”

We contemplated each other gravely, having pronounced Austen’s requiem. Rachel shivered and came nearer to me.

“Do you notice,” she murmured, laying her hand on my arm, “how he watches her? how he tries to propitiate her? What’s his life to be? Is he to stay here on Paola’s charity? I can’t consider it in detail, Gervase—years and years of it. With that foreign woman smirking in the background. And Julia, another foreigner, and a servant, seeing it all, sneering at Austen, pitying him, being kind to him—for she’s a kind soul.”

I agreed with Rachel. I did not care to consider it.

“Paola’s so strong, Gervase. So cold and strong. I told you she wasn’t one of us. She’s a strong thing from outside, destroying us all. Was Uncle Noble her father, even? sometimes I’ve doubted it.”

“How very outspoken,” I said, amused—though it was a grim enough amusement, “we are becoming in this house. And all this candour, forced upon us, we owe to Paola, directly or indirectly. Truly she plays havoc amongst us. Salutory—oh, let’s give her her due!”

MY CONVERSATION with Rachel went no further that night. I had had a glimpse of her—knew her to be harassed and disturbed—but I couldn’t take much interest in Rachel, though I filled in the outlines well enough—saw her life, uneasily alternating between Austen and her husband—passionately loving the one, timorously fond of the other, who represented, after all, an honest security—I filled in the outlines well enough, I say—saw her hankering after courage,

while clinging on to safety—but I couldn't take much interest—not an absorbing interest—for she was no more than a secondary figure, poor soul—no more than one of Paola's puppets. The only people that counted in the house were Paola, and Austen cringing at her heels. This was clear to me; it became clearer when I went down to dinner. It seems a grotesquely inadequate expression, "went down to dinner," when I mean to convey that I reentered that electric circle on the lower floor after my absence in the respite of my own bedroom. Paola was late; we waited for her, like waiting for a queen. Michael, whom I had forgotten, what shall I call him? the aspirant to favouritism, tremulous on the precarious brink of his position. And Mrs. Godavary was with us this evening, a squalid queen-mother, nervous and complacent, smug and insufferable.

As for Stephen, he was a hanger-on, a dreg; nobody took the smallest notice of him, and he effaced himself, in his apologetic way, as much as possible. But in his evening clothes, he looked deceptively fine and high, impressive almost, an echo of the brother who lay in his grave under the rain at Mallerstang, and who had played so reverberating a trick upon the remainder of us, living.

In the dining room, when Paola had at last appeared, we found a change: the round table had been squared, and Paola's place laid at the head. I had the suspicion that Austen himself had given the necessary order.

15

WE SEEMED to have come to the end of our adventure; there seemed to be nothing left now but for us to take our leave, and to let Austen, Paola, and the Italian woman settle down into the groove ordained for them, working it out as best they might, the trio, obscure enough to the world at large, but intense to themselves, in the dale that enclosed and focussed so tightly and corrosively the lives of those who dwelt within its prison. I assumed that Paola would allow her brother to live at the Grange, and I assumed also—with contempt—that Austen would submit himself to the favour conferred. My brain ran up and down the clefts of Austen's nature, even though, save when he had been a little boy, my acquaintance with him was limited to rather less than two full days; still, I could run up and down him, with an instinct to guide me, much as I could go up and down the clefts between the fells even in the remoter parts where I had never actually explored before. I didn't think that our tragedy would slash asunder the knot between him and his sister. I thought that the situation would drag itself out, slow and dumb; spiritual, not melodramatic. I

thought—but if all that I have written has not been in vain, no need remains for me to paint in the long details of my speculations. And I must hurry on, for I have already lingered sufficiently over these two days, and the pile of covered foolscap grows at my elbow; I have lived too intensely in the prison of the dale, during these evenings when, after my day's work, I have sat down to dip my pen and write my record; even in my working hours the dale reaches out after me, closes round me, and settles down upon my spirit. I must make an end, and emerge once and for all into a freer, a wider, air.

Shall I be freed even then, I wonder? Is my inheritance so lightly to be cast? Paola—ah, Paola would have freed us all; she was clear sighted; her hand struck swift and unhesitating. What she could do for us, she did; but was our freedom beyond even Paola's power? Substance she could destroy; legend, perhaps, eluded her. Eluded even her. Supposing that Paola, instead of destroying the legend of the Godavarys, has merely added to it? And that, I think, is the truth. She would have set us free; she has but added to our legend and our oppression. Well, the dramas of the Godavarys have been many; if I chose to ramble back over the centuries I could pick up many and many a thread to trail across as many pages as I have already filled here, and I like to play with the conceit that between the annals of our race and the annals of those bloodstained, hard-bitten Italian broods that strove somewhere in the background of Paola's ancestry, a resemblance existed.

I lose myself in these depths; I see Paola as I always saw her: modern, yes, the cosmopolitan Paola of Paris and Rome, of opera house and race course, languid, bored, courted, coldly sensual; I saw the young men who would be her lovers—and to be her lover would be a question of fashion, a training school for all young men to pass—I saw them with their greyhound figures and English clothes, and their blunt heads, dark as sloes, and Paola easy and indifferent with them all; but also I saw the Paola whom I had thought should sit to Leonardo, that more eternal Paola—and the limbs of the young men were now shapely in red tights, and their hair brushed out into a *zazzera* under the little jaunty red caps.

So I play round the myth of Paola, and my record lags. She has gone now, back to the Italy that bred her, trailing her mother behind her, increasingly slovenly, I wager, half proud, half petulant, storming now at Paola, now fawning upon her; and with them trails Julia, always practical, always unperturbed, arriving with that genius of hers at the right moment, scolding or comforting, and providing like a conjuror the necessities of creature life. Paola has gone, but her myth endures; the proof is that I, who knew her but for three days, retain the strong, stamped impression.

Yet Paola was nothing to me.

My God, the stab of my pity for Michael!

But these thoughts avail me nothing. Michael never breathes her name; he only looks old, eaten up, consumed by something secret; haunted, he looks. He has lost all life, I suppose, since she passed over him like a scourge.

16

SO OUR adventure, as I thought, was over, and dullness descended. There was nothing before us but next morning's train. The night, when I looked out for a moment after dinner, was clear; no rain, no mist, no moon either, but fine big stars, and all so still that I could hear the wether's bell tinkling up on the fells, through the noise of the becks purling down the hillsides. Rachel joined me as I stood holding the door ajar onto the night. I did not want Rachel at my elbow; she troubled me, and I couldn't help her, so we were better avoiding one another; but, no, there she stood. And she was shivering again, as before; she wanted counsel, support, because she hadn't the strength in her to rely upon herself. But she might have known that it was no good to come to me: wasn't I Godavary too? I fear I was rough to her timid voice. She was trying to make an alliance with me, and I wouldn't be drawn into that new grouping; I was sick of the dale and its ways. Rachel whined and whispered at my elbow; she shifted her body like a soul in distress. But I shut the door, dropping the curtain back over it, and turned towards the smoking room. She followed me across the hall, murmuring rapidly, so as to complete the phrase of her whimpering. It was like being followed by an importunate and plaintive ghost.

I felt that I had disentangled myself from her fingers when I reached the light of the lamps; truly, her fingers had begun to weave around me the slight ligaments of cobweb which, as I well knew, embroiled and impeded; I would have nothing to do with them, whether they came from Rachel or from another. I would hold myself apart. To-morrow I should be out of the place, and might I be hanged if ever it caught me again. And there was the Italian woman, now, bending over me, sniggering to me with a hateful assumption of conspiracy; hadn't she sent for me? hadn't she given me a hint of what was in store? no, be damned to her, I nearly cried; not a hint had she given me, only created an atmosphere of uneasiness in that cluttered-up room of hers, only yapped about Paola, but never a hint that the uninitiated might read. And how much had she known herself? She had hoped, no doubt; trusted to luck; but for all her plaguing of her husband, and for all the assurances he had probably given her to make her hold her tongue, she could never have felt confidence in

him; she must have known him pretty well, in her shrewd Latin way, known him slippery as a fish, cowardly and unreliable as all Godavarys. Well, she had got better than she could have depended upon getting; he hadn't played her the easy trick after all—but I guessed she had lived through a bad moment when the lawyer had started reading the will.

I could not endure her bending over me any more than I had endured Rachel's chattering nearness; I hated her coarse triumph and the warmth emanating from her body as much as I had hated the other woman's irresolution and her phantom-like flutter after me across the hall; they both gave me a nausea and a weariness, in their separate ways. Of the two, I had to own, the Italian woman was the healthier. But I shifted in my bodily discomfort, as Rachel—poor Rachel—had shifted in her soul-distress. I knew that Austen eyed us; that he guessed, more or less, what Mrs. Godavary was whispering to me, with those little explosions of laughter, and a repressing hand carried to her mouth. Oh, she was vulgar, that woman; she was a concierge, a peasant; she was ten times more vulgar than Julia. She had scored so completely, on behalf of the daughter for whom she would have risked everything. Paola—my mind swung over to Paola: she had given no sign of triumph, she had accepted quite coldly; consequently, she was more deadly than poor coarse Mrs. Godavary; it wouldn't be Mrs. Godavary that destroyed Austen, it would be Paola. But with what calm, what dignity, really, Paola had accepted it all. She was ice-cold; she had the reserve of high, perfect breeding. She had the diabolical hardness of her particular quality. It was then, I think, as I looked round for an escape from Mrs. Godavary, that I first observed Paola's absence from the room.

Others observed it too; Michael, always a lost dog when she was missing, roamed vaguely; his face, lantern-jawed at the best of times, hung gaunt now like a face seen in a distorting mirror. He no longer existed, simply, for Paola; not even as a pastime; even as that she had discarded him. But still he fretted after her; still, had she been there, would have sought to attract her attention, though he knew it to be in vain. Her handkerchief lay dropped upon the hearthrug; he picked it up, almost fondled it, put it in his pocket, unashamed though any of us might notice him. Mrs. Godavary did notice; she nudged me with a smirk, but I drew away: I wouldn't deride my brother to please this foreigner. Mrs. Godavary laughed and looked at me with bright little triumphant eyes; it was the triumph of the South over the North, of Paola over the Godavarys—Austen, Michael, Rachel, all her victims—the triumph of the old hard civilized intelligence over our misty and superstitious ignorance. And Michael still roamed; he was shameless. He went to the window, jerked back the curtain, and threw the window up; the cold air streamed in, causing the fire

to flicker.

We listened: a dull noise grew upon our ears; a bruising of the night. It was faint and distant enough to leave room for doubt. We put our heads on one side, absurdly, to hear better, like dogs listening. And as we grew certain, our ears becoming accustomed to the note they were to listen for, Austen said, “The sluice.”

17

I WAS unmoved; no excitement stirred me. If tragedy was to turn to melodrama—well, that was a solution, a winding-up, preferable to the long dragging-out I had foreseen. If we could move our limbs, hurry them to action, so much the easier, and the hollow suspense would be filled. All the horror vanished at the entrance of reality. Relieved we were; we breathed; we looked at one another, for here was an easy danger where hand could pull on hand, voices advise, and shoulders be squared to a burden—no inarticulate straining out of soul to soul. And as Austen said, “The sluice,” I was a man again, not a thing of wispy fears and tangled imaginings. Michael too—he had a suddenly new concern: his arms might bear her body to safety if not to bridal. I looked at him: he was strong. Rapid, too: he was out in the hall on the instant, calling for Paola. We were all in the hall, with the front door torn open, and the bruising sound of the falling water coming through the night. It was louder now, with the increasing volume that drowned the purling of the becks; it filled the night, deep and distant; a full, dark sound; falling, falling. We could see nothing as we looked out at the door, nothing but the stars above our heads, and the heaped outlines of the fells, and in front of us the levels of the valley, stretching away to the hidden lake, a dim valley, enclosed by the hills, marshy in places, with little lagoons glimmering in the starlight. A cry of duck came from the marshes, a thin scared cry against the heavier falling of the water, and the wild duck rose and passed in their spear-headed flight across the stars, flying towards the lake. They streamed out, with their necks outstretched, and their wings lifting them on in their shapely formation. Alarm was abroad, and the roar of the water rose solid behind the smaller cries of birds and animals in distress.

Paola came, before Michael could set out to look for her. The light of the lantern she carried came swaying up the track from the lake before we could discern the figure of the bearer. Yet I think we all knew what mysterious figure walked in the darkness beside the swinging light. She came into sight, and stopped below the doorstep, black in her oilskins as the night itself, only her pale face gleaming between the high collar and the low cap. I could look at

nothing but that ivory pallor and the soft caverns of her eyes. She was calm as ever, nonchalant even, surveying the group that pressed forward at her in the lighted door. She didn't speak; the voice of the water was her interpreter. She only looked us over with a slow smile, small and glistening and incorruptible.

I don't know for how long we faced her. She stood with the lantern, the darkness pushed back round the yellow circle, with moths and bats wheeling round her and knocking themselves against the glass. She stood there, those little creatures of the night flying round her, her oilskins gleaming, and her face lighted to a greenish brilliance. The roar of the falling water boomed out now in a great volume, steadily pouring, a beautiful dull sound, incorporate with the night and the fells. Let this not be dismissed as rhetorical: the sound reverberated with all the darkness of the night and all the rondure of the fells. The water poured through the sluice, surely, in a great curved blade, black as iron. I went to Paola and said to her, "We have only to close the sluice."

Looking towards me, though by reason of the light that blinded her and of the darkness that enveloped me, she can have known me only as an impertinent voice floating towards her, she scorned that remark. The cogs were broken, the pulleys flung away. I had known this even before I spoke. The cogs and pulleys were little trivial things succumbing to her venom, no more to her than Austen and Michael and the rest of us.

The men were moving. Round the still figure of Paola with the lantern they stirred in different directions, till the group had dispersed, Austen going towards the lake, though I could have told him his effort was in vain. He went at a shambling run, head bowed, shoulders bent, and Rachel went beside him, a hopeless woman still clinging to a broken man. We lost them almost at once, down the dimness of the track. I wondered idly whether they would ever return. Michael came up to Paola, and I saw their faces hung briefly in the light of the lantern, with the moths beating between. So concentrated they were; such coldness on her part, such despair on his, that I turned away from them. I wondered that Paola was not afraid; and simultaneously I discovered a truth I had always known: she knew no fear.

I would have gone with Michael, but she detained me. "Stay with me, Gervase." I stayed. This isolation with her, this chance of looking into her mind, were more than I could resist. There were plenty of men to deal with the not very urgent danger. The cowmen were out now, roused from their sleep—for in common with their kind they slept early; their bewilderment turned to efficiency, and I could see them in their shirts and trousers going towards the byres, and presently heard their voices among the cattle, and the sound of chains falling loose. Paola, who had set astir all this commotion, remained

unmoving while activity streamed round her. It was evident that she intended to take no further part in the movement she had released. She had emerged from her passivity to execute her one deliberate action; now she was returned into her passivity again.

“Statuesque—aren’t you?” I said to her bitterly, “an image; you crushed Austen by your silence, by your presence; that’s what I had against you. It was a spell, wasn’t it?—to frighten him. Let me tell you that you’ve broken it by your mischief now: loudness breaks spells, you know. The magic’s gone.”

She simply observed that she didn’t know what I meant.

“Oh, no,” I said, “you wouldn’t understand. We understand, we superstitious Northerners. You react on us, and we drape your crudity with the attributes of magic. Don’t you see that everything turns to superstition in our minds? Mystic, we are; we’re soaked in the sense of fate and terror. That’s the true meaning of mysticism. But what’s the good of talking to you, Paola? You’re a Latin.”

“You’re afraid of me,” she replied.

Because it was true, I protested. “Not afraid of you,” I wound up, “when you become active—break sluices, drown your home—that’s a thing one can deal with. I only fear you when you sit silent, absorbing our souls”; but it occurred to me then that instead of looking into her mind myself I was giving her a very good opportunity of looking into mine, so I broke off short and said soberly, “I suppose you realize what you’ve done.”

“The house will go,” she said.

“Twenty foot of water over the roof,” I answered, and for the first time in my life I loved the Grange, now that it was threatened. “The valley will go too,” I went on; “by to-morrow morning the fields will be a lake. The water must be creeping along the road already.” We were alone now; the men were all in the byres, and past the continuous roar of the sluice we could hear the lowing of the cattle. I say we were alone; and indeed there was a peculiar quality in our separation from others, in our idleness while others dealt swiftly with emergency; that circle of light, too, in which Paola stood, cut her off from the world of darkness and water—a prisoner over whom I stood sentry, but a prisoner free from the cringing of prisoners; a prisoner calm and indifferent and unrepentant, who had made no comment on her crime, on whose crime, moreover, no comment had been made. “Speak!” I said, for it was her silence that gave her superiority over me, “Speak, instead of standing there, absent from the damage you’ve brought upon us.”

The cattle began to come from the byres; they came with their customary mildness, placid under this unwonted interruption of their night. They swung past Paola and me, like great moths lit in passing by the light of the lantern, turning their dark muzzles in a troubled way towards us, as the light fell along their creamy flanks. The men came behind them, striking them idly with sticks, and the dogs ran in and out, barking up at the great soft lowered heads. "O sacrificial heifers," I said ironically, "where are the garlands upon your horns?" They snuffed towards Paola, the immovable priestess—the great heads coming into the light, and the slow feet crunching down upon the gravel. I saw her with the moths beating wildly round her lantern, and the great heads thrust at her, the cusped horns, the black muzzles, and liquid eyes. She seemed surrounded now by the great gentle heads, thrust out of the darkness into the circle of her light. The vague bodies moved, with swinging tails and cavernous shadows below their joints, and the sad procession passed on, slow but for the snaky dogs that writhed in and out, running swiftly to and fro, their anxious eyes always returning to the men.

Now the last straggler passed out of sight round the corner of the house, and I knew that they were taking their way up into the safety of the hillside. Presently we should follow them, when the water stole towards us and whispered round the walls of the house, mounting stealthily, reinforced by the battalions of flood that poured from the booming sluice. What a night, thought I; and what a dawn! for by dawn the whole would be accomplished, and we should look down on still gray waters where we had been accustomed to find the house with its roofs and threading chimney stacks, and the lush valley fields. It was late, and the stars were brilliant above the fells. Orion had not yet risen from behind the barrier of hills, but the Plough wheeled to the north, and Cassiopeia; Altair in Aquila thrust a dagger into the Milky Way, and the bright Vega blazed alone like a white jewel overhead. All was still but for the dull falling of the water. Then two men came from the byres, bringing the bull; they held him with a pole hooked to the ring in his nose; they threw their weight back against the pole, setting their feet firmly as he bored his way forward, putting down his head and shaking it from side to side. I saw him, monstrous and magnificent, a very engine of creation, angry at being disturbed, angry at the restraint of the pole, square and heavy upon his short legs, a tuft of curls between his horns; a black beast, a vast shadow in the night of shadows. He came towards us, with the men striving against him; they uttered little grunts of effort; he breathed so that we could hear his breathing; he advanced upon us in his heavy, checked, laborious way. Those pale, mothlike heifers, with their placid reproach, had passed first as the harem of this black sultan. He issued as a sultan from his palace, a full-grown bull, stall-

bred, kept for purposes of rude creation, never before having snuffed the night or mirrored the points of starlight in his eyes.

