



Malice of Men

Warwick Deeping

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“I believe in the large simplicities, in the human urges at the back of all of us. I believe in love, courage and compassion. I suppose that is why the people who are out first after cleverness fail to see that life is a complex of the great simplicities. We are apt to look at little bits of the pattern, and not at the whole garment.”

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THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE
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NO HERO—THIS
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MALICE OF MEN



WARWICK DEEPING

MALICE
OF
MEN



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FIRST AMERICAN EDITION

MALICE OF MEN



CHAPTER ONE



As I sit in my chair, with my little dog on my knees, in this room full of books, I can look down over the Sussex oaks at the English sea. The spring's cold spell has passed, and the oaks are stealing into leaf, but the lacework of young leaves is dyed in different colours. One tree may be a pale, greenish gold, another have a tinge of bronze in its great dome. The distant sea is very still to-day, a sheet of grey blue silk.

If I turn my head to the right I can see the portrait of Sanchia Cherrill looking down at me with eyes that move me to many memories. Its exquisite pallor and strange, flowerlike eyes are part of the inevitable beauty and poignancy of things. Nothing was ever so dark and tragic and bitter to me as her hair. Her slim throat rises from a collar of turquoise blue velvet, a gracious and gentle stem. She had ceased to be so unhappy when Halliday painted that portrait for me, but her eyes still stir in me a protective compassion.

If life has taught me anything it has been the realization of man's capacity for infinite self-deception. He goes through life, humbugging himself, in sex, in the struggle for self-preservation, and in the thing we used to call religion. We English are a strange people. In our commerce and our exploitations of other countries we can be ruthless realists, but our ethical and emotional world is so like our Victorian Sabbath. We seem to become suddenly afraid of a hypothetical God, the shadow cast by our own consciences, and we put on black coats and cringe, and wash our hands in invisible soap. We become sentimental, but we sin in secret.

I know that as a child I was terribly quick to divine this falseness in my elders. Some children have an intuitive clarity of mind, call it what you will, but it is no distorting glass twisting reflections into nice, deceptive patterns. There can be anguish in such clarity of consciousness, but it is an anguish that may create a hatred of all cowardice and self-deceit. It can temper the steel of one's ruthlessness. It can teach man to be ruthless to himself.

I have loved and I have hated.

Let the ethical people hold up their hands in horror when I confess that successful and triumphant hatred has seemed almost as good to me as love.

I did not turn my other cheek to my enemy. He smote me bitterly and brutally, but when my own hour was ripe I gave back to him with ruthlessness the blows that I had taken.

Always I have craved for beauty. In my young days, like many young things, I was a dreamer; but can a man dream dreams in a world, that, beneath a conventional sleekness, conceals snobbery and cruelty and a selfishness that dresses itself in sentiment? I chose to put off my dream, take harness and fight. It was not given me to fight with the sword like the conventional gentleman of romance. My battle was in bricks and mortar, a material struggle that yet contained the essence of a dream. To my snob's world, the Bullstrode world, I was a little commercial cad. But my dream transcended their gentleman's relish, and became actual when theirs died.

I was born into that strange community which sells things across a counter. To the Olympians of those days we shoppers were just cads. I can remember reading a little poem by a man of notable athletic and academic culture. Its title was "Cads on Casters." Shop-assistants peddling on bikes. It happened that I was lying under a flowering thorn in the Rote Valley when I discovered that ironical and bitter thing in the gentleman's book of verse. My young self was full of the smell of the mayflower and of the cloth of gold in the meadows. Ringwood Castle lay black in its sheet of water under the shadow of a cloud. I had been dreaming dreams of that castle and myself.

But I was the son of a shopman. My mother ran a lodging-house in Sandbourn. I had ridden out to the Rote Valley on a primitive bike. I was not a gentleman, but a cad on a caster, and yet I could be moved to a kind of anguish by the beauty and sweet smell and the mystery of this exquisite day.

In our early days my father kept a draper's shop at Westend on Sea. It was neither a very considerable shop, nor, I imagine, a prosperous one, situated as it was in one of those shabbily new streets where stucco or yellow brick were the mode. We had an ironmonger's on one side of us, a greengrocer's on the other, and opposite us a row of yellow brick houses with blunt bow windows and absurd iron railings perched on the top of a low brick wall. I remember that at Christmas my father's shop blossomed into a display of cheap handbags and calendars, bric-à-brac and Christmas cards. I realize now that it was a pathetic little place, productive of chilblains and indigestion and flat feet. The shop was not warmed in winter, but it developed a curious cold fug of its own.

We lived over the shop.

My mother did the cooking, and sometimes helped in the shop, and a woman came in to wash and clean. Even in those days my mother was an austere little person in black, tightly corseted, and with stag's eyes that were always afraid. She ate very little, and suffered from chilblains in winter. Life for my mother had had but a transient flowering.

My mind-picture of my father has grown a little dim. His Christian name was Alfred, and he wrote poetry. I still have a manuscript book of it, and it was very bad poetry in the style of Martin Tupper. I suppose it was this poetic urge that made my father christen me John Keats.

My impression of him is that of a thin, dark, mercurial creature always dressed in black, flowery both in manners and in speech, a lovable but rather futile figure. He would walk to the door with customers and bow them out, rubbing ineffectual hands. I can remember the ingratiating phrase he always used "Thank you so much." I gather that my father suffered from that most fatal of passions, the desire to please. No doubt his world was a poor, flimsy structure, and that my father knew it for what it was, but he was a timid, garrulous creature who could never teach himself to use the word that is most ruthlessly essential in any human language. My father could not say no.

That he suffered from shameful qualms, moments of bitter self-revelation is betrayed by certain pathetic moanings in his poor poems. He clung to the little things, and had not a sufficiency of the savage animal in him to run amok and dare disaster. Disaster fell upon him for this very reason. He rubbed his hands and, with ingratiating unctuousness, thanked a world that laughed at him.

My childish memories of Westend are fragmentary and queer. I wonder whether a child's memory has a selective significance, and if the seemingly trivial may not be profoundly prophetic. Might we not treat childish memories as Freud deals with dreams, save that sex is not the one and singular urge?

It was my child's reaction to beauty that brought me into conflict for the first time with property. Strung along the low cliff above the estuary, a terrace of little, Regency houses spread small gardens like flowery mats below green balconies. Iron railings surrounded these sanctuaries. No. 3 was inhabited by a retired ships-chandler named Dudgeon. Mr. Dudgeon had a particular passion for stocks, and early in the summer his small front garden was a mass of colour and of perfume. The iron gate of the garden was kept locked. Something in me greatly desired a posy from that pleasance, and one morning late in May I crept

to those railings, insinuated a small hand, and was in the act of plucking when I heard a sudden bellowing at a window.

“Ha, you young thief!”

My hand withdrew itself. I had become aware of a hairy, terrifying face at a window. For the moment I was paralysed, but when the hairy face disappeared, I realized that the angry god was descending upon me. I turned and fled, scuttling on my small legs towards the nearest corner. Mr. Dudgeon had arrived on his doorstep.

“You young thief. I’ll put the police on you.”

I ran home to my mother. I found her in the parlour above the shop, sitting by the open window, and darning a pair of my father’s pants. I too was panting. I believed that dreadful things were going to happen to me, and I poured out my tale to my mother.

She put her work aside and took me on her knees. Had I actually picked a flower? No, I had not, and having reassured and soothed me, she gave me my first lecture on the solemn sanctities of private property.

“But, flowers, Mum, too?”

She assured me that Mr. Dudgeon’s flowers were wholly his. He had bought them or grown them, and everything inside a fence was sacrosanct.

“Supposing somebody walked into father’s shop, dear, and took things off the counter?”

I could appreciate the privacy of my father’s goods, but surely flowers were different? Didn’t God make them! I can remember my mother smiling a little sadly.

“Yes, dear, but flowers in somebody’s garden belong to somebody.”

“Do daisies belong to somebody?”

“It depends, dear. If they grow in a field with a fence or a hedge round it, they do.”

“I don’t like fences, Mum.”

“No, dear.”

“It doesn’t seem fair. If God made the flowers didn’t He make them for everybody?”

That, I expect, was rather a poser for my mother, and I don’t remember what her answer was. I doubt whether her generation had pondered these

elementals, or whether Westend ever questioned their *bourgeois* God and the rights of property. My mother conformed to all the conventions. The struggle for existence made conformation a necessity.

We went to St. John's Church on Sunday. It was a dim old place with pews like cattlepens, an oak gallery at the back, and windows full of greenish glass. My father wore a top hat, my mother a black bonnet. I can remember the way my father carried his hat into church, chest high, and with a kind of sacredotal carefulness as though it was precious. The hat was put very carefully under a seat. Previously, it had been taken out of a white box and ironed by my mother. Its glossiness was rather streaky, and in retrospect I can appreciate the problem of that hat. It was a symbol of poverty and respectability.