I thought Paola would make way. But she remained where she was. The men called out to her, and she turned her eyes in answer; she didn't even turn her head. The bull came near to her, though the men tried to keep him back; black statuary in the lantern light. For she was like a gleaming black marble statue, and the bull was black as night, with his shining muzzle and the thick curls between his horns. He put down his head at Paola, and she put out her small hand and touched him lightly on that tuft of curls, but the men shouted and pulled on the ring; "Huh!" they shouted, and jerked the ring, and his great head came round, and he stumbled a little as his cloven forefeet crossed over one another at the turn. Then they went off as the heifers had gone, round the corner up the hillside. The bull bellowed once as he went, with a sound that like the roaring of the sluice held the darkness of the night and the rondure of the fells. It was a sound scooped out of the night, as the shape of a white wind-filled sail is scooped out of the blue and white day.

I was quite detached from Paola now. She was something extraordinarily motionless, with the animals filing past her, first the heifers, then the bull, and now the swine. In a hurried, tight little drove they came, rushing senselessly, bulging out at the sides, checking suddenly, rushing again. Their tight little black backs tossed like a sea, their hard little cloven feet cut into the gravel like a rattle of cavalry. They had none of the placid dignity of the cattle. They were the populace, wildly scurrying. Their frightened squealing was vulgar. The men beat on their backs with sticks, keeping them close lest a panicky straggler should give them the slip.

They rushed up the road, the tossing sea of their backs broke round Paola, they enclosed and surrounded her. I thought that she would fall—that she would go down, ludicrously, amongst the pigs. The men were alarmed and tried to beat them off. But she seemed wholly immune. Her small black figure rose like a column above the sea of backs, bristly along the spine as the light fell on them. Michael came round the corner of the house and stopped dead as he saw her. "Circe, by God!" he said, and I saw that his face was white.

SHORTLY after midnight we were ourselves forced to take refuge up the hillside. We had remained as long as possible down by the house, working to save our possessions, carrying them to the line of safety on the hill. It was easy to estimate where the water would find its own level—twenty feet, as I had

said, above the roof of the house—there wasn't any doubt, or any danger, certainly, but in spite of that the advance of the water was extremely grim. When first I saw it, a shudder ran all over me; I saw it as a black, thin line, very shallow, crawling over the grass. For it crawled, as an enemy slinking and insidious, an enemy on hands and knees. It came towards me over the grass, the starlight just enabling me to see it, very thin and low, crawling forward, lipping round the molehills, till their peak stood out like a tiny island; crawling forward again, flowing into the ruts, spreading its mere over the smooth places, taking the grasses under. It crept towards me like the blade of a slow scimitar, scything the grasses, so thin and stealthy that I found it hard to connect this advance with the vigour of the distant roar. I stood still, looking down; it crawled nearer to me; the water crept round my feet. The stars, which were very bright, reflected in tiny blurred points all over the expanse of the mere. And I could hear the crying of birds, for the curlews had risen, and the air was full of wings, beating without understanding over the great shield of the new waters.

The thin black blade had reached me; the water crawled round my ankles with its cold caress and filled into my shoes. I was surrounded by that rising tide. Then I heard a sound of splashing, and across the dim distance of the mere I made out two dark figures tramping through the flood. My eyes were tired, by then, of the constant effort to pierce the darkness. I could only see the dark forms and hear the weary splashing of the footsteps. As they came nearer I distinguished Austen and Rachel; they came to me like persons rescued from drowning, their clothes hanging sodden about them, their hair dank, their faces greenish-white, their hands greenish-white likewise in the starlight, and hanging slack as though from their fingers should depend long streamers of slimy weed. "Full fathom five," thought I, "it were better so." The woman's hair was loose, and plastered about her shoulders, giving her an inexpressible air of despair and neglect. Yet of the two she seemed to retain the most life in her, dwelling all in her eyes which fastened themselves upon the man with an anguish and yearning to which he seemed oblivious. They came up with me, and even paused; Austen paused to look at me, and Rachel too stood still, her movements regulated by his, her eyes remaining fixed on him without deviation towards me, until he should give the signal to move again. He looked at me in the dumb and beastlike manner of some derelict of humanity huddled on a doorstep on a winter night. It seemed to me almost that he was misshapen, so sunken was he into himself, so brutishly did he lower at me from under his brows, without the pride to lift his head.

Then, as poor pilgrims, they continued on their way, without a word spoken; and at a distance I followed them. The water crawled in our wake,

sluggish but ever spreading. The protraction of our catastrophe produced a sense of anticlimax; we had not been swiftly overtaken; no merciful knife had sliced our hearts; we must endure for hours before beholding completion. I shuddered at the thought of those hours. I shudder again at the thought of them, now that they lie behind me. At night I dream myself on the hillside; I awake twitching with the suspense. I feel again the cold, and the damp; I see the huddled group, I hear the low tones of the men; I hear the gentle, puzzled snuffing of the beasts; I hear the thunder of the sluice; I see Paola, withdrawn from us, sitting motionless on a boulder, with her chin in her hands. Like a small black figure of fate she was sitting there when Austen and Rachel drew near; her cap over her eyes was like a helmet. She never moved; throughout the night she never moved. We were a camp of nomads, homeless, grouped round her. Men and women, cattle and dogs, dependent upon her to whom we owed our destruction. At a gesture from her I believe we would all have taken up our packs and walked, driving the flocks before us. She didn't make the gesture. I don't believe she saw us or knew that we were there; she was only waiting for her work to fulfil itself out to its appointed end. I see her silhouette on the boulder now, like a carving, beautiful of line and hard as stone—stone like the rock she sat on—so that she seemed embossed upon it, carved out of one piece. She was small and terrible—evil, possibly, though I for one would never call her so, but certainly superb. It was an experience—though to this day I have not made up my mind what, precisely, it did to me. But it was an experience to live through. It had (that night on the fellside) the grandeur of great art. It had, too, the tragic and the pitiful richly mixed. For all the household goods of the Grange were there, hurriedly carried out, dumped into safety, all such as could be moved: chairs, clothes in armfuls heaped together, saucepans, pictures, towel horses, books: all their poor salvage under the stars, wearing the tragic cloak of disaster with a scrubby lack of success. Not even the fells and the night could invest those humble servants of daily life with dignity. Meanwhile the waters rose, invading the despoiled rooms; when first it crawled in at the door and over the floor of the hall I was there to see, and followed it, treading in its few inches, when it entered the living room and lipped round the still hot embers of the fire. It explored the house, crawling round the hall, mounting the stairs step by step. I ran upstairs, I turned on all the lights that I could find. I flung back the curtains, till the light streamed from the windows of every room. I don't know whether those watching on the hillside knew what I was about. I only know, for my own part, that I was possessed by a fury of emotions I shall not attempt to register. But above all I was determined that the Grange should go down bravely, in an act of defiance.

I came downstairs again, and met the water, deep, by now, in the hall, a

mirror of lights. The reflections broke and shivered as I splashed my way through. I left the house to the water and the lights. From outside it rose already out of a black lake, like an illuminated and foundering ship at sea. I climbed a mound out of the reach of the water. Through the windows I could see into the brightly illuminated rooms, empty, and familiar still, though the pictures had been unhooked from the walls, leaving squares of a deeper colour on the faded wall papers; and though all small objects had been swept from table and mantelpiece, still it was the Grange as I had known it, now to be swallowed up forever before my eyes. The water had risen to the sills of the ground-floor windows. It seemed but a few moments, though in fact a full hour must have passed, before the windows were covered over. Their lights gleamed through the water. Still it mounted, creeping up the stonework, and now it seemed to come faster, after the slowness of the first advance, mounting the upper floor windows by inches, glazing them over, and blurring the edges of the lights as a star is blurred through a misty sky. The mound on which I stood overtopped the roof, so that I looked down into the windows through the water, and now by an illusion I almost believed the house to be sinking, for the effect of rising water diminished, and the house indeed seemed to be foundering into a black and motionless sea. I could no longer see any details within the rooms; I could see only the vague yellow gleam of the lights, as of a submarine dwelling; I expected to see a great fin wave slowly past and enter the windows, and the undulation of lank sea plants rising up from the floors. I was glad that no one was beside me. They were all up on the hill, held there, frozen there, by the silent spell of Paola. I was alone to see the Grange go under.

WHEN the first paling of the dawn was in the sky the waters closed over the roof, and at the same moment, as by dramatic intention, the lights went out. Only the chimney stacks emerged. The block of the house was discernible beneath the now graying waters. I gazed down upon it with such melancholy as I had not conceived possible. It was gone at last; swallowed up, submerged. And I thought of it rotting there, its woodwork eaten away by the water, its stuffs and curtains sodden into decay, its stairs silent in a crystal prison. Not even a wave would disturb its mouldering sleep, for when a wind rippled the surface of the lake the cubes of water in the rooms would still stand solid, not lapping against the partitions or lipping into any semblance of life. In the course of years the timbers would fall in, the roof collapse into ruin, until only the stone walls were left standing, a matter of curiosity for the chance tourist

rowing in a little boat and peering down upon the legendary Grange as upon the drowned palaces of Baia.

I turned away. My solitude was over. Strangely enough, my London life, my office life, came surging back to me. It was the first time I had remembered it since I set foot on Haresceugh platform. Three days—I couldn't believe it. Three days—of interlude? or of a return to the only permanency? I slowly climbed the hill. They were all there; not a position had shifted; all there, huddled round the still figure of Paola on the rock. One shepherd slept, wrapped in his cloak, his back against a boulder. Only the cattle moved, snuffing round for pasture. I surveyed my kindred with more contempt than pity. One by one they raised to me their weary and melancholy eyes; Michael, Stephen, Rachel, Austen, looked at me briefly and sank once more into their stupor. I looked at Paola. Crouched above them, she dominated them, but her eyes were far away, under the black helmet of her cap. She wasn't seeing them or me. Then I noticed her mother. Seated on the ground, at the foot of Paola's rock, her arms clasped round her knees, like an old gipsy woman, she swayed very slightly backwards and forwards, nodding her head as to the rhythm of some inward and pleasing thought, a grin of faint delighted malice on her lips.

I left them then, as I took the mountain path over the heights to Haresceugh. From the summit I looked down once, on the Godavarys left alone to confront the floods and the dawn.

GOTTFRIED KÜNSTLER



GOTTFRIED KÜNSTLER

A MEDIÆVAL STORY

THE low afternoon sun of winter slanted through the pine trees onto the frozen lake. As in a painting it slanted, in rays so definite as to seem artificial. Between the trunks of the trees it slanted, the stripes of its rays so golden as to appear full of dust motes in the blue afternoon. The winter afternoon was made up of blueness, of golden rays, of blue ice, of the dark block of pine trees on the shore—and of figures on the ice, skating. They sped; they glided; they numerically skidded and revolved. On the blue expanse of the ice they gave the impression of being composed chiefly of limbs, and of being smaller than life. The torso dwindled; limbs acquired an exaggerated importance: spindly legs and arms, black and shapely on the ice, the legs sustaining the body, the arms outstretched, complementary to the fine gliding gesture of the legs; the grosser torso became a mere adjunct to the skill and design of the slender limbs. Here, on the frozen lake, were at least five hundred beings temporarily released into the simple and intricate pleasure of rhythm. And if they seemed smaller than life, it was doubtless because they sped or circled on so generous an expanse of ice, illuminated by the rays of a sun so low and apparently so artificial. Despite the many colours in which they were garbed, at a first glance they showed as so many black silhouettes in movement; it was only on a closer inspection that the reds, the greens, the yellows were revealed. The whole population of the town, seemingly, had speckled itself out over the ice, leaving care behind; leaving the whole encumbrance of family or relationships behind too, for most of the figures were single; it was rare to see even so much as a couple, making a thicker blotch as they sped interlaced. Most of the figures were isolated, detached. It was not only their limbs that showed up against the ice, but their identity.

But since it is impossible to write of a crowd, even a crowd so sharply and

smallly broken up as five hundred citizens skating on a frozen lake, we must single out one or at most three figures, and pursue the adventure which began with ambition and ended as we shall presently relate. This particular afternoon, as should rightly have been explained in the first paragraph, fell upon a Sunday in December in the year 1523; on a Sunday, else Gottfried Künstler would have been at his desk in the warehouse of a Hanseatic merchant, instead of on his skates with the cold air whipping his face and his black scarf flying out behind him. He was a good skater, he was alone, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself. For this afternoon, at least, he had resolved to forget all his troubles; it was as though he had crowded them all into a bundle and with a push had sent the bundle scudding away across the ice, travelling faster and faster, until it dwindled in size and disappeared over the edge of the world. That was a fairy-story, of course, a Märchen; this was an afternoon for Märchen. Even the skaters, whom in his sober mind he knew to be but his fellow citizens out on holiday, looked like the good folk of tales. The children's cheeks were so rosy, their eyes were so blue, like blue smears as they floated past him; they were so absurdly done up in woollen caps and scarves; round caps with a tassel on top, woollen scarves streaming, tubby little bodies perched on a pair of legs; and red cheeks, red noses, blue smears for eyes. It was a long time since Gottfried had felt so happy, so lighthearted, as though he had bound wings to his heart in the same moment as he bound skates to his feet; he felt as winged and as bright as that V of wild duck flying above the ice, necks outstretched, keeping formation, slow and grave in their flight, but high, high above the world. Gottfried was not high above the world, but he was slippery on its surface; that was a good substitute for height; the laborious processes were abolished; a push of the foot sent him gliding; a twist of the shoulders sent him circling; his whole body was rhythmically gratified; it was like the dream which floats one down a flight of stairs. And the children so woollen, tubby, and red-nosed. That was part of the delight to Gottfried: this mixture of the almost disembodied movement and the stolid, folklore look of the population.

But the word ambition has been mentioned, and since ambition may take many forms, it is as well to say at once that in Gottfried Künstler it took the form of cutting difficult patterns on the ice. His was a complicated and restless nature which preferred a spiral to a straight line. So it was not to be expected that he would for long be satisfied with speeding across the ice, even though a chain of frozen lakes should lead him eventually to the Baltic, and even, supposing the Baltic to be frozen all the way up to Spitsbergen, to the North Pole. Such an objective was too definite for him, too geographical; for although he might take pleasure in the joviality of his fellow skaters, there was

something fluid and suggestive about a pattern which flattered a very need of his soul. Thus, skating was to him not merely a physical, but an æsthetic pleasure. It provided him with a release, in the drabness of his usual life. Besides—for he was fastidious and proud—he liked the idea of cutting his patterns as it were in space; if he left a mark at all, it would soon be obliterated; he liked doing something very difficult, which no eye would observe or be able to follow, and which he himself would not be able exactly to repeat. Indeed, one of the reasons why he loved the ice was because it so soon dissolved and was lost without trace into the commonwealth of waters; so fine, so enchanted, so steely, so perfect in itself, when it was there, it was yet so brief; in such a way, he thought, he would wish the best of himself to crystallize once into existence and then be lost and forgotten.

Meanwhile such grandly wasteful thoughts were far from his mind, and physical enjoyment was enough, with the cries of the skaters coming to him, and the blood running warm up and down his body. Desk or no desk, his muscles were neither slack nor stiff; and skating, which he had practised ever since he was himself a woollen child straddling about on a frozen ditch, was an accomplishment which did not fade away between winter and winter. Sitting on the wooden bench over there, on the shore, strapping up his ankles, he had wondered, as he wondered every year, whether his skill would have deserted him. Hobbling down to the lake, with the ungainly action of every animal constrained to a wrong medium—“like a bear on its hind legs,” he had thought, “or a fish gasping on the grass”—he had still been full of mistrust. But once the steel touched the ice he became a fish in water, a bird in the air, a horse upon the savannahs. Steel and ice were made for one another, as masculine for feminine. It was the joining of a circle. Very few people looked at him; up here, in the North, they were used to good skating. So he fled out to the centre of the lake, simply to stretch his limbs; and there he stayed, describing his patterns, and bringing his patterns to a click of completion with the stab of his pointed skate into the ice.

The sun, which had been low already by three o’clock in the afternoon, ceased at last to stream its slanted golden rays through the pine trunks, and after turning the trunks blood red—on the further side only, which the skaters on the lake could not see—sank below the horizon, bringing dawn to other nations as the earth rolled round towards the east. On the lake in northern Germany torches were stuck into iron holders, flaming scarlet in the blue evening. Gottfried Künstler welcomed this artificial lighting: he preferred it to the natural light of day. Fluidity was the natural, the normal, state of water; ice was a freak, a magic; walking was the natural, the normal, progression of man; skating was the freakish ease and swiftness; it was therefore suitable that

torches should cast strange shadows, and that the light should be scarlet and low, concentrated instead of diffused, catching the colours of jerkins and mufflers, making eye-sockets deeper and cheek-bones higher, turning noses and the shadow of noses into caricatures. The population skimming on the lake lost nothing by this illumination. The children became more squat than ever; the grown-ups, according to their position in the light, became rounder or more elongated. All moved with an increase of swiftness, and an increase of ease. The reds, the greens, and the yellows, interlaced into a *chassez-croisée* like an aviary of parrots. A new influx of gaiety spread like a flat tide. A band of crazy musicians struck up somewhere on the shore. Couples began to dance. Nothing was quite the same as it had been before. The lingering twilight dropped away, and with it dropped the last responsibilities of life. All was dark but for the line of fitful torches down one side of the lake. The brightly coloured skaters cast long dark shadows across the blue ice; one, lost for a moment in the gloom beyond the light, reappeared, coloured, smooth, gliding, slipping between dancing couple and dancing couple. Occasionally there was a gleam as of armour from the narrow blade of a skate.

Gottfried Künstler in the midst of this carnival cut his patterns as a poet possessed by the fiery tongues of Pentecost. Hardened skaters though they were, his fellows stopped to watch him. “Crazy,” they said of this clerk; “if he goes on like that he’ll come to grief.” The slim black, spinning, leaping figure fascinated them. Unlike the rest of them, he wore no colours. He was dressed in black from head to foot. His long shadow was less black than he. But, ambition, did we say? He leapt clean off his shadow and came to rest on the back of his head.