There was one occasion when, in a fit of fidgets, for the service bored me, I inadvertently kicked my father's hat in its place under the pew seat. I can remember my mother giving me a wounded look when the hat was produced at the end of the service. The heel of my boot had left a ruffled scar on the beaver. She said nothing to me then, and my father walked home, wearing that hat as though nothing had happened.

It seemed a ridiculous and trivial incident to me, but my mother said to me before dinner: "You must be careful, dear. Hats cost money."

Poor soul, she spent her whole life in being careful.

My particular passion in those days was for lead soldiers. I was a veritable small Frederick the Great, and I accumulated a standing army of some two hundred men, foot, horse, and artillery. It was unnecessary for my parents to ask me before a birthday or Christmas what I wanted, for the answer would always have been the same.

"Soldiers, Mum."

I had English guardsmen, Prussians in dark blue and with spiked helmets, Frenchmen in red trousers, Russians in dark green. My *corps d'élite* was a troop of lancers in red, white and blue. I first saw them in the window of Mr. Cumine's shop, and I took my mother to view them early in December.

"Aren't they lovely, Mum?"

I suppose in my childish way I liked the coloured panoply of mimic war, the nice order and pageantry of the painted battle-line. Also, in my small way, I was exercising power.

When I next went to visit Mr. Cumine's window in High Street the box of

lancers had gone. I felt grieved. Someone else must have bought those soldiers.

I ran home to tell my mother.

“Mum, they’ve gone.”

“What, dear?”

“The lancers.”

She pretended to console me, but on Christmas morning I found the box of soldiers in the pillowcase that my father as Father Christmas hung at the foot of my bed. I did not want to go to church that morning; I wanted to stay behind and parade my new cavalry, but being overruled by convention I slipped one of the lancers into my pocket, and kept taking it out to look at it during the service.

I remember another Christmas when I disgraced myself. I had set my heart on a box of grenadiers in scarlet tunics and black busbies advancing with bayonets fixed. The box was marked four and sixpence, and I realize now that the Lancaster finances must have been precarious. The present from my parents proved to be an absurd little box, in which, when a drawer was opened, two bell tents erected themselves. Six miserable little lead figures without the spice and dignity of swords or rifles inhabited the red box.

I was terribly disappointed. I remembered blurting out my dissatisfaction.

“Silly old present. Can’t have cost sixpence.”

It was one of the rare occasions when my mother spoke to me with gentle bitterness.

“If you are so ungrateful I had better take the present away.”

“Yes, it’s a silly thing. I don’t want it.”

My mother did take the box away, but when I saw her face after she had shut the present away in a drawer, sudden contrition assailed me. I remember running to her and pressing my face against her body, while I grasped her skirt with both fists. Nothing was said between us, but when the box of tents was ultimately returned to me I never failed to erect those tents on a corner of the table where my army was paraded.

As for schooling, my parents sent me to a mixed school for the very young kept by two elderly sisters. I did not take kindly to class culture, perhaps because even in those days I was too passionate a little individualist, and my

wits found no pleasure in consuming educational mincemeat, but went exploring on their own. They were good women, the Misses Dewman, palely sedulous in imparting elementary education, and I for one must have tried their patience very sorely. The elder, Miss Jane, was for ever saying to me: "John Lancaster, you must learn to pay attention."

It was at this dame-school that I had my first love affair and my first scuffle with a rival, both of which adventures ended unhappily for me. My angel was a little, fair-haired thing called Ethel. She was the perfect minx, even at the age of seven, but I thought her the most beautiful and exquisite creature on earth. I dreamed of rescuing her from savages and wild beasts. I was the fairy prince in armour.

I had a rival, a little, bull-headed, hard-eyed bandit named Stanley Fisher. He was an inch or two shorter than I was, but thick and fat. I suppose in my princely and amorous serenity I had despised Stanley. He was a stupid little oaf in school, and apt to be repulsively wet-nosed in winter.

We clashed over Ethel on the footwalk outside the Dewman wall. Both of us wished to walk home with Ethel. We grappled hand to hand, and suddenly I found myself down on my knees, and realizing with shocked shame that Stanley was stronger than I was. Even now I can recall the little arrogant face of my conqueror.

My sudden shame was such that I got up off my knees and slunk away. It was not the result of cowardice, but acute and sensitive self-humiliation. My little, princely self had been put down by a boy whom I despised. I suppose I should have flown at him with hot fury, and tried my luck at punching, but my anger had turned upon myself. I loved my little self so dearly, and it had been shamed in that scuffle, and my pride was in tears.

Stanley went off with the lady, and I slunk home. I had a bloody mark on one knee where the gravel had chafed it, and when my mother spoke of it, I lied to her. I said that I had fallen down in the playground while playing "Touch Wood."

But this trivial incident was a spicule of steel that entered into my small soul. I was not the princely creature that I had dreamed myself to be. I grew up a wiry lad, and that early licking may have taught me that I had to be strong in other ways, quick-witted, resourceful, agile. My contest was to be with circumstances rather than with men, for in subduing circumstance to one's will, one becomes the master of crude flesh.

I had no more scuffles with Stanley Fisher because I somehow knew that he could lick me. I was a little Agag, and hating myself and him for the

homage I had to pay. I pretended to laugh and dodge him when he was truculent, but I hated him with my whole small soul, and I hated myself almost as fiercely. Even in those days I used to ponder the problem of how one dealt with and smashed the world's Stanley Fishers. Would boxing lessons help, or sedulous exercise with the bedroom water-jug for the development of one's biceps? I was to realize that there were other strengths, and that in a policed world, one does not master men and things with naked fists.

CHAPTER TWO



W E LANCASTERS were a lonely trio, and the only relative with whom I came in contact was my mother's brother, Uncle Sam.

I can understand that Mr. Samuel Wimbush was an embarrassment to my parents and to the careful respectability of the Lancaster shop. Uncle Sam was not at all respectable. I believe that in those days he was vaguely connected with the Turf, and his association with strong liquor was even more intimate. He was a little, perky, Robin Redbreast of a man who wore strange waistcoats, and a very large fawn-coloured billycock hat, and he was the very antithesis of my mother. He had a queer, lilting walk, a very red face, mischievous eyes, and a floridity of language that must have made my poor parents shudder. Uncle Sam would suddenly descend upon Westend, and sometimes in a state of liquor, to be smuggled in by my mother and put to bed. But when Uncle Sam was drunk, he was genially and expansively and affectionately so. He was the sort of man of whom the world said that he was his own worst enemy.

I liked Uncle Sam. I imagine that he had moments of affluence, and periods when his pockets were empty. When fortune favoured him he used to take me down to the beach, set up his stick on the sands, and promise me a penny every time I hit it with a stone. I remember on one occasion making ninepence out of these cockshies, and the assumed despair with which Uncle Sam paid over the money.

“You'll ruin me, you young buccaneer.”

He was free too with his half-crowns, when he had them, and though the silver pieces must have added lustre to his person, I did not love him only for the money he gave me. Uncle Sam was so different from any other human being whom I had met in Westend-on-Sea. He smelled of adventure as well as of alcohol, and to my young soul in its dreamy, piratical days the adventure was more stimulating than the alcohol. He had strange tales to tell, and he told them with a cocksureness that impressed me.

My mother used to be worried by my association with her brother. I can see her now, ruffling herself up like a small black hen.

“Sam, I won't have you putting such ideas into the child's head.”

My uncle laughed at her.

“Fiddlesticks and tigers, he’ll come to no harm through me.”

Which was true. Uncle Sam may have been a boisterous and disgraceful mountebank, but there were no sinister streaks in his soul. Indeed my childish impressions painted him as one of the most honest creatures on earth, and a kind one. He was so careless of his own reputation, and held conventional respectability in such contempt that he was for ever poking fun at it. He could not help poking fun at my poor father, and when my mother, who appeared sensitive upon the subject, flared out at him, he was always ready to mollify her by laughing at himself.

“My dear, never take Sam seriously. Thank God, you didn’t marry a Sam. I never grew up, and never shall, glory be to God, Amen!”

But I remember one incident that made me think rather wonderful things of my uncle. We had in the mews, at the back of Alexandra Road, a ginger-headed brute of a cab-driver who was a terror to dogs, children, and his neighbours. My uncle and I happened to be passing the end of the mews when this fellow was in one of his tantrums. A neighbour’s dog had annoyed him, and he had got the poor little beast into a corner between a dung-pit and the stable wall, and was beating it to death with a broom-handle. A couple of frightened and agitated women were screaming at him, but he was paying no attention to them.

My uncle stood, saw, and went curiously red about the ears and cheeks.

“Here, you stop that.”