2

OF COURSE there was a doctor amongst the crowd; there always is. Pushing his way through the dense and immediate press of the curious—which was the easier to do, since they were all on skates and could be shoved aside—the doctor bent over the crumpled figure. No blood stained the ice: so far, so good. But the man was unconscious and could scarcely be left there, lying on the ice where he had fallen. The doctor looked up through his large horn spectacles to see whether any friends of the unknown were hurrying forward to claim him. No one came; only the babble of voices rose again, which had been hushed into respectful awe by the arrival of the doctor, eagerly testifying that the youth had been skating alone during the whole of the afternoon. Skating like one into whom the devil had entered, too, they said, and advised the doctor to have him carried to the shore, where he might be left to his fate. Couldn’t a man skate

without falling down? Couldn't a man come with his friends? Obviously this man had no friends: there was something wrong with him. No one knew him by sight or by name. The clamour grew; they urged the doctor to have nothing more to do with him.

The doctor waved them aside, but inwardly he was perplexed. He had looked through the contents of the man's wallet, slung on his belt, but beyond a few coins it revealed nothing—no name, no address. The doctor's sister, who lived with him, was a scold, and as ugly as the Duchess Margarete Maultasch whom she somewhat resembled, so the doctor dared not give the order to have the young man carried to his own house. He put up a silent prayer to Saint Luke, and then looked round for the Good Samaritan who is never lacking.

She appeared, skating up, in the person of Anna Rothe, and the crowd immediately rolled back, less in respect than in dread. Anna Rothe had an evil reputation among her neighbours; she was, in fact, suspected of being a witch. Her little house stood alone, in a clearing of the pines, on the water's edge, nor had anyone ever been known to enter it; besides, under her coif she was said to be dark, dark as an Egyptian, and secret in all her ways. The doctor himself, who in virtue of his science prided himself upon being above such superstitions, had been taught by his sister to disapprove of Anna Rothe on more reasonable grounds: a woman of thirty ought to be married, she ought to have a man to look after her, she certainly ought not to live in solitary independence on the shores of a lake. Even now, as he looked up at her, his relief was tempered with mistrust, and he made a little gesture with his fingers behind his back, a gesture which might be relied upon to ward off the influence of anything evil; then he felt a moment's professional qualm at the thought of delivering this unconscious stranger into such enigmatic hands. His mistrust was not lessened by the sudden conviction that Anna Rothe and the stranger would understand each other very well. Whence this conviction came, he could not have said, for as a rule he was anything but an imaginative man. Perhaps he might attribute it to the unusualness of the scene, and to the unusualness of the way in which these two persons were being brought together: someone had fetched a lantern, and its rays fell upon the unconscious figure; the other skaters were now all standing round in a circle; in the centre of the circle were none but Anna, the stranger, and the doctor himself. The lantern, set down upon the ice, threw a ring of yellow light, barred and streaked by the shadows of its own protective lattice. As the doctor knelt, he saw the skaters foreshortened, with these shadows dancing crisscross over their clothes and faces; they looked like a baleful and distorted chorus. No wonder, the doctor thought, discarding other ideas as unworthy of his professional dignity, that he had felt that touch of premonition as Anna masterfully took command.

GOTTFRIED KÜNSTLER came to his senses lying in a bed which was certainly not his own. It was a heavy four-poster of some dark and much-carved wood. Under his chin was linen, and hitherto he had been accustomed to a rasping blanket. The room, too, was not a room he had ever seen before. He turned his aching head, and looked towards the light. A wintry branch waved outside the small panes of the window. Devoid of leaves, it retained a twiggy design against the gray sky, which pleased Gottfried, with his love of design and pattern. He looked; saw it dimly; and closed his eyes again. He was conscious of nothing but the pain in his head. A hand touched his forehead; a voice bade him go back to sleep. He drifted off in obedience; he slept, while the sand ran through the hourglass four and twenty times.

At the end of that period he awoke, opened his eyes for good and all, and saw a woman sitting beside his bed. She was stitching at a piece of needlework in a frame. It was a circular wooden frame, and the linen was stretched taut, so that the needle went plock-plock, as it went in and out. With each stitch it seemed to stitch a piece of fate, so remorseless was the sound; and the wool, as she drew it through the linen, made a slow, deliberate, drawn-out sound, as though she drew it through the shroud of life. By her side stood a spinning wheel on which she had evidently just unravelled the skein she was now using. But no doubt Gottfried was fanciful, as he lay there, so newly returned from the frontiers of unconsciousness. The wintry branch still waved outside the window, and the first thing that really entered his mind was the movement of that branch, a creature of the lively, open air, as opposed to the quiet of the sickroom. "A windy day," he murmured, turning his head uneasily upon its pillow.

She put down her work and smiled at him. She put up a finger to her lip, to counsel him not to talk—the long tapering finger of a narrow hand. On it she wore a ring, attached to a narrow black thread which crossed over the back of her hand and was fastened round her wrist. His eyes travelled up her arm and came to rest on her face: it was small, rather pointed, and extremely delicate, and it reminded him of a drawing he had seen somewhere, but he could not remember where. He thought it might be by the painter of Augsburg, Hans Holbein. The smallness of her face was exaggerated by the close white wimple she wore, entirely hiding her hair. His eyes lingered a little, then travelled down, over the pointed black velvet bodice, the billowing black velvet skirt. At her waist hung a little gold mirror on a chain from a girdle. He sighed in acquiescent contentment; he had no desire to talk, but preferred to lie and look,

now at her, now at the branch that waved outside the window. So it was not until the evening that she discovered that he had not the faintest idea of who, or what, or where, he was.

4

CONTRARY to the doctor's idea, his sister was furious with him for his reluctance to bring the stranger home. Hands on hips, she upbraided him. The stranger could have made himself useful, she said: drawn the water, chopped the wood, swept the snow from the path; they would have got an extra servant for nothing. The doctor suspected that what she really wanted was a personable young man about the house—for he had drawn an attractive picture of Gottfried's youth, his slenderness, his flaxen hair—but looking into her hideous and angry face he thought it wiser to keep his reflections to himself. It was not only the picture of the personable young man that enraged the lady. A jealous demon possessed her; in short, she could not endure the thought of those two youthful creatures together, he so fair, she so dark, locked away so securely to do whatever they pleased in the little house on the water's edge; she gnawed her fingers as she imagined their delights. Nothing would content her but that the doctor should go to visit them and bring her his report. He tried to demur, but she instantly threatened to take his mule and go herself. So away he went, and she watched him out of sight, riding his fat mule with his servant trudging beside him, and his great cloak bellying out behind him in the wind.

It was a long ride, right round the lake, and the doctor shivered as he held his head down against the wind and came out at last within sight of Anna Rothe's house. Clambering cautiously down from the saddle, and giving the bridle into the hands of his clerk, he surreptitiously crossed himself before he knocked upon the door. How the pines brooded round the house! he thought; how queerly it stood between the frozen lake and the forest! and what was that? a cat? Meanwhile no one came to open the door. He lifted the latch and went in.

Something held him back as he tried to go forward; all the tales that he had ever heard of witches and sorcerers came rushing into his mind, so that he nearly let out a yell of fright; then turning round he saw that he had shut his own cloak into the door. Releasing himself with recovered dignity, he tentatively stirred the folds of a curtain that caught his eye. A voice bade him enter.

He found Anna stitching at her work, the spindle beside her, while the stranger idled by the window, tracing the frost fronds on the panes with the tip

of his finger. They both gazed at the doctor, but neither of them said a word. He had time to observe them; too much time; but he was so taken up with observing that he forgot to feel embarrassed. It was at Anna that he looked first. She sat at her stitching, her black velvet dress billowing out all round her, the tight bodice holding her young figure close, the long tight sleeves coming down to a point over her narrow hands. Her hands, and her throat, were as white as marble. But it was at her hair that the doctor looked in amazement. She wore no coif, no wimple, and was as fair as the stranger himself. The legend that the witch was dark as an Egyptian was shattered for the doctor at one blow. He removed his eyes to Gottfried. The young man, too, was dressed all in black, as the doctor had first seen him: the same black jerkin, the same black hose, tight-fitting his long legs. He might be twenty-eight years of age, extremely slight, extremely pale: his cheek-bones were wide and high; his whole face looked carven. His general pallor was remarkable; and his hair, like wintry sunshine above his black clothes, gave the impression of being lighter than his face. "As pale as a crust of bread," thought the doctor; "not handsome, but strange." Much to his relief, Gottfried, giving him a smile, went out of the room. It was only when the curtain had fallen behind him that the doctor realized how definite, how natural, the action had been. Gottfried had intended to be neither rude nor discreet; he had gone simply because he wanted to go; when the doctor had left, he would return. He had gone as a child, with the advent of a stranger, goes off to its own concerns.

The doctor, as has been said, was not an imaginative man; nevertheless, something in the room disturbed him. The room seemed lighter than it ought to have been. The snowy landscape outside, the frost fronds on the window, the convex mirror reflecting the snow and the sun as in a little bright but twisted picture; that elusive glimpse of the pale young man; this fair young woman, looking at him now, amused? scornful? The doctor had a strong sense of intruding where he was not wanted.

He went away without having said one word of what he ought to have said, and was soundly rated by his sister in consequence.

WITHIN a week Gottfried was physically restored, and he and Anna were out skating together. She called him Klaus. One cannot, after all, forever call a fellow inmate "You," and it is more convenient to invent a Christian than a surname for an anonymous accident whom one has adopted off the ice. The sophisticated reader of novels will long before now have completed this story

according to lending library experience, by assuming either that (a) Gottfried Künstler fell in love with Anna Rothe, (b) that Anna Rothe fell in love with Gottfried Künstler, (c) that—most promising of all—Gottfried Künstler and Anna Rothe fell in love with one another. A great disappointment is in store for the sophisticated reader of novels: none of these three things happened. This is not a true story. Anna Rothe, as her behaviour has already indicated, was no ordinary woman; perhaps she had been bewitched at birth; and as for Gottfried Künstler, now transformed into Klaus, he was in so strange a condition—having lost his memory, and consequently a large, though perhaps the most superficial, part of his personality—that nothing which could be related of him would be surprising. For hours he would lie on the floor gazing at Anna as her needle went plock-plock through the linen stretched on the round wooden frame, and he would marvel at the whiteness of her neck, where the black velvet met it, cut in a square; he would look at her hand, with the black thread from her ring crossing it; he would watch her foot as it moved up and down, driving the spinning wheel; and he would smile back at the humour of her mouth when she smiled at him, raising the frame to her mouth, biting off the end of a thread; but it never entered his head to fall in love with her. For hours he would swing with Anna across the lake, through into the next lake, and the next, and the next, their arms crossed like cat's cradle, their skates ringing in unison, their bodies tingling to the iron-cold air; but it never entered his head to fall in love with her. Love is not the only thing in the world, though the novelists appear to believe so; and fortunately there are other ways of resolving the confusion of life into some kind of synthesis. Gottfried had resolved it by simply becoming another person—a more infrequent and also a more startling way to do it than by merely falling in love, which, however, it must be conceded, offers an illusion bearing a strangely convincing resemblance to truth. But love is hackneyed and suffers from a deadly sameness. Gottfried had contrived to do something really original. He was not, of course, aware that he had done it. He was not aware that such a person as Gottfried Künstler had ever existed, smothered under poverty and domestic troubles, the nature of which will be presently and catastrophically revealed. He was just Klaus. Klaus was as happy as a child and as pure as an angel. Absolute happiness and innocence seemed to have become personified in him as majesty in the lion, fleetness in the gazelle, or fidelity in the dog. Yet he was not sugary, transparent though his candour and good faith might be; no, difficult though it is to be good without being exasperating, Klaus succeeded without effort. He was fanciful and he was inventive, and said little shrewd things which, though not exactly malicious, showed, nevertheless, a wholesomely critical sense. He pricked as sharp and cold as an icicle. Gottfried Künstler had been no better than most men: he had been petty, envious, ill-

tempered, mean, and all the things which a life of struggle harasses most men into being; yet he had had inklings at moments, as when he skated alone on that fateful Sunday, that life had turned him into something very different from the original intention. There were things in him, he knew, which did not go with the rest. Now, all that remained in Klaus of Gottfried Künstler was that secret heart of fantasy and pride which had burned in Gottfried Künstler and made him enjoy cutting difficult patterns on ice. Yes. That remained, and had come out into the open, like a marble statue which hitherto has been disguised beneath the tatters of a scarecrow.

Lucky Gottfried Künstler, thus to die and yet continue to live! to climb out of the ruts of habitual thought and walk fair and square and rapid along the road. For the rest of us, travel where we may, we take ourselves with us. Ourselves is the last person in the world we can escape from. Travel we to Asia or Africa, ourselves goes with us. The same questionings, the same memories, the same small physical secrets, the same small mental meannesses, accompany us. We seek a refuge in imagining what we could make of life might we but have it all over again. We would not, we say, sell ourselves again to the world. We would not again allow the world to corrupt us. And so we arrive at middle age. Alas that so few of us should have the luck to leap off our shadow and fall on the back of our heads on the ice!

Anna, who was a thoughtful woman and sometimes rather sad, and who had long ago decided not to consort with her neighbours, was fully aware of how much she learnt from Klaus. He enriched her. At first she had been tempted to think him "simple"; now she had learnt the real meaning of such simplicity. Moreover, he sharpened the whole of life. Through him, her perception was increased. Her vision became precise; bright; shapely; minute. Often she had looked into her little convex mirror, that reflected the room as a tiny picture, often she had seen the world through one pane of the lattice, and had found satisfaction in the neat reduction, the neat framing; now, with Klaus, every moment of the day, every circumstance of seeing took on a similar lucid, detailed quality. She found sheets of paper covered with his drawings: as fine as etchings, they represented always some minute and intricate study, either of a snake with the beautiful overlapping pattern of its scales, or a whorled shell, or the outstretched wing of a bird; drawings that corresponded to the fantasy and clarity of his mind. Whence his wisdom came, and whence his goodness, she did not know; he was quite unreal to her, an enchanted being—though at the same time he was more real than anything she had ever known; but this also was a puzzle. One thing alone seemed clear: that he was completely irresponsible and completely happy. But she wondered sometimes what changeling she had had carried in through her door.

MEANWHILE the weather behaved as though it were enchanted too. Never had such a succession of still, crystal days been seen, even in that northern country where winter yearly froze the land. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees, nor did the snow slip to the ground, but lay along the branches and outlined the twigs in horizontal white, glittering in the sun as the perpendicular icicles glittered where they hung from roof corners and made a coronet round the fountains. On the ground in the pine woods the snow was unbroken save by the pad of a hare or the slot of a deer; and there away among the trees lay the lakes, white, too, though in summer they lay among the trees like great plates of pewter. Only a narrow gray path stretched across them, leading on and on, deeper into the pine woods, till it reached some village; a path made by the country people skating in to market. This was where Klaus skated with Anna, taking her deeper into the woods than she had ever been before, till she felt that it was Winter in person that led her, so sure did he seem of his way, so palely did his hair shine as he went bareheaded, as pale as the sun slanting between the trees. Everything that was wintry delighted him, and his heart seemed as cold and pure as the ice. Nothing human had ever touched or could touch him.

One day he went out alone and returned driving a white horse in a scarlet sleigh, little bells jingling all along the scarlet reins. Anna asked him where he had got it, and he laughed and said he had got it in exchange for his Nuremberg watch, but for some reason Anna did not believe this story. So superstitious was she about Klaus, however, that she questioned him no further. She would not, by that time, have been surprised to see him return in a sleigh drawn by a pair of swans. Henceforth they drove together in the sleigh by the forest paths, the horse trotting silently over the snow, the runners gliding smoothly, the bells ringing, and little feathers of snow falling as Klaus flicked the branches with his whip. Anna thought that Klaus was becoming stranger every day, and she was aware that under his influence some transformation was taking place in herself, as though she stood still in a trance, like the rest of nature. She wondered whether she was afraid of him; but it was impossible to be afraid of anything so innocent. He was passionless, cold: that was all; not evil. Yet she shivered, as though she feared suddenly that he might congeal her forever. For a moment she hated the snowy landscape, the oblique sun, the deathly glittering stillness, the blue shadows; and themselves in the scarlet sleigh speeding lightly over the snow, purposeless, isolated. So narrow is the line between enchantment and disillusion. No such apprehension seemed to have entered into Klaus as she glanced at him; he twirled his whip, he shook the reins so that the bells jangled; sometimes he leapt from the sleigh and ran

beside it, incapable of stumbling, incapable of fatigue. He looked as right, as natural, running in the snow, as an Arctic fox.

Now that he had been released, it was impossible for him to remain within doors. He was like a creature that has spent the whole of its life in captivity. Anna set no restrictions on him; he came and he went as he pleased, and when he fetched her she laid down her work and followed him. The existence they led was idle and useless, and by some instinct she knew that it was transient; but while it lasted it seemed to her, within its compass, perfect. That sufficed. In the same way, the goodness, the purity, of Klaus, were not moral qualities; they were simply a kind of fulfilment. He had shed the inessential, like ugly clothes. All the complexities had gone from him, and that which remained of his nature was made all out of one piece. "Let us make a snow man," he said, stopping the sleigh.

They made a snow man, in the heart of the forest, such a snow man as has never been seen, as tall as a giant and as splendid as a saga. Klaus would not let Anna put a pine branch into his hand: he must be all white, he said, with nothing dark to stain him; and he scooped away the snow till it looked like sculpture, and the man stood among the pine trees like a mythological hero left over from the Ice Age, like a great stalagmite that has taken a hundred thousand years to form, and another hundred thousand to turn into ice.

The peasants found it standing there next day, and a legend began to grow up that the forests were haunted, so that the women refused to go out alone after dark. The tales increased, every market day adding something to them, after the country people had flocked into the town, and, stamping the snow from their shoes, holding out their red fingers to the warmth of the braziers, had melted into gossip for an hour before they thought about their business. Then it seemed that the gabled houses of the market place bent down to listen, and that the wooden drummer himself forebore to step out of the town clock and strike his mallet twelve times on the bell, for the market place seethed with as much excitement as when a Polish nobleman passed through in his coach, or an itinerant merchant from Russia, trading in furs. The market place was the centre of the province, as it was of the town. The peasants came to it, out of their isolation, from their little villages among the dark pines and the frozen lakes, their minds busy with the things they had imagined during the long evenings and in the mornings before the sun rose, when they had to trudge out to the sheds to relieve the heavy-uddered cows. The things they had imagined were long in the telling; many of them had to be whispered behind a screening hand, and repeated to neighbours, pressing up, who had lost a word here and there; but they lost nothing in repetition, and nothing as they passed from

second hand to third hand, and from third hand to fourth. The forests were haunted; by what? ah, the hilltops were often veiled in mist, and shapes could not be clearly seen, but the traces were left: a deer frozen stiff, a garland of mistletoe tangled in his antlers, his front leg lifted for the next bound, as though a hand had stilled him even in the midst of action; then again, all the wild beasts of the forest, the wolves and the bears, would be seen hurrying across the snow as to an irresistible summons; and the queerest things had happened even on the farms: for instance, a duck's egg had been seen walking away on a pair of webbed feet. Of these manifestations the peasants dared to speak; but of Klaus and Anna they scarcely spoke at all. Perhaps they feared that retribution would fall upon them. Perhaps they preferred the effect to the cause; the abstract to the concrete. Perhaps they were artists in their own way, transmuting one thing into something else. Perhaps the mist really prevented the shape from being clearly seen. Perhaps they divined only too well the innocence of those two persons, but enjoyed having something to talk about. It will never be known. At all events, the new legends of the forest soaked gradually into the town, and everyone, although the names of Klaus and Anna might never be mentioned, knew perfectly well who was responsible. But this was not spoken of in the public place; only between husbands and wives, within the privacy of the bedchamber; or sometimes when two women got alone together.

Then the pastor's cow ran dry, and the burgomaster's sow died, farrowing. It was a very old cow, and a very old sow, so that neither event was really surprising, but affairs had just reached that mysterious point where some development must take place, and in an equally mysterious way the name of Anna Rothe was suddenly pronounced all over the district on the selfsame day. Why the peasants had hitherto avoided it, and why, as by common consent, they decided to utter it all at the same time, is one of those things which cannot be explained; but fortunately it has very little importance. Utter it they did, and gossip grew as tangled as a blackberry bush, and just about as spiteful. Anna's morals and Anna's spells were the topic of the hour. The camps were divided, some—the women mostly—commiserating with Klaus; others coupling their names in equal guilt. It was either the witch and her victim; or the sorcerer and his prey; or the witch and the sorcerer together, in collusion; little matter how the combination was turned! The two subjects of interest remained as oblivious as though a wall of ice had been built between them and the world; they could not know how rapidly evasion had turned to definition, or definition to accusation, or accusation to the taking of practical steps. The doctor's sister strode swiftly if ungainly forward to lead the rabble. Exclamations burst from her, as though for weeks past she had been holding them corked down. Morals,

rather than sorcery, formed her line of attack, though she was careful to mention sorcery as often, since, in the first place, she perceived that this appealed to the rabble, and, in the second, she was anxious not to draw any uncomplimentary suspicions upon herself. So they were living in sin, she exclaimed; but added immediately that Anna's dark practices had been reinforced by this lover who likewise was in league with the powers of darkness. Else, she exclaimed, how had Anna Rothe, that solitary dweller, recognized a fellow spirit so unhesitatingly as he lay senseless upon the ice? Could any member of the community doubt that her brother, the doctor, who was well known to be a man with a heart as good as gold and as soft as a sponge, would not have carried the young man home to his own house for proper care in his miserable plight? (Here she glared round, as though challenging anybody present to contradict her assertion; but her ill-tempered hideousness was such that they all nodded their heads vigorously, as much as to say, she was only expressing the opinion they had held for a long time.) The doctor's sister triumphed; out of her enormous mouth proceeded the voice of justice, the voice of righteousness arraigning the instruments of evil. Sometimes her hearers, looking at her and seeing that huge gabbling mouth, those pig-like eyes, those vast flabby cheeks, averted their glance with a shudder; but they listened all the same, for she voiced those things which they were most anxious to hear. If they had a sudden vision of Klaus and Anna, young and gracious, dashing past across the snow in their scarlet sleigh, to the pretty jangle of their many bells, they shut it off as they might have turned their backs resolutely on a marsh light in summer, bent upon leading them in a wrong direction.

(Summer! But for some reason their imagination could not stretch to the continued existence of Klaus and Anna in summer. Summer was too hot, too heavy, for such delicate and brittle beings. Their pallor was made for the ice and their scarlet sleigh. Was it not related that a pack of wolves, arrested in the midst of their loping gallop, had stood stock-still among the pines and had raised their muzzles in a baying call to speed them on their way? Where would such things be in summer? Winter had seen them come, and winter must see them go.)

Still the winter persisted, delaying the thaw beyond its usual time, and this also was ascribed to the baneful influence of the pair that dwelt on the shores of the frozen lake. It was noteworthy that no villager or citizen now sought his pleasure on the lake, either on Sunday or holiday. Shrove Tuesday passed without the usual carnival. The municipality no longer went to the expense of lighting the row of torches down the shore, nor did any vagrant musicians stop to play, since all the skaters had betaken themselves elsewhere. Only, at

evening, when the sickle moon travelled the sky slung between two planets, two figures might be seen skimming the surface, small, black, and apart, then joining together, hand linking up into hand; swinging together for a space, then separating once more and describing a parabola, coming together again, having the whole of the flat frozen acres of water as their playground, beneath the domed, spangled acres of heaven. They were, of course, unaware of the eyes that peeped at them between the trunks of the pines. Those who have nothing upon their conscience always are unaware. Yet those eyes, could they but have touched them, would have burnt as live embers dropped upon the flesh.

The doctor's sister worked secretly, because she knew that her brother would disapprove of her activities, and weakling though he was, might put down his foot; but she worked energetically, because she knew that she had public opinion behind her. Nothing is more sustaining. Everyone knows how rare it is to find an entire community unanimous upon a given point. Usually, the arguments against are at least as convincing as the arguments in favour; at any rate, to an impartial mind, and even a partial mind is liable to be shaken. But the doctor's sister could lean back on public opinion, as though she had a buttress of stone built against the small of her back. Her life was transformed; after the usual sordid round of backbiting and quarrelling, she had at last found an occupation which released all the sourness, envy, and disappointment stored up within her, and which moreover might be expected to lead to a practical result. Still, she was resolved to keep herself in the background. Very skilfully she contrived to omit her own name from the round robin that was finally sent to the burgomaster, although that round robin had been the outcome of her own instigations. The document was supposed to be a secret, though naturally everyone knew of it, since everyone had signed it, written on parchment, tied with ribbon, and sealed with three red seals; and many glances were cast at the Rathaus next market day, where the burgomaster and his justices were known to be sitting in council. These proceedings were highly delightful to the doctor's sister; still, she felt that an even greater delight might be in store for her if only her contact with her two enemies might become personal. For as enemies she regarded them, though they had committed no crime towards her save the crime of being young and lighthearted, and of taking their pleasures by themselves in their own way.

CONTACT became personal, in a manner entirely unforeseen by her. She opened her door one day and beheld upon the threshold a woman as ugly as herself. The wife of Gottfried Künstler

Now the fruit was ready, ripe to drop from the tree. Klaus had seemed less happy than usual, that day; although he said nothing, he had wandered several times uneasily to the window, and Anna had been at a loss to know what to say to him. (For the matter of that, their habit was to speak very little to one another; they were so well content in one another's company that speech seemed noisy and unnecessary.) Manifestly, he was disturbed. Could it be, she wondered, the prickings of returning memory? But he gave no such indication. Anna paused with her needle in mid-air and considered him; the strange thing was that she had scarcely thought of him as a human being before. Yet he must have had a life of his own, an ordinary life, which he had left and which in some way must have continued in its reverberations without him. What was his employment, for instance? in what unknown ledgers had a different script now succeeded his own? His family—what gap had he left within their ranks! A mother? even a wife? She could associate him with none of these; yet her reason told her that no man was completely detached. Her Klaus! She laughed. He was one of those who had never had a mother. Then her thoughts turned to the neighbours, and she laughed again; hitherto she had not given them a thought. But it was obvious what they must be thinking: Klaus her lover . . . but such was the innocence of her mind that she got no further; did not explore down those bypaths of superstition, each one of which ended with the figure of herself—as of a statue seen at the end of a vista—branded as a witch. The human suspicion was one that she, at a pinch, could realize in them; the other was a thing quite outside her apprehension.

“Klaus?” She would try him.

“Anna?”

“What are the things you like?”

He was lying on the floor at her feet, in his usual graceful attitude, while she stitched. So, she thought, might a boy lie, propped on his elbows turning over the leaves of a book of drawings.

“The things I like? Well, I like the ice, you know; and the sleigh; and being out of doors, or here in the house with you.”

“But before that, Klaus?”

“Before that? There was no before that.”

“You think this has gone on forever? for as long as you can remember?”

“Remember? I remember yesterday. I remember last week. It was colder then.”

“Colder then?”

“Yes. To-day is warm. It is going to thaw.”

So that was the cause of his uneasiness?

“Shall you mind if it thaws?”

An expression of dismay came over his face.

“Mind?—But the snow will go—the ice will melt.”

“Why do you love the ice so much, Klaus?”

He murmured, “It comes for so short a time.”

9

AFTER that they went out, at Anna’s suggestion, since she was wise in some ways, although in others so innocent, and saw no other means of keeping him at peace for the rest of the afternoon. She knew that he would fret within doors. They did not harness the horse to the sleigh, but, binding their skates onto their feet, swung out across the lake, racing one another over the wide expanse, compelled to join up close together to pass down the narrow passage which led from their own lake into the next. Klaus swung up to her and took her hands; good skater though she was, she went much more swiftly when she travelled with him. As they came out onto the next lake they observed that a good portion of it had been swept clear of snow. Klaus, who had expected to find nothing but the narrow gray path across the ice which would lead them to the next lake, and the next, and eventually to some village, was delighted. Nothing would content him but that they should pause here; he would show her, he said, once and for all, what could be done on a narrow blade. And indeed she had to own that he cut his patterns with genius.

Flushed and exultant, he flung himself down beside her on the bank, where she had seated herself to watch him, on a scatter of pine branches, dark green on the white snow. Still she was in an inquiring mood and wanted to know what particular delight the ice held for him. “For,” she said, “it is not only the stillness and the ice, but thine own prowess which ravishes thee.” Klaus turned a little shy at that; and it took all her wiles to coax him round. It was not, he said, his own prowess precisely, but the idea of doing something very difficult, entirely useless, and instantly to be obliterated, that ravished him. A gesture, in

fact, that might break a limb, or a heart; and all for nothing. All for a scratch on ice that next day would turn to water. "As our life together," she said, looking at him very sadly, and expecting perhaps some human reassurance, some warm contradiction; but he only said, with a philosophy that amounted to indifference, "Just so—as our life together."

10

THEN they left their skates hidden in a hollow stump, and took a path between the pines, which they knew would lead them to one of the rare hills of that flat country. Klaus loved the place, for a frozen waterfall hung over the face of the rock, and this sight of the mobile thing suspended into immobility never failed to delight him, but to-day Anna followed him with a heavy heart as he ran nimbly up the hillside, his slender figure threading in and out among the trees. Anna followed slowly, her heart full of foreboding. With an absolute conviction that this was to be their last day together, she felt herself many years older than Klaus. The shadow which had fallen over him now seemed to be completely forgotten; that airy spirit could not be sad for long. The sun, the ice, and the snow had dispelled his gloom. The day, indeed, was not a day for sorrow; the snow glistened, and the sun was warm, so that the snow fell with little soft thuds from the branches; was this the end of winter? Anna wondered, for she had always made up her mind that with the end of winter she would lose Klaus. In what way she would lose him she did not know; perhaps he would simply vanish . . . and as the earth woke up from the long enchantment that winter had laid upon it, so would she too wake up from the long enchantment of her life with Klaus. Meanwhile, he stood high above her, having reached the summit, and stood there with the sun on his hair, beside the frozen waterfall, waiting for her to come. She would not have been surprised to see him fade into a wisp and be extinguished before her eyes.

She stood beside him now, and together they looked curiously into the frozen water, which streamed down the rock, now in pointed icicles, like a beard of ice, now in a curtain with many folds, but always shot by the sun into the iridescent colours of a rainbow. A frozen rainbow, said Klaus, with the colours imprisoned; a stream held fast; a rush arrested; and see, he said, here is a fern which has been caught, and which through the transparency is plainly visible. So it was, even to the little brown flecks, like freckles, on the back of the fronds. It was characteristic of Klaus to discover such tiny details; it was all a part, she thought with a sigh, of that detached, exquisite, and fastidious nature. To-day she found it particularly grateful to bend her attention on such detail as the fern within the ice; such concentration made her less aware of the

surrounding world, which suddenly appeared to her as menacing, dangerous, and terrible. She could bear to look at the fern within the ice, when she could not bear to raise her eyes and survey the snowy landscape and the dark pines that now seemed to press up towards her like a forest of spears.

A soft sound startled her; the snow had slipped from a ledge and fallen, leaving the rock exposed. "Yes," said Klaus, as though she had spoken; "it is thawing. See!" With his finger he indicated the extreme tip of a giant icicle, and Anna, fascinated, but struck with horror, looked where he pointed. A great drop of water was forming; like a bubble it hung, perfectly round, reflecting points of prismatic colour, violet, rose, and silver. Quivering it hung, then its shape altered, it became oblong, and the little patches of colour stretched and altered their shape with it; it shook once more, then slowly detached itself, as though reluctant, and fell with a splash on the rock beneath.

11

THEY returned home in silence, both feeling that they had assisted at a death, and everywhere the signs of the thaw were about them in the whispers that came from the branches, although the aspect of the world had not visibly changed, and the snow lay pink in the sunset as they were accustomed to see it. Anna felt her grief as a physical oppression. This is the end, she thought, but still she could not see how the end was to come, only hoped that it might be in some manner fitting to Klaus; in some manner which would leave his image forever perfect in her memory, as clear as the frozen waterfall, as lovely as the colours that it imprisoned. Then, she thought, she could endure to let him go, even though the arabesque he had drawn upon her life would be lost, as the ice itself would be lost in water. He had never been to her as a human being, but rather as some lovely illusion that had entered her life for a span and now was about to pass out of it. Whilst he had been with her, no ugliness had ever approached them; there had never been a thought or a word that was not radiant. This she might keep, she thought; but coming out from between the pines onto the open space before her house she perceived a group assembled before her door.

Her instinct was to clasp Klaus by the hand and run with him back into the shelter of the forest, but already voices were raised, and accusing fingers stretched to point towards them. Hand in hand they stood hesitating against the dark wall of the trees, while the red light of sunset streamed across the lake and lit their pallor as with the glow from a funeral pyre. As on that first Sunday afternoon, it slanted, but now its rays were less definite, less like artificial

streaks of gold, oblique planks and ladders of golden light propped from earth to sky; the glow was diffused, it streamed over everything as from a crimson foundry. The windows of Anna's house gave back an ironical reflection to the setting sun. Anna herself, in that moment of tension, was conscious of every separate element: of Klaus's hand within her own, of the crimson illumination, of the hostile group cackling and pointing, yet holding back, in a sort of shamed fright, now that the hour had actually come to lay hands upon them. She realized then she had always been aware of the subterranean growl of gossip, the furtive malevolence of suspicion. But she and Klaus had been shut away; had shut themselves away deliberately. At the same time she realized that innocence was no shield against the pointed fingers of the crowd.

But Klaus himself? They were confronted now by two women of extraordinary hideousness, with great gabbling mouths and little pig-like eyes; sisters—nay, twins, they might have been, and certainly were, if not by birth, then by natural evil, and by malignity held in common. One of them, the doctor's sister, was known to Anna; the other was a stranger, only with a separate part of her mind Anna marvelled that anywhere in the length and breadth of Germany the doctor's sister should have found another woman to match her so exactly. What a clash, as of the upper cymbal meeting the lower, she thought in a second of amusement, must have taken place when those two first met and in each other recognized a spirit from whom might be struck a chord! But Klaus? He stared at these two, and as he stared his whole face altered. It was a horrible transformation. His very features seemed to change; his mouth drooped to ill temper, his eyes lost their lustre, their candour, and took on an expression that was at once cringing, disagreeable, and defiant. Klaus—was it hopeless, to call him back? Klaus!—But here was the burgomaster.

Gold chain around his neck, his purple velvet robes edged with fur, the burgomaster stepped forward as the voice of worldly authority. Nothing gives a man a greater sense of righteousness than this. He believed himself to be the interpreter of Christ on earth, forgetting the woman taken in adultery. Is this woman, he says, pointing to the grimacing but silenced citizeness, is this woman truly thy wife? Is it she whom thou hast deserted, now three months fully told, for the lures of a woman of uncertain virtue, until then a stranger to thy bed? Fie upon thee, Gottfried Künstler, he says; yet pity upon thee, Gottfried Künstler, to be fallen into the hands of a woman of such proven evil. Return now to thy lawful wife; put out thy hand to her, and all will be forgiven thee; only this scourge of humanity, this Anna Rothe, shall be made an example upon the face of the earth.

Anna heard, and though the tone of remonstrance was recognizable and indeed unmistakable, the words came to her as though spoken in a foreign language. But now a great upbraiding broke out, as the burgomaster ceased; a great upbraiding from the ugly woman—who, as it seemed, was Klaus's wife—a great upbraiding directed at Klaus: his desertion of her, his infidelity, his hare-brained escapades whilst she slaved at home to keep the children shod—all was made to appear as though she were the most virtuous, long-suffering, hardly used creature on earth, and he the most recklessly vicious and self-indulgent. She was supported by the doctor's sister, who, to listen to her, might have been her lifelong friend, knowing all her trials and troubles in their intricacies, breaking out at last into an expression of the indignation she had silently felt for years. At one moment she even slipped her hand through the other woman's arm, and there they stood, the two ugly women, pouring out their abuse, turn and turn about, strophe and antistrophe; one jaw had not stopped moving, before the other began. The burgomaster stood by, and the ring of the neighbours, all nodding approval, like a lot of puppets set into motion by the jerking of a string. And Klaus stood before them, taken in fault, silent perforce because the women talked him down, but looking as sour and as commonplace as they. That is not Klaus, said Anna; that is a man apparently called Gottfried Künstler, whom I do not know. Klaus has vanished, as I knew he would vanish; he has vanished at the touch of the world.

12

INDEED, she scarcely recognized him, three days later, when she was brought out of the town prison and led to the centre of the market place, although he stood with his wife to the forefront of the crowd. For one thing, he had changed his clothes—this she noted—and now wore the brown garb of an ordinary citizen, a flat brown cap pulled down over his hair, his slenderness enveloped in a cloak. He looked at her with lack-lustre eyes in which there was no gleam of recognition. His wife, she thought, has made him bring her to see the show; and so complete was the lassitude and despair that then overcame her that she no longer cared about anything they might do to her, but wished only that she might escape as quickly as possible out of a world so painful and so incomprehensible.

Dusk had already fallen, for the burgomaster knew the value of dramatic effect and liked to promote the good-humour of his people by giving them a good entertainment when the occasion offered. Was it not he who had ordained the line of torches down the lake, until the lake had been cleared of skaters by the presence of that evil woman and her victim? And was it not he who had

now caused torches in the selfsame iron holders to be kindled all round the market place, flaring under the gabled houses, licking redly out on the wind, like pennons streaming from their poles? For it was a windy night. A south wind wandered through all the streets of the town, not cold, but melancholy, causing the lanterns to flicker at the street corners, and the citizens to glance upwards as they hurried along—to glance upwards at the chink of sky between the gables almost meeting overhead—but whether they wondered if the wind would blow out the stars, or bring with it a rain to extinguish the fire is not recorded. Though the wind was not cold, they shivered. Though the thaw had set in, and the road was slush under their feet, they shivered. But whether they shivered with dread or with expectation, is not recorded either.