My uncle’s voice was a male one, and as such brought the bully round upon his heels. He asked my uncle in very foul language who he might be and what business he had in interfering between a gentleman and a dog. My uncle stood there smiling a little, thin smile, his very bright eyes fixed upon the fellow’s face.

“What you want is a thrashing.”

The cabbie was without his coat, and his grey flannel sleeves were rolled up. I remember that his forearms were freckled and covered with ginger hair. My uncle took his coat off, and handed it to me.

“Look after that, John.”

He was a smaller man than the cabbie, but directly they began to fight I realized that I need not fear for my uncle. He was much more clever and quick than this blundering brute. Ginger’s fists flew all over the place, but he seemed

quite unable to hit my uncle, whereas my uncle was most successfully hitting him. I can hear the clean smack of the blows even now, and the way the cabbie's face became a bloody smudge. What was more, the whole neighbourhood appeared to have been electrified by the news that Jim Higgins was getting a licking. In two minutes we had a small and appreciative crowd round us, and I felt that I was indeed a great man, holding the hero's coat.

Out-fought, the cabbie tried to rush my uncle and close with him, but the little man was up to such tricks and ready for them. His two fists cut upwards crisply, one after the other, and the bully's face went all funny and sleepy. I remember the queer way his legs seemed to sag at the knees. He seemed to hang for a moment suspended in the air, and then fall in a crumple on the cobbles.

My uncle just put on his coat and went to look at the dog. The poor beast was lying tucked up and shivering against the wall. My uncle bent over it, caressed it, and the dog licked his hand.

A woman pushed through the crowd, and spread her apron.

"I'll take him, poor dear. He's mine."

"Can you manage?"

"Yes, and thank you for giving that brute what he got."

My uncle smiled at her, and lifting the dog, lowered him into her apron.

"If he makes any more trouble, mention my name. Mr. Wimbush, London, will find me."

I remember the last half-crown Uncle Sam gave me. My mother's birthday was near, and in spite of temptation I was hoarding the silver piece to buy her some present. Spring cleaning was in progress, and I was amusing my small self rolling Uncle Sam's half-crown down the stairs, when it slipped through a crack between a riser and a tread. This was a tragic business, and though my father attempted to recover the coin by prising up a stair-board, he succeeded only in barking his own knuckles with the hammer, for my father was an ineffectual person in the handling of tools. Also, he was making a horrid mess of the stair-tread, and my mother intervened.

"Alfred, please don't do that."

My father had forced up the board, only to reveal a dark and dusty interior, and I now realize that had we exercised the functions of critics we should have

attacked the stair's bottom step, and not the one where the coin had disappeared. My father was easily discouraged and my mother's house-wifely distress subdued him. He replaced the splintered board, and went to hold his bleeding hand under the kitchen tap.

My mother said to me: "Easy come, easy go, my dear. It's all your uncle's fault."

I cannot say that her reasoning satisfied me, and I blurted out the truth as to the expectations I had held for that half-crown.

"I was going to buy you a birthday present, Mum."

My mother kissed me.

"Well, I'll take it as given, dear, and thank you."

This was natural philosophy, but I have often wondered whether my mother's present still lives at the bottom of those dusty old stairs.

The disappearance of that coin might have suggested prophecy, for my Uncle Sam never came again to Westend. My curiosity had to be satisfied with vague explanations. I was told that my Uncle Sam had gone abroad, and when I pressed for more detail, America was mentioned. The why and the wherefore were not vouchsafed me, and I did not suspect that Uncle Sam had become a skeleton in our cupboard. I pictured him as riding a mustang and blazing away with a revolver at Red Indians, and my mother did not crush the illusion.

Moreover, those were such dark days. It was a wet and dreary winter, and it seemed to me that fewer people came into my father's shop. I used to see him going round and turning down the gas jets. Nor did our food appear so good and plentiful as it had been. There was so much boiled rice, clammy solid rice pudding, margarine, and boiled potatoes. My mother's face had a pinched look, and her chilblains were more troublesome than usual. And I remember that my father appeared to be troubled with strange and distressful noises under his waistcoat.

There was an occasion when I surprised my mother in tears. I found her sitting by the parlour window in the failing light, bending her head over some piece of mending. I was profoundly shocked, and a little frightened by my mother's tears. It seemed so strange that she should be sitting there working and weeping.

"Have you got a headache, Mum?"

She lied to me, though I know now it must have been heart-ache.

“Yes, dear.”

I put my hand to her forehead and found it cold instead of hot.