The snow had gone. For three days now it had dripped in water off the roofs, splashing on the head of the unwary passer-by, till in some places the unpaved and gutterless streets were all but impassable. That which had been so beautiful had deteriorated into a mess. The town, which, to the birds of the air, flying above it, had appeared as a vision of spires and pinnacles pricking up out of the tilted roofs all sparkling and glittering with white, now resumed its ordinary aspect of reddish-brown, crossed by black canyons of the streets, while the surrounding country lay, no longer a sheet of dazzling snow, but dirtily patched in a compromise that was neither one thing nor the other, neither a pure delight to the eye nor a loamy satisfaction to the husbandman. Only in the market place, in honour of the rare and special ceremony, the cobbles had been swept and what remained of the snow had been shovelled into heaps, stained dirty, and of the shape of new-made graves before they have had time to sink. Nevertheless, the citizens did not think of this, but only of the light from the torches, and of the sagacity of their burgomaster who had designed this treat for their delectation. And there is the witch, the evil woman, the daughter of Satan, they said, as Anna was led out with chains on her wrists; and there is poor Gottfried Künstler, our fellow townsman, looking as dull and as vacant as though he still lay under her spell—though we know that he has now returned to his right mind and denies all knowledge of the woman—and there is his wife, who, ill favoured though she may be, is a virtuous woman and has undergone a trial such as falls to the lot of few, deserted by her lawful husband as she has been, yet of so charitable a disposition that she has taken him back now to her house and to her bed. That shows, they said, how little one should judge by appearances; for although her mouth may not be beautiful, it has uttered the speech of clemency and forgiveness, whereas from the curving lips of the witch have proceeded nothing but snares and incantations.—But there was no denying, they said, that the witch and Gottfried had made a lovely pair.

Now the burgomaster, surrounded by his colleagues, came out onto the balcony of the Rathaus and took their seats amid the respectful murmurs of the crowd assembled below. They wore their robes of office, black and crimson robes trimmed with sable, gold chains about their necks, all very ample and sumptuous; their faces were severe, whether clean-shaven or partially concealed by the square, curly beard. On their heads they wore the flat furred cap; and on the index finger of several hands, lying clasped on the balcony rail, might be discerned a noble ring which testified to the worldly prosperity of the wearer. For these were the great merchants of the town, who combined with the wealth of their counting houses the dignity of civic government. The crowd murmured again, in appreciation and reverence. It gave the burghers a sense of security, and at the same time flattered their vanity to feel that their township was controlled by a group of men so affluent, so righteous, and so portly. Here, at least, whatever conduct might be tolerated in larger and looser capitals, no licentious living or satanic practices would be permitted to flourish. This was no place for an Anna Rothe; and as for Gottfried, his straying feet have been turned once more into the right direction, and the sound of his quarrels with his wife has begun once more to rejoice his neighbours' ears. This is as it should be, for in a properly conducted community no man can escape for long the vigilance of his fellows or the austerity of justice.

Meanwhile the town herald had stepped forward from under the balcony and blown a blast upon his trumpet. He was followed by the town crier, who, untying the thread which secured it, let a long document on vellum unroll with a snap, and in the high voice of his calling began to proclaim to the attentive throng the misdeeds of this woman, now standing in gyves before them and about to pay the penalty of her crimes. All ears were stretched, not to miss a syllable; all eyes turned from the crier to Anna, to observe how the witch would receive the recital, and how she would behave at the approach of her doom. They could see that she was listening. At first she seemed detached, indifferent, as though she gave but half her mind to the interminable proclamation; but presently, raising her eyes as the crier set forth how she had secured this young man, this Gottfried Künstler, in his hour of weakness and had removed him to her own house where she made use of him for purposes both dæmonic and immoral—as she heard this, her attention increased; she slightly raised her eye-brows, and a faint smile was observed to cross her lips. A snarl travelled all through the crowd as they saw it. Perhaps, at this sign of her contempt, they feared that she might even now, at the last moment, escape them. Be that as it may, a voice from the back called out, "Dispatch! dispatch!"

Had the burgomaster been summoned to analyze his own motives—but it takes an unusually alert man to do that—he would have been compelled to

make several nice distinctions. What had inspired him, exactly, to organize the present entertainment? Was it a sincere conviction that Anna Rothe, an evil influence, ought to be stamped out? Was it a desire to keep his burghers contented by keeping them amused? No one will ever know. At all events, his humour appeared to be genial, and well disposed to fall in with the wishes of the crowd, for on their demand for dispatch he majestically arose, sweeping his robes around him, to utter a command to the captain of the guard.

An order rang out; fifty pikes struck upon the cobbles; the red of the torches flashed in fifty morions of steel. The whole market place stirred in expectation; only Anna herself stood motionless, her chained hands loosely clasped before her. A murmur ran: the witch is not here, they said; her spirit has fled already; only her corporeal body remains. (And indeed they spoke more truly than they knew.) But in any case, they said with satisfaction, she is as pale as death and never takes her eyes from the face of Gottfried Künstler.

She made no resistance as her two jailers laid their hands upon her shoulders and propelled her towards the pyre. She walked, moving as one who glided rather than as one who set one foot before the other. Seeing her meekness and her abstraction, even the rough jailers grew gentler with her, and made the weight of their hands on her shoulders less oppressive. So with reluctant hands they bound her to the stake. She stood there, drooping as a lily after drought, supported only by the chains around her waist and above her breast, under the arms; but for the chains, she would have fallen. Still, they said, she never takes her eyes from the face of Gottfried.

Now, carrying a flaming brand, a soldier ran from out of the Rathaus, bending low, and speeding, lest the flame, blown backwards by the wind, should burn to its end before he could hold it to the pyre. It was not so much his figure that the onlookers saw, running across the square, as a trail of windy fire. They saw the brand darting here and there as he crouched low to the ground, leaving a little nest of fire wherever it had touched the tinder, a little nest of orange snakes, running and coiling, creeping and crackling, not rearing upward, but penetrating in a low and covert way, the more deadly for the deep internal hold it was taking, preparatory to the final consummation. Soon the whole base of the pyre was flecked with these orange nests. The wind blew upon them, and they grew. The burgomaster rose again upon the balcony; he flung out his hand; ah, that was a burgomaster to have! a burgomaster who knew how things should be done! His voice rang out, "Extinguish the torches."

Running round, the soldiers clapped extinguishers over one red pennon after the other. Now there was nothing left but the black night and the growing points of orange round the base of the pyre. The crowd held their breath. Now

the woman's figure bound against the stake was no longer visible; no longer visible, those eyes fixed upon the apathetic face of Gottfried Künstler. But the scene was only temporarily obscured. They knew that in a moment it would flame out into a yet more vivid life. For that eternal moment they hung suspended in a strange, emotional relationship: the mob and its victim, both equally in the dark, the one in awe of its own stupid, vindictive cruelty, the other so hurt, so baffled, that physical dread had lost its meaning, and mental pain had passed beyond the limit where it could still be encircled by the mind. The moment was everything; they had long since lost sight of the motives and machinery that had created the moment, a point in time.

A slim tongue licked up, precursor: the fire had taken well. The superstitious hush was broken, and the mob pressed forward, only to be held back by the crossed pikes of the guard. Against the pikes they pressed, as curious cattle against a fence. Their momentary awe was gone now; they were simply avid for the spectacle, ignorant, sadistic, and malevolent. The flames leapt; little flames like searing, gossiping tongues; then great flames, like revenge. In the sudden blaze the market place leapt once more into light: the many faces, the armour of the pike-men, the cloaked figure of Gottfried Künstler standing beside his wife—oh, holiness of matrimony—the drooping figure of the woman bound against the stake. Flames and smoke shot up together, scarlet and gray, swirling like mingled scarves of silk in the wind, swirling like a rout of dancers round the sacrifice. Before the smoke and flames hid her they saw her stretch out her chained hands towards Gottfried Künstler.

They had not escaped calumny.

THE POET



THE POET

I FIRST saw him sitting at a little table outside a café in Italy. He was alone, and I knew him instantly for a poet by his wild eyes, his tumbled hair, his sensitive nostrils, and his weak but beautiful mouth. He wore a faded blue shirt and a pair of blue linen trousers, with his bare feet thrust into heel-less *espadrilles*. At the moment when my eyes first fell upon him he was gazing sorrowfully into a glass of beer. I imagined that in those translucent amber depths he sought, perhaps, some simile for a mermaid's hair—the café was situated on the shores of the Mediterranean—but after a prolonged contemplation he beckoned to the waiter and said in Italian: "There's a fly in this beer. Take it away."

I was disappointed. I had been so certain he was a poet and that he was English. His appearance was so romantic, the lonely fishing village was so romantic, too: just the place for a poet, with its little harbour and the painted boats swaying softly on the dark green water, and the Mediterranean beyond, and the fishermen's houses in a semicircle, the colour of tea roses and tulips, and the nets hung out to dry, and the lovely hills rising behind, silvery with the olive trees. Now it seemed that he was a native, a peasant, perhaps, come down from the hills to catch the evening coolness of the port and to drink his glass before climbing back to bed: a native, a peasant, unlettered, and a materialist into the bargain. As I watched him, he rose, and slouching away he vanished through a little green door into a neighbouring house. I heard him coughing as he went.

On the following evening I saw him again in the same place. His glass of beer stood beside him, his elbow was propped on the table, his cheek was propped on his hand, and he was reading in a small book bound in calf, the pages slightly foxed. I passed behind him and looked over his shoulder. He was reading Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, in a seventeenth-century edition. My spirits revived. I felt that my assumption had been justified.

As I sat down at another table and ordered my vermouth and selz, unfolding my *Daily Mail* meanwhile rather ostentatiously, I felt rather than saw that he had raised his head and was glancing in my direction. I bided my time, paying no attention. Presently I heard, as I had known I would hear, the scraping of his chair on the tiled floor. He was edging himself towards me. He wanted to enter into conversation. I cursed myself for a brute as I heard his first apologetic cough develop into a terrible, a heartrending attack of coughing. I flung my *Daily Mail* aside, and hastily poured him out a glass of water. "By God, you're ill," I said.

He put his handkerchief to his lips and brought it away stained with red. "Ill?" he said, and stretched out a shaking hand. "There's death in that hand," he said with a twisted smile.

That jarred me. I had dramatized him to myself, heaven knows, but that he should dramatize himself was more than I could bear. I was divided between distress at his ill-health and disgust at his exploitation of it. In consequence I spoke rather briskly, asking him what ailed him—though it was clear enough.

He was ready to talk. He hadn't spoken his own language for three months, he told me. He had come to Santa Caterina to die. He thought it couldn't be long now, but he didn't mind: he didn't care for life, so long as it gave him time to accomplish that which he must accomplish. He thought he had done his best by now and was quite ready to go.

And what, I asked, was he so anxious to accomplish?

"I write poetry," he said, quite simply this time.

He was twenty-five years of age, he told me, and his name was Nicholas Lambarde. That seemed to me a good name for an English poet, in the tradition of Kit Marlowe, Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and the rest. English poets had nearly always been endowed with good names, and Nicholas Lambarde might figure as honestly in an alphabetical index as the others. But, although I keep an eye on poetry, I had never heard of him. A mere name was not enough to make me take him on trust. What poetry, I asked, had he written? Had any of it been published?

No, he said, he had never bothered about publication. He cared nothing about contemporary fame. Posterity was the only thing that counted, and about posterity he had no doubt at all. He began then to talk of his poetry, dashing his hands through his hair; he talked extravagantly, lyrically; but somehow—although I am sceptical, I think, by nature, and not readily impressed—I couldn't feel that he was boasting in a void, or that the claims he made were in any way in excess of their justification. I couldn't explain to myself why he

thus immediately convinced me. Perhaps his very scorn for present fame did its part, a scorn so rare and so manifestly genuine. At any rate, when he told me that he had that morning written a real poem, a true contribution to English literature, I believed him. And, in a way, as my story will show, I was right. He had.

He held very definite and vigorous views about poetry. He couldn't abide the modern school of *défaitisme* and despair. He couldn't feel—dying man though he was—that life was little more than the sloughed skin of a snake, or a rustle of dry leaves, or a parched land without water, or whatever the metaphor might be. Nor did he feel that poetry was the proper vehicle for metaphysics, any more than fiction was the proper vehicle for propaganda, sexual or sociological. He held that poetry ought to spring from its own soil and break freely into leaves, like a tree, with a suggestion of sky above and of roots beneath, drinking deeply in the earth. He believed profoundly in the technique of the craft, and held that the first use of technique was to suggest, by association, far greater riches than were actually stated by the words. In fact, rapturously though he expressed himself, he displayed a considered judgment and talked a great deal of sense.

He never read poetry nowadays, he said, for fear of being influenced, though, of course, he added, he had read through the whole of English literature in his early youth.

Every now and then he broke off to cough and to dab his handkerchief against his mouth.

Well, I stayed on at Santa Caterina. Nicholas Lambarde, invisible in the daytime, appeared regularly every evening at the café, ordered his glass of beer, joined me at my table, and talked poetry to me, while the stars came out, and the lights of the harbour dropped their plummets into the water. I watched him growing a little paler, a little thinner every day. His fits of coughing became more frequent and more violent. Still, when I exhorted him, he impatiently brushed aside my importunity and went on with what he was saying. The only important thing in the world to him was poetry. Death did not matter, health did not matter, nor time, nor fame, nor money: I never met anyone who lived so intensely or so continuously the life of the spirit. I can see him now, with his burning eyes, his unshaven chin cupped in his hands, and the stained handkerchief crumpled between his fingers, as he leant across the table, talking, talking.

One evening he said that he would like to ask me a favour. He had no friends and no relations, he said, and the only thing which bothered him was the disposal of his manuscripts after he was dead. He had thought of

consigning them all to a literary agency, but that seemed an insecure thing to do, for who could guarantee that any literary agency would find him a publisher? Poetry did not pay—he knew that—and he feared that the eventual fate of his poems might be the waste-paper basket. On the one hand, you see, he was curiously sane. On the other, he was absolutely confident that in, say, a hundred years' time he would be recognized as the head of English song. He made a possible exception in favour of Shakespeare, but admitted no other rivals. If, that is to say, he had his chance, and that must be my business. In short, he asked me to act as his literary executor.

Of course, I accepted. No one could have refused him, and I was, as you may imagine, consumed with the desire to read these poems of which I had heard so much. Often though I urged him, he would never show me a line, but putting on an expression at once arrogant and secretive, would reply: "All in good time! You'll see, you'll see."

It was on a morning in early May that a fisher boy came breathlessly to find me, saying that the Englishman had died during the night: would I please come at once? I had never before penetrated into Lambarde's lodging, and it was with an uncomfortable sense of intrusion that I mounted the rickety stairs and stood upon the threshold of his room. I had not expected to find him surrounded by many possessions, but neither had I been prepared for such utter barrenness and poverty. He himself lay upon, not in, the bed, dressed as usual in his faded shirt and trousers, as though he had flung himself down in the last fatal access of coughing—for the sheets and counterpane were stained with a deeper flood than ever had been stained his pitiable handkerchief. One glance round gave me the complete inventory of the room. A pair of brushes, a comb, a razor; a bunch of wild jonquils stuck in a bottle, some shoes, a few books, mostly tattered. That was all I could see. But there were papers everywhere—strewn over the bed, over the one table, and even over the floor—separate sheets of foolscap, some closely covered, some scrawled with but a single line, tossed aside, blown by the breeze into some neglected corner. His landlady, who had followed me upstairs, doubtless thought that she read criticism in my glance.

He would never allow her to tidy, she said; sometimes for weeks together he had locked the door and she had been unable to enter his room; and once, when she had ventured to pick up some of his papers and place them on the table, he had flown into the most terrible rage, so that she thought he would expire on the spot. It was comprehensible, she said, with the Latin peasant's understanding of the artist: the poor young man was a poet, and poets were cursed with that kind of temperament; one could not expect a stag to browse

mildly like a cow. And she looked at him, lying upon the bed, with a compassion that forgave him all his trespasses.

But now he could prevent nobody from picking up his papers and arranging them on the table. It was, indeed, precisely what he had asked me to do, yet I did it with a sense of guilt, induced, no doubt, by my own knowledge of my own curiosity. Outwardly I was executing the wishes of a dead compatriot: in reality, I was gratifying the meanest of our instincts. Yet why should I blacken myself unduly? I love letters, I respect genius; I had lent a sympathetic ear to an unknown poet for weeks past; I had upset all my plans on his account. It was only fair that I should have my reward.

And yet, I swear, it wasn't only my reward that I thought of—the reward of discovering a new master of English verse. I honestly wanted to do my best by that proud, lonely, flaming creature who had lived for nothing but his art.

I persuaded the good wife to leave me, and, alone with the dead man, I fell to my task. You must believe me when I say that I have seldom been more excited. At first I was puzzled, for many of the writings were so exceedingly fragmentary; there were scraps of scenes from plays, whose characters bore names in the Elizabethan tradition—Baldassare, Mercurio, and the like; there were a few verses of what appeared to be a ballad; there were some ribald addresses to Chloe and Dorinda; there was the beginning of a contemplative poem on Solitude. I fancied from all these that he had been practising his hand at the art of parody, for he had hit off the Elizabethan manner exactly, and the manner of the ballads, and of the Restoration, and of the early nineteenth century. Whatever else he had been, he was certainly a skilful parodist; I was sure that I had read something very like his play-scenes in some minor work of Kyd or Shirley, I couldn't remember which. But I turned over his poor papers impatiently, in the hope of coming on one of those poems of which he had said to me, "Lord! I'm tired, but I did something good to-day, something really first class. I'm pleased."

And I found them. I found the really first-class things. He was quite right: they really were first class. He had taken an enormous amount of trouble, putting his pencil through word after word, until he got exactly the word he wanted. That was the extraordinary thing: the amount of trouble he had taken in his search for perfection, carving each phrase laboriously from his brain, working it out like a puzzle; I could imagine him sitting there at that same table, concentrated, rapt, dissatisfied at first, and finally triumphant; I could imagine him springing up at last with a cry of triumph and pacing about the room declaiming the magnificent stanzas to himself. It had been a terrific effort, but he had always got it right in the end.

One of his first drafts ran thus:

*Fair star! I would I were as faithful as thou art,
Not in sole glory piercing through the night,
But watching with unsleeping lids apart*

eremite

*The restless ocean at its patient task
Of slow erosion round earth's aged shores.*

The pencil had been dashed through the last two lines, and he had substituted with scarcely a check:

*The moving waters at their priest-like task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores.*

Yes, I thought, no wonder he was pleased with that; no wonder he had come down to the café to tell me he had done something really good!

And there were other passages which had worried him considerably:

*But after me I seem to hear
The wheels of Time near
A fiery spirit ? bright and swift*

*The Earth like Danae
Like Danae the Earth
Under the stars the Earth like Danae lies.*

But he had got that right, too, nearly the whole of it, except one line, for which he had left a blank.

I sat back and stared at his papers. What had gone wrong in that poor muddled brain? What fantastic trick had memory played upon him? I remembered how he had told me that he had quite given up reading the poets now, "for fear of being influenced," though he had read them extensively as a boy. Influenced, indeed! The irony of it!

And yet, you know, I still maintain that a poet was lost in him. I found among his papers one sonnet, which, with the obvious though partial exception of the first line, I have so far been unable to trace to anybody else. It is not the kind of poetry which brought him downstairs to tell me that he had done something "really good"; it is, indeed, only a sonnet of a type which could be

turned out in dozens by any competent rhymester, soaked in the conventions of English literature; the octet may pass muster, but the sextet is poor, as though scribbled down in a hurry; and probably I exaggerate the merit of the whole, being privy to the absolute truth which inspired it; but such as it is, it may very well stand as his epitaph:

*When I am gone, say only this of me:
He scorned the laurels and the praise of men,
Alien to fortune and to fame; but then
Add this: he plunged with Thetis in the sea;
Lay naked with Diana in the shade;
He knew what paths the wandering planets drew;
He heard the music of the winds; he knew
What songs the sirens sang; Arion played.
Say this; no more; but when the shadows lengthen
Across the greensward of your cloistered turf,
Remember one who felt his sinews strengthen
And tuned his hearing by the line of surf.
One who, too proud, passed ease and comfort by,
But learned from Rome and Hesiod how to die.*

POMODORO



POMODORO: A SKETCH

THE little peninsula stretched out into the Mediterranean. As drawn on the map, it looked like a finger pointing into the sea, a flat finger of land, a loop without character. Actually, it rose in steep cliffs sharp out of the sea, rocky, covered by olives and stone pines, threaded by tortuous goat paths, a savage, secluded little strip, with one or two villages crowded onto a ledge down on the coast, and at its tip a lighthouse that swept a nightly beam over the surrounding waters. Strangely enough for Italy, it had remained untouched by the foreigner; it had preserved, inviolate, the native practical life of fishermen and peasants. Such corners do occasionally escape contamination. The peninsula of Pomodoro had escaped it. Life went on there, with its several facets of husbandry, religion, superstition, violence, and primitive morality, exactly as it had gone on during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and even before them, in Roman times. There was nothing to indicate the twentieth century except the gramophone in the village café and the chuff-chuff of a motorboat out in the bay.

The young man Daniel, the young Englishman, stayed there because he found something which satisfied him by its contrast with himself. He was pale, delicate, and neurotic, whereas everything about Pomodoro was sunburnt, healthy, and sane. He who in London had scorned such things submitted himself to them in Pomodoro with the rapture of a monk bending under the scourge. He, the intellectual, took pleasure in the talk of the fisher boys as he had never taken pleasure in the conversation of his London friends. He lay about with the fisher boys on the rocks in the sun. Their talk was childish, full of silly jokes and puerile importances. But their bodies were beautiful, and their talk, though disjointed, was rooted in real things. Or so it seemed to Daniel. Fish, sex, politics, boats, God—as they lay on the rocks and kicked their toes into the rock pools.

Daniel did not talk much: he listened.

They did not bother about him: they accepted him. He had been amongst them for six months, and in their lazy way they had got used to him. They really took very little notice of him, except when for ten minutes at a time they turned on him for amusement and made good-natured fun of his deficiencies. He could swim—but not as they, who were fish in the water. His skin was burnt—but not as theirs, whose bodies were copper statues. He could speak Italian, but had not quite mastered their dialect. Sometimes he misunderstood what they said, and then they screamed with laughter. For all his efforts to be like them, he remained the stranger, the foreigner. They retained a sense of the difference in him, and it galled him. He wanted to be a fisher boy of Pomodoro, but though they now called him Daniele (thank God, he had a name which went easily into Italian), and not signorino, he was not one of them and never could be, for they had all grown up together, and six months was nothing to set against twenty years. But having gone through a number of emotional and intellectual experiences he wanted desperately to escape from being the self he had been born with; he wanted to transform Daniel into Daniele permanently; he wanted to leave Daniel behind, still elegantly crossing Piccadilly Circus. Daniel could go on doing that forever, so far as he was concerned, while Daniele, stripped to the waist, lay on the rocks of Pomodoro.

He thought sometimes that he would buy his citizenship by marrying Amata.

Amata was the reigning beauty; it was the fashionable thing, among the young men, to be in love with Amata. Every evening, strolling on the piazza, they proffered their gallantries as she stood with arms akimbo, taking the air at the entrance to her mother's little fruit shop. The young men were all round her like wasps round the fruit, and no wonder, for she was as luscious as a nectarine herself, standing there, the shop lined with scarlet paper behind her, under the hanging lamp, figs, melons, pomegranates, and tomatoes glowing on the shelves. But she was scornful, the young beauty. She welcomed adulation but would not brook familiarity. She answered the young men's advances with an insolence greater than their own, every evening on the piazza, when the lights came out and the big moths hovered round the lamps in the warm air. Paying court to Amata was a ritual, good-humoured, almost a joke, breaking no hearts, an after-supper diversion, until the hour came for the fishermen to hoist the sails in their boats down in the dark green harbour, and the piazza was left deserted to the women and the children. Then Amata turned back into the shop and spread butter muslin over the fruit for the night.

Daniel was sure that he could win Amata if he tried. It would be a grand thing for Amata to marry a signorino from England. England! He was never

going back there. His neurasthenia had found a refuge in this warm, crude sensuality of the South. He was not in love with Amata, but he liked to dwell on her rich, animal sensuality. The thought of it laid warm arms about him; it healed him, and rocked and cradled him. He liked to think of his own brown babies tumbling about the harbour steps with the other brown babies of Pomodoro. Then he would cease, surely, to be a stranger, and they would forget that he had ever come from another place. He himself could forget it. He would forget the intelligent women he had liked—so cold-bloodedly—in London; he would forget the niggling, fastidious experiences which had done duty for sensation. The more he thought about it, the more he accepted the idea of eventually marrying Amata.

But not yet. Amata herself knew nothing of his resolve. Although he lounged up to the fruit shop every evening with the other young men, Daniel alone remained silent, paying no court. He contented himself with looking at her—long, deep looks, as though he drank her beauty and willed her to understand his need. Because she sometimes glanced at him, while exchanging pleasantries and retort with the young men, he grew to imagine that a compact existed between them. He was sure that the affair would be quite simply arranged when the moment came: he would go to Amata, she would put her hand into his, and all the village would realize that this consummation had been a foregone conclusion.

True, it was said that Amata had an understanding with Tito Calvi, who had gone to America. It was said that one day Tito would come back, having made his fortune, to claim Amata and carry her off to New York. But to Daniel it was unthinkable that Amata should prefer New York to Pomodoro. It angered him to hear the young men express envy of Tito, who had broken away from Pomodoro and gone to see the world. In Daniel's eyes they were giving up their birthright by such expressions—the birthright to the warm animal existence of Pomodoro. He could not imagine that anyone with a hereditary right to Pomodoro should wish to exchange it for street cars and pavements and all the hideousness of a modern city.

He must make sure of Amata before Tito came home. He would speak to Amata on the day that Tito's letter arrived announcing his homecoming. That was the date he set in his mind, finding meanwhile a certain luxury in procrastination.

The summer was hot and long; day succeeded day, with a glittering sea and an unbroken heaven above the smoky gray of the olive trees. The little peninsula lay baking in the sun, while the lizards ran over its boulders, and the sea washed up lazily into the tiny creeks. Such a summer suggested centuries

of similar summers lying behind it; an idyllic, perennial world. The calm was broken every now and then, as was suitable, by some violent demonstration of nature: a thunderstorm that flung its rain against the windows of the little houses, spearing the dark sea with javelins of lightning, rocking the boats in the harbour on a night when no fisherman, however bold, would set forth for his nightly catch; or by an earthquake, that made the fisher folk run out from their beds, clinging together in the piazza with midnight tales of what the earthquake had done to their ancestors in former years. Daniel welcomed such demonstrations. They reminded him of the violent background to the soft Italian life. By such storms, he reflected, would his life with Amata be stirred. No merely domestic and smug content would be their lot. With Amata, he thought, he would taste alternately the burning sunny days and the reminder of a more dangerous life.

He put out to sea with the fishermen his companions. So far, they allowed him no part in the nightly business, beyond according him a mere amateur's seat in a boat. He sat quiescent in the bows, confident that the day would come when he also would be allowed to haul his weight upon the nets. As Amata's husband the nightly catch might reasonably have some importance for him; with Guido as his brother-in-law, and Luigi as his cousin, he might be admitted to their councils. In anticipation of that day he shelved his resentment: he could afford to wait.

The moon was full, laying a broad silver path up the dark pavement of the sea. The cliffs rose straight out of the water to a height of two or three hundred feet, crowned with pines along their topmost ridge. At the foot of the cliffs the little fishing fleet rode motionless, dotted about under the great cliff shadows. Daniel's boat standing further out to sea, he could observe the activities of the men in the other boats, those tiny patches of darkness in the greater darkness of the inky pools, close in against the towering, beetling architecture of the cliffs. Every night the same ecstasy filled him as he watched the silent, secret movements of men going about their accustomed tasks, under cover of night, bending over the nets, stooping to coil a rope in the bottom of the boat, the shape of their arms and shoulders and blunt, round heads just discernible as they stood or crouched or straightened themselves, or stepped across, making the boat rock; busy, quiet, and expert, very different from the lounging, philandering youth they were by day on the piazza. With the performance of these rites, this function of the darkest hours, it seemed to Daniel that they fulfilled the core of darkness and secrecy within them. He romanticized them, plainly; but that was a part of the need he had for escape into a different world. Every night, out with the fishing boats, was to him a renewed and mystical experience. Shivering with excitement as though with fever, clutching the

gunwale with tense fingers, he waited for the moment when they would light the flares.

The light of the torches wavered in the boats, one after the other; then burnt up strongly, casting the red light as a splash of blood over the dark waters. Masts and the limbs and bodies of men leapt into a black relief. And, most fantastic of all, upon the face of the cliff were thrown the gigantic shadows of boats and men, not distorted, but of heroic size; the shadow of men nine feet high, a frieze, a cartoon, straining and curving in the classical gesture of drawing a net from the sea into a boat. The amazing beauty and fantasy of this scene filled Daniel with rapture every night as a returning tide. It was the moment of the twenty-four hours for which he lived and waited.

And on this particular night of August his mind was made up: he would identify himself forever with this ancient, deep existence. Its beauty and paganism satisfied him. And for his own personal life he would have Amata.

The boats came home in the dawn. Daniel had seen the sunrise many times at sea off Pomodoro, but this morning he felt inclined to weep for the loveliness of it. Another day beginning—pale blue and sparkling in the early sun. A little breeze just filled the sails; a boy sang, plaintive and amorous, with his hand on the tiller; the silver fish lay in heaps in the bottom of the boat; the sea, scarcely breathing, was rayed by paths of a deeper blue. The village was still asleep when the boats came silently into the harbour.

At midday the local *piroscafo* arrived, fussy and self-important, bringing peasants and one or two tourists, and an old countryman with a flock of geese. Daniel, who with the other young men was lying half asleep on the warm stone of the parapet, rolled over to watch the waddling, squawking birds being driven ashore. He was full of a deep content, knowing that that afternoon he would speak to Amata; meanwhile, the simple amusement of watching the geese sufficed him; he no longer cared for the more sophisticated pleasures of life. But Luigi, lying beside him, suddenly sat up. "*Per Dio!*" he exclaimed, "if it isn't Tito!"

It was Tito: Tito returned without warning from America. The village boys were round him in a minute, jabbering, hugging him, shouting for others to come and see Tito who had sprung this surprise upon them. The whole piazza, resounded with shouted names, and people came out of the houses to see what was the cause of the commotion. Tito stood in the middle, pleased with the success of his plan. But he was dreadful—dreadful. Daniel saw that in a glance. He was just a common little man, dressed in a loud suit and a pearl-gray Trilby hat; he wore rings and a watch chain and long, narrow American

boots. Daniel, whose heart had stood still for the first moment, laughed to imagine this little Americanized bouncer paying his addresses to Amata. The sooner Tito went back to America the better.

Daniel was quite forgotten in the excitement over Tito's arrival.

In the late afternoon, after the siesta, Daniel emerged from his lodging and made his way across the piazza to the fruit shop. He found Amata with her father and mother and Tito sitting inside, on upturned packing cases among the fruit, all talking eagerly. They stopped talking when he came in and looked at him expectantly as though he had come to buy an orange and would then go away again, leaving them to resume their conversation. Chilled by their polite and inquiring glances, he remained foolishly silent, looking at them. A family group? Tito seemed very much at home: he was in his shirt sleeves, but his Trilby hat lay beside the figs. And on Amata's finger was a large and unbelievably vulgar ring.

It became necessary for somebody to speak; Amata's mother took the lead: she introduced Tito to Daniel as her prospective son-in-law. Tito got up and elaborately shook hands. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said in English with a strong American accent; "pleased to have you come in. We were just planning how soon I could get Amata out of this hole-and-corner place and take her where she deserves to be." Amata, hearing her name, smiled and blushed. "This Yurrup of yours, sir," said Tito, "seems a bit sticky when you want to get a move on. And our boat sails for Noo York on the sixteenth." He was brisk; insufferable.

"Amata," said Daniel, "you can't want to go to New York—you can't want to leave Pomodoro?"

"Not want to leave Pomodoro?" said Amata in intense surprise. "But of course I want to leave Pomodoro—who wouldn't? One doesn't live, here. New York is lovely: Tito has been telling us. There, everyone is rich; one eats meat three times a day. Tito lives in a beautiful hotel; he is the manager; there is a bathroom to every bedroom, and a band that plays in the lounge. It is always full of people, coming and going, millionaires and film stars, all rich, all famous. There is a lift which goes up twenty storeys, and beautiful decorations in the Egyptian style. Everything is gilded, even the edges of the notepaper. I am so proud of Tito, signorino, who will take me away from this poor place and put me in such a costly home." She gave her hand to Tito, who patted it smugly, while the parents looked on and beamed with pride.

Daniel saw the shadows flung against the rock; he heard the water lapping in the coves; he saw the nets coming up full of silver fish; he heard the little

clatter of the goats' feet down a stony path; he saw the sky through the almond branches; and turning away from the fruit shop he stumbled out alone into the sun.

ELIZABETH HIGGINBOTTOM



ELIZABETH HIGGINBOTTOM

ELIZABETH HIGGINBOTTOM attained the age of forty before romance entered her life. Outwardly a severe and serious person, engrossed in an office from nine-thirty to six, she had nevertheless continuously hankered after romance, while flattering herself that no observer, however shrewd, could suspect her of so humiliating a weakness—an illusion which she probably shared with fifty per cent of her colleagues. Even towards herself she was guilty of some deceit, liking to think that she indulged herself in the daydreams of romance entirely on account of her name; for romance, to her observation, frequently ended in marriage, and marriage, for a woman, inevitably involved a change of name; and a change of name, for Elizabeth Higginbottom, would have equalled the removal of a splinter from a festering finger. In the matter of a Christian name her parents had certainly done their best to repair their initial mistake: Elizabeth was as magnificent a name as anybody could desire, recalling queens and battleships; but as for Higginbottom, the less said the better. Elizabeth knew not whether most to blame her father for having unavoidably inherited such a name, or her mother for having voluntarily linked her destinies to it. On the whole, the voluntary error seemed the most heinous; but what was a girl to do if she fell in love with somebody called Higginbottom? It was unfortunate, certainly, but should true love admit of such impediments? True love had not admitted of them in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Higginbottom; and their daughter Elizabeth, conceived no doubt in a moment of ecstasy irrespective of nomenclature, was left to pay the penalty. Higginbottom she was born willy-nilly, and Higginbottom she willy-nilly (which was worse) remained.

Featherstonehaugh and Champion de Crespigny floated across her mind as substitutes. She practised signatures in odd moments on the office blotting paper, which she was careful to obliterate, even though it ruined her pen. Elizabeth Champion de Crespigny; E. C. de C.: how well it looked. Sometimes she tried a foreign name. Elizabeth de la Tour d’Auvergne. And then she fell

madly, hopelessly in love with a young man called Scroggs.

She thought Scroggs the most beautiful young man she had ever seen. He was, in fact, remarkably good-looking. Flashy, with wavy black hair and an olive complexion. Some people, greatly to Elizabeth's indignation, said he looked like a dago. But she did not very much care what they said, since she was convinced she knew better: he was as handsome as a god. All the anguish of jealousy became known to Elizabeth. She imagined him surrounded nightly by lovely, eager young women, taking them to dances, escorting them to cinemas. No one had ever taken Elizabeth to a dance in her life; as for cinemas, she and Miss Jones from the office sometimes went together on Saturday afternoon. But Scroggs! She made herself a picture of his life, which was really not very far from the truth. And she suffered atrociously.

He first noticed her because she had a little bunch of spring flowers in a glass on her table. Anemones and four freesias. She had bought those because she knew they lasted longest, though as a matter of fact she should not have afforded the luxury of flowers at all. Scroggs, passing through her room with some papers in his hand, stooped to smell the freesias. "You like flowers, Miss Higginbottom?" he said. He had an irresistible smile.

After that, they stopped to speak to each other whenever they met on the stairs or in the passage. Only a few words did they ever exchange, but a little sprig of friendship grew up between them. Scroggs was drawn to Miss Higginbottom entirely because she had a name as horrible as his own. He wondered whether she minded as much as he did.

It was not a question one could ask anybody, he thought, yet one evening he did ask it of her. It came about quite easily. They had met by chance in the Underground station, when all the world above ground was warm and sun-rayed and pulsating with spring. Scroggs had an assignation with a particularly pretty girl and was in an unusually good humour. Miss Higginbottom seemed flustered when he came up to her, and dropped her ticket. "Mustn't lose that, you know, Miss Higginbottom!" he said as he restored it to her.

To his dismay and astonishment, the eyes she turned on him were full of tears. ("Poor old thing," he thought, "how plain she looks.") She put her hand on his arm. "Oh, please, please," she said, "don't call me that. My name is Elizabeth."

He stared. "By Jove," he said, "do you mind too? It's rotten for us, isn't it? Well, look here—tit for tat, you know—my name's Sylvester."

"I know," said Miss Higginbottom with deep feeling, as though she were saying, "Amen."

He tried to laugh it off. “Almost as bad as Scroggs, isn’t it, only in a different way? Sylvester Scroggs. My God! What *were* my godfathers and godmothers thinking of? But I say, I never knew you minded. How funny. I often wondered if you did.” He knew that he was being very boyish and attractive; the adoration in Miss Higginbottom’s eyes told him that. And Peggy would come in a moment. “Let’s walk up and down,” he said, “till your train comes in. I’m meeting somebody here, but she’s sure to be late.”

They walked up and down, Miss Higginbottom in such an agony of conflicting emotions that she could scarcely utter a word. Not that that mattered, for Sylvester did all the talking. He talked easily, persuasively, intimately. He was really very charming, and didn’t see why he shouldn’t give the poor old thing a little pleasure when he had five minutes to spare. Besides, he could talk to her about his name. That gave him a curiously comforting relief. It was probably the only thing he really minded, in a butterfly life. Peggy and the others teased him about it; Scroggy, they called him, or Froggy, or Scraggy, or any other absurdity that came into their heads, and he laughed with them, but underneath their joint laughter he winced. Poor old Higginbottom—she was dreadfully solemn, but he could give her a moment’s pleasure, and he could talk to her about their bloody names. So, why not? Peggy, if she did finally consent to arrive, would twit him nicely about his companion. “I see you found a substitute for me,” she would say, if she saw them walking up and down. And he would laugh, and would not tell her what they had been talking about. He felt that he had quite an understanding with Higginbottom, of a different kind he had with Peggy and her like. He took Higginbottom’s arm. She pressed it gently against her side.

“But it’s different for a woman,” he was saying, even before he realized the tactlessness of the remark; “a woman can marry and change her name, whereas I’m Scroggs for life. Besides, what woman would marry a Scroggs?” he hastily added, trying to put himself into the same unmarriageable boat as herself. He waited then for Higginbottom to make the expected reply, “Surely, any woman would marry *you*?” As the reply was not forthcoming, he repeated, rather crossly, “What woman, I ask you, would marry a Scroggs?”

Higginbottom looked at him then, and though her tongue remained dumb her eyes were eloquent. Satisfied, he gave another little laugh, very confidential this time, and returned the pressure of her arm. At that moment he caught sight of Peggy, looking very seductive in a belted coat and scarlet cap. “I say,” he said, disentangling his hand from her arm and not quite able to bring himself to call her Elizabeth, “you wouldn’t come to a movie with me tomorrow night, would you?” It was a sop to his conscience.

Would she! “You don’t really mean it?” she said, gazing at him—they were almost the first words that she had uttered. But of course he meant it, he exclaimed, anxious to join Peggy. Well, then, she said, very hesitating, very uncertain how she ought to conduct this affair, would he come and have some supper first in her room? Yes, yes, he said impatiently, wondering what on earth the old thing was driving at; yes, he’d come back with her after they left the office. They’d have some supper, and then they’d go to the pictures. Anything to get away to join Peggy. Seven o’clock, then, she said, and gave him her address. Seven o’clock, he shouted back reassuringly, hurrying down the platform.

She woke with a sense of something marvellous impending. It took her some exquisite seconds before she remembered what that something was. Sylvester! Scroggs . . . but what did Scroggs matter? Sylvester and Elizabeth; that was all that mattered. One’s Christian name was one’s own; one’s paternal name was merely an accident. To each other they would be Sylvester and Elizabeth, and the rest only on envelopes. Mrs. Sylvester Scroggs—for her innocent mind foresaw only one eventual outcome. She gave one great gulp and swallowed it. It was the greatest renunciation she could make, but for his sake she would make it joyfully.

She rose then, an hour earlier than her usual time, and busied herself with setting her room to rights and putting out the plates for supper. Had she done wrong in asking him to supper in a bed-sitting-room? and what on earth did men like to drink? These problems chased perplexingly through her mind as she bustled about, dusting, polishing, twitching things straight, but in spite of her anxieties she sang an old music-hall song in an exceedingly untuneful voice, much to the astonishment of her landlady, who had never heard Miss Higginbottom sing before. “Lawks!” she remarked as she proceeded downstairs with the slop pail.

Elizabeth surveyed her room. It was clean, it was tidy. The folding bed had disappeared behind its curtain. But she must have some flowers—were not flowers responsible for the first words Sylvester had ever spoken to her?—and taking her purse she descended to catch a bus to Covent Garden. She had just time. “Tulips,” she thought, hurrying along.

Covent Garden was as gay as a picture. Everything was gay this morning—the very buses seemed a brighter red, and people’s faces seemed wreathed in benevolence. The flowers rioted in boxes and baskets, on stalls and barrows. The orange of marigolds, the purple of irises, the heavy trusses of lilac, the sprays of blossom, and the scent of flowers filling the air, warm and honeyed

in the sun. The singing heart of Elizabeth Higginbottom hovered over this coloured and scented market. She suddenly had the impression of being somewhere abroad, in Italy, perhaps, or on the Riviera, where flowers were to be had for the asking, and people were merry and kindly.

She paused before a barrow. An enormous man in shirt sleeves, with twinkling eyes and a tousled head, was smiling down at her. He had very white teeth and looked like a Herculean gipsy. “Flowers, madam?” he said. “Nice tulips?” He held out a bunch, two bunches, putting his head on one side as though to admire them.

How friendly he was, thought Elizabeth, as though really anxious that she should get something she liked—almost as though he had divined her secret. Certainly something extraordinary had happened to the world this morning.

“How much are they?” she asked, taking out her purse.

“Two and three, madam—cheapest on the market. How many bunches, madam? four? six? Let you have them a bit cheaper for six.”

“I’ll take six,” said Elizabeth recklessly.

She could not afford it; but never mind, she would go without lunch for two days to make up.

“That’ll be fifteen bob,” said the man, handing her the sheaf wrapped in blue paper. She paid, rewarded him with a smile, and ran gladly down towards the Strand.

Sylvester meanwhile had been taken severely to task by Peggy, who was a decent sort. She had espied him with Miss Higginbottom on the Underground platform and had grasped the situation shrewdly. “It’s not fair, Scroggy,” she said; “cut it out. Kinder to do it at once. Anybody can see the old thing’s sippy about you.”

Sylvester hesitated. Any conquest was acceptable to his vanity. Still, perhaps it really wasn’t quite fair; and besides, the old thing might become a bore. But with his weak good-nature he hated the idea of disappointing her.

“Much kinder to do it at once,” said Peggy, watching him.

Thus it came about that an acutely embarrassed Scroggs paused before Miss Higginbottom’s table, and bending down so that Miss Jones should not overhear, said hurriedly, “Oh, about to-night. . . . Stupid of me, I made a mistake. I remembered afterwards that I’d got another appointment. Should you mind very much if we put it off? Another night, perhaps. . . . So sorry.” He

fled.

Miss Higginbottom went home alone. On the table she found the two places she had laid, the pressed beef and tinned salmon she had bought, the bottle of whisky and the syphon. She found also the tulips, carefully disposed about the room. It then occurred to her for the first time that the friendly-looking, gipsy-like man had cheated her. He had charged her fifteen bob when he should have said thirteen-and-six. She had been too happy and too careless to check his sum: he had seemed so genuinely and smilingly anxious to please her. Up to that moment she had borne up in a dry, controlled sort of way; now, with the realization of his petty perfidy, she laid her head down on the table and sobbed and sobbed.

UP JENKINS



UP JENKINS

THERE were four of them, four young people, two men and two girls, gone on a walking tour together. They were all busy young people in their normal lives, independently earning their living by various jobs in various offices, but they arranged so that their fortnight's holiday should coincide. For the second year running they had done this. They prided themselves on being extremely modern, rational, and unconventional. It never occurred to them to spend their holidays at home, and if they mentioned their parents at all it was in terms of tolerant contempt.

Their names were Michael, Simon, Judith, and Anne. Their ages ranged from twenty to twenty-five. They were all unrelated, but their surnames are quite irrelevant.

In appearance they were what you might expect—attractive in the modern way, of which they were carefully conscious, but even more attractive with the loose grace of youth, of which they were mercifully unaware. All four, on their holiday, wore the same sort of clothes: coloured jerseys and gray flannel trousers. The yokels in the village inns stared somewhat at the sight of two girls in gray flannel trousers, but as the two girls shared a bedroom and the two young men shared another, the innkeeper always concluded that they were all right. In fact, they all looked so much alike that the innkeeper usually decided that they must be brothers and sisters. The young men wore their hair rather long, the girls wore theirs rather short. All four had an impudent, slender, devil-may-care appearance, boneless as kittens. Judith was perhaps prettier than Anne, with her blunt profile and cropped dark hair, but there was not much to choose between them. Simon was perhaps better-looking than Michael, with his dark-golden hair lying untidily over his forehead; but again, there was not much to choose between them. They were all very slim, careless, and (in their way) picturesque.

Deliberately sexless, too, or so they liked to think; but their instincts inconveniently went against them. That is the point of this story.

Simon and Michael were both vaguely attracted to Judith. Judith observed a strict impartiality. Anne alone might have been regarded as odd-man-out, had they not all four been such good friends, and had they not all been equally determined to have none of that nonsense interfering between them.

As it was, they meandered in single file along the cliff paths above the Cornish sea, or lay on their faces in little coves, kicking their toes into the sand, talking about all kinds of things, after the manner of the extremely young. They talked for the sake of talking and of imagining that they rearranged the world. When they talked of love and sex, it was in the same academic way as they talked of the Five Year Plan or of Sir James Jeans—rather dictatorial, and on the same assumption that it could have nothing on earth to do with them personally, yet convinced that they knew all about it and had nothing to learn, but rather, that their pronouncements were final and summed up the matter once and for all. Michael was the cleverest: he was really a very intelligent boy. Anne ran him close.

In all their walks and all their discussions they were very careful to let no sex obtrude, and no sentimentality. They were determined at all costs, even on holiday, to be brisk and intelligent.

In the evenings they repaired to an inn, where they could play darts and shove-ha'penny with the yokels if so minded, or could secure the coffee room to themselves for an hour before going to bed. Then they slung down their rucksacks onto the table and exchanged their walking shoes for bedroom slippers. They were usually rather tired in body but clear in the head. A suppressed and unrealized excitement made them seem perhaps clearer in the head than they actually were. Suppressed excitement often releases a great deal of superficial brilliance. It acts as the steam poking up the safety valve.

But they were not always disposed to be brisk and intelligent. Sometimes, thank goodness, they felt inclined to be merely silly. Playful and silly. Then they would play beggar-my-neighbour, or hunt-the-slipper, or Up Jenkins.

For the benefit of those who do not know how the game of Up Jenkins is played, I will explain it. The two "sides" sit opposite to one another at a table. A small object—be it a sixpence or a ring—is drawn for, and allotted first to one "side" or the other. It is passed rapidly and with as much secrecy and deception as possible from hand to hand. It comes to rest finally in the hand of a certain member of the side, whose business it is to conceal it. When the side that holds the object considers itself sufficiently prepared, its captain says,

“Ready.” The opposing side then has a choice of methods; its captain may say either “Crash!” or “Creepy,” or “Crawly.” Crash speaks for itself; it means that all hands come down with equal force upon the table. A primitive, even a barbarous, method of procedure. Creepy and crawly mean that the fingers must be gradually extended, either all at the same time, or one by one. On no account must the object be allowed to jingle on the table, thereby revealing its whereabouts.

Up Jenkins is not really a very good game for four. It means that each side has only two members, which is not enough. To ensure a properly disconcerting confusion, each side should number at least six. But that entails a large party. The party of Michael, Simon, Judith, and Anne could be split only into groups of two.

Up Jenkins, which they had played happily with a sixpence during the first year of their joint holiday, became complicated during the second year by the fact that Simon had given Judith a ring. It was an absurd ring, costing one and six, and was made, as Simon remarked when presenting it, of milk. Simon had a theory that all objects of unidentifiable substance were made of milk, such as cigarette holders, beads, and rings. Someone had told him so; someone who ought to know. No furtiveness had attended either the purchase or the presentation of this ring. It had been done in the most open and unsentimental manner possible. Simon had simply seen the ring in a shop window at Truro; had said, “What a good design!”; had gone into the shop while the others lounged outside (attracting, incidentally, some attention); had emerged; had tossed the ring to Judith, saying, “Here! catch!” and no one had thought any more about it. But the fact remained that Judith wore Simon’s ring.

It became a symbol. Michael looked at it on the finger of her slim brown hand and envied Simon’s sharp eyes. Why had he not first spotted that ring in the shop window? He knew himself to be cleverer than Simon, although perhaps not so good-looking; but in spite of his cleverness he had allowed Simon to see that ring first, and to buy it for Judith. It was absurd to mind, of course. There was no worm of rivalry, or of sentimentality, to be found crawling among the four of them. They were all good friends: no more. But Judith liked that ring; she wore it continuously, and Michael caught himself looking at it whenever her hand lay inert on the sand beside him.

It was a strong, brown, slender hand, and the false amber of Simon’s ring became it strangely.

In the evenings they used the ring instead of a sixpence for Up Jenkins. Whenever it came to Michael’s turn to give the order, he said, “Crash!” hoping that Simon or Judith (who always seemed to pick each other for sides, leaving

him with Anne) might be obliged to bring their hands down with a bang on the table, thereby shattering the ring to smithereens; though Simon, as rival captain, took a perverse pleasure in saying "Crawly," which meant that Michael had to release the ring with the utmost caution into safety. But milk seemed to be both curiously resistant and curiously resonant, for when Simon crashed it never broke, but when Michael crawled it always fell with a clatter. The ring was Simon's ally, whatever Michael might do.

That silly ring and Up Jenkins, between them they were creating quite a situation. "Dash that ring," said Michael, having once more lost the game; "I'll throw it into the sea to-morrow." At that moment he looked up and caught Simon's eyes fixed upon him. Their expression was suddenly, violently charged with hate. "Oh, no, you won't," said Judith, restoring the ring to her finger.

Next morning at breakfast Simon and Michael had a quarrel. It was a ridiculous, childish quarrel, about a handkerchief. Simon said Michael had taken his handkerchief. "I wouldn't take anything of yours even as a gift," said Michael. "No," said Simon, "you'd better not." But they both knew that Judith, and not the handkerchief, was the bone of contention.

Anne tried to keep the peace, but the suppressed, unspoken anger smouldered all day beneath an unnatural politeness. They were all affected by it, even Anne, who was beginning to feel that she loathed Judith. Judith was the cause of the trouble, after all, and there she lay on the sand in the hot sun, apparently unconcerned but actually making things worse all the time in a sly way. What need was there for her to caress the golden curls at the back of Simon's neck with a gull's feather? A week ago she might have done it with impunity, but to-day she must know very well that she enraged Michael. And Anne was further exasperated by the fact that she dared not ask Judith whether any understanding existed between Simon and herself. They had always been such very intimate friends, she and Judith, and now here was this miserable sex question arising and spoiling everything. Look what it had achieved already! It had made the two men quarrel, and it had estranged the two girls. It had turned Judith, darling Judy, into a stranger, shut away with a rich, dark secret all her own; and as for Simon, it had turned their nice, merry Simon into a potential savage. That was what the poison of sex, in an incredibly short space of time, could do to care-free and untroubled friendship.

The whole day was extremely uncomfortable. At moments they forgot themselves and played about in the old way, making sand castles or getting involved in some impersonal discussion. But as evening descended, Anne, a very receptive person, became aware that Simon and Judith increasingly

wanted to get away alone together. In spite of all her exasperation, she could not help feeling sorry for them. It was against the traditions of the party for two members to wander away from the others; they had always been a community, without division. It was difficult for Judith and Simon to do something so unprecedented. Anne was so much tickled by their dilemma that she almost simplified things for them by taking Michael off for a walk herself. But, underneath her amusement, she was too much annoyed with them to put into execution a project so charitable.

So, urged and impelled, Judith and Simon had to manage matters for themselves. According to plan, they had all taken their supper down to the cove, for the night was warm as English nights are seldom warm, and later on a full moon would rise over the blackness of the sea. They lay in the cove, waiting for the moon to rise. Conversation became more sparse and more difficult. The August darkness had come down on them so quickly that neither Michael nor Anne could see whether the other two had moved closer together or not. They knew only that some mysterious influence vibrated in the night between them—an influence made up of hatred and passion, instinct and resentment, disintegrating, irresistible; and withal not really mysterious, but as simple as the tide that crept around the rocks.

“Come on, Simon,” said Judith’s voice suddenly out of the darkness, “let’s go and bathe. Look, there’s the moon.”

A silver rim was showing over the edge of the horizon.

They disappeared, swiftly, silently. Michael and Anne were left alone together. Neither spoke. Michael threw pebbles into the sea.

“It’s all nonsense, you know,” Anne said presently; “they’re not in the least in love with each other. It was that ring that started the trouble—that, and moonshine, and propinquity. It isn’t safe, I suppose, for people of our age to be together. However sensible one may be. Something puts a match to the haystack, and up it goes in flames.”

“Meanwhile,” said Michael, “I feel as though I could kill Simon. I suppose you’ll say that’s nonsense too.”

“Of course it is,” said Anne; “you never thought about Judith at all till you thought that Simon wanted her. We’ve just been caught unawares in the usual silly trap. And it’s all about nothing. That’s what annoys me.”

“You’re very wise, Anne, aren’t you?”

They were silent for a space, while the moon climbed up the sky and irradiated the water.

“Oh, damn,” said Michael. “Nonsense or no nonsense, I’m going after them.” He sprang to his feet.

“Michael, you can’t. It isn’t done.”

“It’s going to be done this time.”

“Michael, don’t be a fool. You’ll only have a row with Simon, and then we shall all have to separate and go back to London.”

“I don’t care if we do. As for having a row with Simon, I ask nothing better. I’ll punch his head for him.”

Anne sighed. Where was sweet reasonableness fled? Evidently when men were seized by love or by the desire to fight, it was no good arguing with them.

“Well,” she said, getting up, “I suppose I’d better come too.”

They went along the little path to the next cove, Anne bored and alarmed, and Michael raging. The loveliness of the night hung over them like a reproach.

In the next cove Judith lay on a flat rock and Simon stood over her. He was entirely naked but for a cloth about his loins, his young man’s body gleaming with amazing beauty in the light of the risen moon. Anne caught her breath. They looked like something mythological. Even the towel in which Judith had wrapped herself took on the semblance of white classical draperies. They were not speaking, they were simply looking at one another. The dark sea washed gently beneath them. They were looking at one another as though miraculously exploring one another’s beauty.

Anne put out her hand and found Michael’s arm. He was gazing at them too, transfixed.

“Oh, Michael,” she whispered, knowing that now she could lead him, “come away. It’s real, don’t you see—it’s real.”

THE UNBORN VISITANT



THE UNBORN VISITANT

AN EDWARDIAN STORY

ALL her friends agreed that Elsa Branksome was a hopelessly ordinary woman. They had said it so often that it was a wonder they had not tired of saying it. It was still more of a wonder that they had not tired of including so ordinary a woman in their parties. Human persistence, in some respects, would seem to be incalculable. Wherever there was a party, there Elsa Branksome was sure to be; and wherever there was a party, there was a knot of people getting into a corner and saying how hopelessly ordinary poor Elsa was.

One wag even went so far as to describe Elsa Branksome as the “woman in the street” at last typified. She never failed to say exactly what was expected of her. Her response to everything could be foreseen. But even while such response to anticipation exasperated some people, there was something reassuring about it. It confirmed a comforting sense of the endurance of certain values.

Perhaps that was why people continued to include Elsa Branksome as an element in their parties. She was not inspiring. She was never illuminating. But she was an emollient.

Needless to say, Elsa Branksome had never married. No romance, no scandal had ever brushed across her name. She was Society’s old maid; well on the way to becoming legendary in that rôle. Her age was undefined: thirty-five? forty? and the more kindly-disposed struck a happy mean at thirty-eight. No one could be really ill-disposed towards Elsa Branksome. She was too inoffensive for that; she was nobody’s rival and everybody’s confidante.

Moreover, rare quality in a confidante, she was discreet. She never made mischief. No storm centre she, whether of her own storms or anybody else’s. She was essentially a non-explosive. Therefore the astonishment, and indeed

the indignation, of her friends may well be imagined when the attractive and hitherto unapproachable Evan Sinclair was observed to pay her what is known as marked attention.

Even Elsa herself, humble though she was (humble almost by profession), could not fail to observe it. Evan Sinclair was always at her side. She had known him, of course, for years—they moved in the same set—but their acquaintance had never advanced beyond a mere social familiarity. And now, suddenly, there he was; always there; tactful but insistent; saying, “Let me fetch your wrap,” or, “You oughtn’t to sit on that damp grass.” Assuming proprietary airs towards her.

At first Elsa couldn’t understand it. And then her friends began to tease, and she was forced to understand. She felt the scratch beneath their teasing—it wasn’t likely that her friends would relinquish Evan without a scratch—but at the same time she felt that their respect for her was enhanced. She had ceased to be dear old Elsa and had become a woman, with a woman’s claims and a woman’s danger.

The experience was novel, terrifying, and exquisite. For the first time in her starved existence she apprehended the emotions which ordinary people regard as their birthright. She, Society’s old maid, had secured a man—and what a man!—for herself.

She was bewildered. Over and over again, every night, in fact, she told herself that she must keep her head. But she knew very well that she had already lost it, and her heart to boot. Evan Sinclair was the most attractive man that she, or any of her friends, had ever known. He was good-looking—like a Gainsborough, they said, with his gray hair brushed back—athletic, scornful, socially charming, but inwardly, and incorrigibly, reserved. Of impeccable manners, he was said to reveal his real self to none.

Women petted him, and he gave nothing but his charm in return. He laughed, and joked, and slipped away. And now Elsa Branksome—dear old Elsa—poor old Elsa—such a dear, but rather a bore, rather an old cup of tea—nice old Elsa—Elsa of all people had caught him. Elsa Branksome, that ordinary woman!

She sat before her mirror, taking down her hair. (The year, it must be said, was nineteen hundred and eight, when women still allowed their hair to grow to its natural length, and paid the penalty in a nightly brushing-out of long, luxuriant tresses.) She sat, then, before her mirror, taking down her hair.

She laid at least one pound of the stout hairpins upon her dressing table, and at least another pound of pads which had puffed out her coiffure in the

necessary shape. But she did these things mechanically. She was thinking neither of hairpins nor of pads, nor even of the *bigoudis* with which she prepared the curls for the succeeding day. Her gestures were purely automatic. She was thinking of Evan Sinclair—thinking of him with an ecstasy that amounted to an agony. An agony of bewilderment and love.

The teasing of her friends had at last crystallized into a certainty. That teasing, which for so long she had tried to dismiss with a deprecatory laugh. “Evan? but how absurd of you! We’ve always been very good friends. You know as well as I do that Evan has never been serious about anything in his life.”

And now, it seemed, Evan was serious. His elusive, charming manner had changed to intensity. That evening, after the children’s Christmas tree (they were both staying at the same house for Christmas), he had caught her alone in the library. His handsome Gainsborough face had pleaded with her; he had knelt beside her chair. She had been terribly afraid that someone would come in.

But what had he said? Words that she had long since ceased hoping to hear. Words, indecent almost, in their urgency. “Marry me, Elsa—marry me. I want you so much for my own.”

And she, what had she said? She could hardly remember, so great was her amazement, as she mechanically laid stout hairpin after stout hairpin upon the dressing table, taking down her hair. Was it possible that she had kept her head? Yes, she had kept it. She had pushed him away gently. She had just had time to tell him that she would give him her answer to-morrow, and then somebody had come in. . . .

She stuck a pin into the cushion on her dressing table, through the wire of a pin-curl; and with accustomed fingers began to roll up the curl round the greasy leather of the *bigoudi*, but all the while she thought of Evan as one in a trance.

“Evan—Evan,” she said to herself, she who had never called him anything but Mr. Sinclair, according to the stilted fashion of her day—for she was nothing if not correct in her behaviour; but now she felt she might whisper “Evan” to herself, in the secrecy of her bedroom, a bedroom which he would soon have the right to share.

She shivered at the daring thought; and the *bigoudi* went crooked, so that she had to disentangle it and roll it up again. “Evan!” she whispered, stealing a fearful look at herself in the glass; and she seemed to see that lean, attractive face looking over her shoulder into the glass at her own reflection. The

transfixed pin-curl in the foreground was not a very romantic adjunct; and, having successfully screwed it up into its *bigoudi*, mixture of lead and leather, she stuffed it away hastily into the drawer of the dressing table.

At that moment she heard a voice behind her saying, in drawling tones unfamiliar to her ear, "How you can put up with all that hot, false hair on your head beats me."

Elsa turned; she saw the slim figure of a girl perched on the back of the sofa behind her. The girl had an impudent little face; short wavy hair; she perched on the sofa clad in a jacket and trousers of rose-red silk; her legs were crossed, and from the corner of her mouth dangled a cigarette.

Every line of her garment advertised the charms of her young body; yet she seemed completely unaware. She perched there, quite at her ease, surveying Elsa with a disingenuous interest and curiosity. "And what a bore having to brush it out every night."

So convincing was her presence, though so improbable her appearance, that Elsa must perforce take her for granted. This was no ghost. Ghosts manifested themselves always in stomachers or crinolines; such was Elsa's training. This apparition reverted in no way to the past, as portrayed either by Holbein or Winterhalter. Lely and Vandyke were equally out of the running.

This, therefore, was no ghost. There remained only one thing for Elsa to say; and, true to her character, she said it; "And who," she said, "are you?"

"Me?" replied the apparition, easily, uncrossing and recrossing her silken legs; "why, of course, I'm your daughter."

"My daughter?" said Elsa. She passed her hand with a worried gesture across her forehead, forgetful that that forehead was now denuded of its fringe, a condition in which she never allowed anybody to see her. Then she made another obvious remark for which she was perhaps scarcely to be blamed. "But," she said, "I haven't got a daughter."

The apparition was unperturbed by this denial of its existence. "Oh, not yet, naturally," it replied, blowing a thread of smoke, "but you soon will have. You'll be engaged to Evan to-morrow."

At this cool intrusion into her most secret thoughts, Miss Branksome, outraged, revolted.

"Evan? I don't know who you mean."

She said this triumphantly, as though she had settled the matter and expected the girl to vanish up the chimney. Instead of which, the girl laughed

in the tolerant way reserved by the young for the elderly, and condescended to an elucidation. “Evan Sinclair—my father. He proposed to you this evening, didn’t he? A nice man, I’m glad you chose him. But please do buck up about it, because I’m in a terrible hurry to get born. When I’ve finished talking to you, I’ll run along to his room and give him the same message. Which room is he in, do you know?”

Elsa, to her own consternation, found herself answering as though she were carrying on an ordinary dialogue.

“I most certainly don’t know where Mr. Sinclair’s room is”—(“No,” said the apparition with a sigh, “I suppose you wouldn’t”)—“and in any case,” Elsa added severely, “if Mr. Sinclair is really your father, you have no business to speak of him by his Christian name. Where have you been brought up? And smoking too! You seem to be a most extraordinary young person. I don’t understand in the least.”

“No?” said the apparition sympathetically. “Well, perhaps it is a little difficult. But I’m not really extraordinary—we’re all the same, everybody, I mean, of my age. You see I’m living in a different year from you, that’s all. It’s quite simple. I’m living in nineteen-thirty-two. You’re in nineteen-eight, aren’t you? That’s right. I’m just twenty-three at present—*my* present. If only you knew about Einstein, you’d understand.”

“Einstein?” said poor Miss Branksome.

“Oh,” said the apparition with some impatience, “I can’t stop to tell you about Einstein now. You’ll find out about him all in good time. For the moment I can only tell you that I’m living in the fourth dimension—so are you, for that matter—but you won’t understand that either. So you must just take it from me, on trust. By the way, my name’s Daphne.”

“Daphne? Daphne what?”

The apparition stared. “Well, Daphne Sinclair, of course—what else? You didn’t think I was married, did you? Not me. You won’t get me to marry in a hurry, my dear old thing. Marriage is *too* bogus. You won’t catch me marrying till I’m well over thirty, if then. I shan’t be thirty till nineteen-thirty-nine, shall I, if I’m born next year?”

“Oh,” said Miss Branksome, pressing her hands to her head. “I *can’t* do these sums.”

“Never mind, I think that’s right. But now tell me,” said Daphne, jumping off the sofa and coming up to Elsa, who shrank miserably away, “what do you think of me? D’you like me or not? Take a good look. It isn’t everybody, you

know, who's privileged to see their daughter as she will be twenty-four years hence."

Elsa gazed at the rose-red figure poised before her, so gay, so boyish; and the virus of a horrified disapproval entered into her veins. Never, she thought, had she beheld so outrageously impudent a creature, with its mop of short brown hair and the cigarette dangling from its mouth.

The creature seemed sexless, too; it might have been a girl, but equally it might have been a mediæval page. Elsa stared; she was trying to think of the most crushing thing she could possibly say.

"Tell me," she said at last, very slowly and deliberately, "are you supposed to be a lady?"

Daphne flung back her head and uttered peal after peal of laughter.

"Oh, you dear priceless old thing," she cried when at last she could speak, "what is it you don't like about me? My pyjamas? My hair? But we all look like this, you know. You can hardly tell us apart. It's the post-war type."

"Post-war?" said Miss Branksome.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot you didn't know about that either. I won't enlighten you—no good giving people disagreeable anticipation. But, as I was saying, we all look like this. We don't go in for voluptuous curves nowadays. We like everything—how shall I say?—pared away. As little fuss as possible, whether in clothes or figure or manners."

"Or morals either, I should say," observed Miss Branksome tartly. She was rather pleased with that. She felt she had scored a point.

Daphne shrugged. "Oh, well, as to that! Perhaps you're right. It saves a lot of trouble. Nobody minds, you see."

She suddenly dropped to the ground at Miss Branksome's feet and sat there, hugging her knees and staring up at her hostess.

"Funny, isn't it," she observed, "to think you're going to be my mother? Do let's go on talking. I can't stay long, so let's make the most of it. Haven't you any curiosity? About what you call the future? About me? After all, I *am* your child, and though of course we don't believe in the maternal instinct and all that nonsense, I expect you still do. Ask any questions you like; I'll answer."

She waited expectantly, and taking a cigarette case from the pocket of her pyjama jacket, she lighted another cigarette from the stub of the last one.

“Chain smoker, I’m afraid,” she remarked, throwing the stub into the fire. “Bad habit. Can’t break myself of it. Nerves. That’s the worst of my generation—nerves. I’d give anything for a cocktail, but I suppose you don’t deal in such things. Lord, what dull lives you must lead! But I’m doing all the talking. It’s your turn now.”

Miss Branksome, however, had nothing to say. If the truth must be told, she was struggling against a feeling of the most violent antipathy she had ever experienced, and which confusedly she felt to be wrong, since this creature was after all (apparently) her child, and, according to Miss Branksome’s standards, one ought to love one’s children, whatever they might be like. She felt that she ought to gather this child to her arms, suffused meanwhile with an emotion of pure heavenly bliss.

Far from any such impulse, she remained appalled by the completed spectacle of the being for whose existence she was to be responsible. Horrible! She shuddered. The vulgarity, the shamelessness of the creature!—for it must be remembered that Miss Branksome, despite her social activities, was a highly correct spinster in an age which prided itself upon its good breeding, and valued manners far above candour.

As though Daphne divined what was passing in her mother’s mind, she broke the silence by saying, “I see, you don’t like me. Well, I don’t blame you, though it’s a pity. Perhaps by the time I really am my age—if you follow what I mean—I shall have educated you up to looking at me with rather less of a shock. Perhaps I’ve been too sudden for you, offering you so to speak the finished article before you’d seen it through its various stages. There really is a big jump between you and me, isn’t there? Much bigger than you’d think from the mere years that separate us. I wonder why? It can’t be entirely due to the war.” (“What is this war,” thought Elsa, “that she keeps talking about?”) “It must be a difference in our tempo”—and this, again, was a term unfamiliar to Elsa Branksome.

“That’s it!” cried Daphne, as though she had made a discovery; “you’re slow-motion, you see, and I’m speeded up. I’ve got it now. You like things to be slow and thorough; I like things to be quick and shallow. I haven’t time to be ponderous. Love, now—I daresay you think you’ll stick to Evan all your life?”

It was on the tip of Miss Branksome’s tongue to reprove Daphne again for alluding to her father by his Christian name; but, realizing that she must concentrate her forces upon coping with this extraordinary situation and upon deciding what steps (preventive) she could take about the future, she remained silent. Daphne chattered on.

“I rather envy you, you know. There’s something left in me which rather likes your old-fashioned sentiment. Of course, that’s a thing I could only say to you—my own friends would simply hoot at me. It’s rather for me to tell you what I really think—we spend such a lot of time in telling each other what we think we ought to think in my generation. And we’re so bright that we positively dazzle ourselves and each other with our own brightness. It’s a funny sort of relief,” said Daphne, swinging herself round and leaning confidentially against her mother’s knee, “to prattle away to a dear pre-historic old thing like yourself.”

Miss Branksome looked down on the boyish head. She disliked Daphne’s vocabulary, she disliked it intensely, but she discovered suddenly that she did not dislike Daphne nearly so much as she had started by disliking her. She felt a queer and sudden interest in this troubled, nervous, intelligent freak. She went so far as to lay her hand upon the head, and a curious thrill ran through her at the contact of her fingers with the soft, wavy hair.

“My dear child,” she said, and was astonished to hear her own voice saying it, “you’re much too analytical.”

Daphne jumped round. She sat on her haunches and stared eagerly up into her mother’s face. “But of course! How bright of you. We all are. Not one of us takes things as they come, but we want to know why, why, why? Freud, you know—but no, of course you don’t know. Sorry. But you see we’ve got this passion for what we call honesty. Knowing ourselves. Motives, instincts, complexes.”

Miss Branksome was puzzled again. But she let it pass. She just said softly, “You’ve forgotten the charm of mystery.”

Daphne thought over that. She blew rings of smoke and vaguely speared them with her finger. It was obvious to her that her mother was talking a different language, and she doubted whether her mother and herself would become quite intelligible to one another, but she was in the mood to be lenient. It was necessary, perhaps, for the generations to go their own way; to develop along their own lines.

“Oh, well,” she said, “I daresay we shall worry along all right, you and I, if we avoid too much argument.”

They were each making concessions.

“You know,” said Miss Branksome, after a pause, “this is very queer.”

“Yes, it is rather odd, isn’t it? But it seems quite natural, somehow—not

shaming in the least—that I should be sitting here talking to you. Shall we remember it, do you think? I mean, shall we be able to talk about it in the future, when I’m really there? What fun! I say, you’ll hurry up with that marriage, won’t you? It is such a bore, waiting about.”

“At any rate,” said Miss Branksome, rather wryly, “you seem to have plenty of appetite for life.”

“Oh, yes, we’ve all got that. You see, you don’t know yet how exciting life is going to become. Lord, how I could puzzle you if I liked! You wouldn’t think, would you, that people in Australia could hear a concert in London? Or that people could fly at three hundred miles an hour? Or that you’ll hardly see a horse in the London streets?”

“Daphne, dear,” said Miss Branksome, and her voice was the voice of a mother reproving her little girl in the schoolroom, kind but firm, “don’t say such exaggerated things. It’s silly.”

Daphne was delighted. “All right. Wait and see. I’ll remind you of this conversation—some day. On Christmas Day, nineteen thirty-two. I’ll remind you of it. And I daresay we’ll be able to do a great deal for each other, if only we’re sensible. Christmas Day, nineteen thirty-two, remember. It’s an assignation.—I say, look at the time.”

Miss Branksome turned obediently, and looking at the clock on the mantelpiece she saw that it was exactly midnight. At that moment the bells rang out from the village church.

It was Christmas Day. She turned again to Daphne with both hands held out; but Daphne was no longer there.

“Well, I never,” said Miss Branksome. She stared heavily at the various objects on her dressing table—the false curls, the hairpins.

She even touched them gingerly, as though doubtful of reality. She looked at the rug beneath her feet, where Daphne had been sitting, but no trace remained; even the gray splotches of ash, where Daphne had flicked her cigarette onto the carpet, had disappeared.

This fact disconcerted Elsa even more, for some reason, than Daphne’s disappearance. She had fully expected Daphne to vanish, but she had not expected Daphne’s little traces to vanish with her. Had she imagined it all? But she was most certainly not asleep.

“Daphne,” she said aloud, tentatively, timidly. And then she thought, “Heavens! she has gone to see Evan.”

A girl in a man's room at midnight. Ought she to go in pursuit? Then she remembered that Evan was Daphne's father. "Oh, dear," said poor Elsa, sitting down in despair, "I'm getting so dreadfully muddled." She continued to sit, staring, thinking. Did she want Daphne? Could she actually cheat Daphne out of her future if she really wanted to?

Which was uppermost, the hostility she had felt towards Daphne, or the queer, shy tenderness which had crept over her as the girl so artlessly revealed herself?

With these questions revolving in her mind, she continued mechanically to prepare herself for bed.

She was almost unconscious of the process of her thought. But as she climbed into bed and blew out the candle she surprised herself whispering, "I wonder how quickly one can get a licence for a registrar's office?"

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 *Thirty Clocks Strike the Hour* by V. Sackville-West]