“Why don’t you lie down on the sofa, Mum?”

“Perhaps I will, dear, presently.”

My bedroom was at the back of the house, my parents’ room in the front, and a narrow landing separated the two doors. If I happened to be awake I could hear my mother and father talking as they undressed, but at this time the sound of their voices seemed to go on and on into the night. I had a feeling that some mysterious and sinister thing was threatening my mother and father and our home. I could not say what it was, though my childish fancy might have pictured it as some hairy and strange creature, malicious and cruel.

My curiosity was piqued, and I crept out of bed one night, opened my door without a sound, and stood in my nightshirt, listening outside my parents’ room. My mother’s voice was speaking. She kept mentioning the name of a mysterious person called Bowker. It was Bowker this and Bowker that, and all that I could gather was that this Mr. Bowker was causing worry and distress to my mother and father. I knew a Mr. Bowker by sight, a thin-lipped, dusty old man rather like a desiccated goat, with a tuft of grey hair on his chin, who wore big black knobby boots. I had seen Mr. Bowker in my father’s shop.

I heard my father’s voice say: “Well, if anything should happen to me, there’ll be the insurance.”

My mother’s voice uttered a little, quick, wounded cry.

“Alfred, you mustn’t talk like that.”

“The old Shylock wants his pound of flesh. If he sells us up—”

“Oh, my dear, it isn’t as bad as that.”

“God knows, Edie, I wish it wasn’t.”

I am not likely to forget that month of May. My birthday was to arrive on the 29th, and May in Westend was a festal month to me. I can see the place now, blue sky, the silvered estuary, the old black pier, the gardens on the cliff, the painted fronts and green balconies of Royal Terrace, with its shrubbery full of lilacs, laburnums, and red may. The beach smelled of boats that had been painted and varnished for the season. The funny, old floating swimming-bath

flew its towels and bathing suits like bunting. Jobbing gardeners were planting the Royal Terrace gardens with red geraniums, white daisies, yellow calceolaria and blue lobelia. The façades of No. 3 and No. 7 had been repainted a glossy cream.

I remember running home from school about twelve o'clock, and surprising my father walking down the Alexandra Road, wearing a straw hat and carrying a rolled-up towel. It was unusual for my father to go bathing and at such an hour; also, his face puzzled me. My sudden appearance seemed to embarrass him.

“Just going for a dip, Johnnie.”

“Can I come too?”

My father smiled at me in a queer, wincing way.

“Water too deep for you, my dear. Run along and tell mother I'll be back for dinner.”

Assuredly those waters were too deep for me. I did not go home at once, but sneaked down the High Street after my father, and stood by the railings above the pier to watch the white boat take him out to the floating swimming-bath. I saw my father climb the steps and disappear behind the row of white dressing-boxes. Then I ran home to my mother. Miss Lowndes, our assistant, was alone in the shop, and I found my mother in the kitchen, bending over the stove.

“Father's gone swimming, Mum.”

I can see her now, turning sharply, and the way her eyes seemed to open inside and to stare. She had a spoon in her right hand, and her hand seemed to sink and let some white stuff dribble down her black skirt.

“Swimming?”

“Yes, he said he'd be back for dinner.”

My mother must have known that the thing she had feared and fought against was very near to her. She put a hand to her head, stood a moment, and then, with a peculiar calmness, went on with her work. I can remember helping her to lay the table. We were to have soup, and suet pudding for our dinner, and my mother sat down with the soup tureen on the table, and made me sit down with her.

“We will wait for your father.”

I can remember thinking that the soup would be cold, and wondering

whether we were to have treacle or jam with our pudding, when my mother, who appeared to be listening, got up suddenly, went to the window and closed it. Her behaviour seemed to me most strange. She ladled me out some soup, gave me a slice of bread, and went out, locking the door. I could hear voices below, and sudden, strange terror possessed me. I ran to the window and managed to raise the lower sash.

I saw the head and shoulders of a man in a blue jersey, the end of what looked like a white door, and someone's naked feet sticking out from under a white blanket. The man and the thing he was helping to carry disappeared from my view. I became aware of a little crowd of people on the pavement. Footsteps were coming up the stairs, slowly and with a suggestion of stress and of effort. I remember running to the door and beating on it with my fists.

“Let me out, let me out.”

I had a horror of something, a dreadful premonition that seemed shut in with me in that familiar room.

My mother came and opened the door. She pushed me back gently into the room. I shall never forget the curious, dead dignity of her face.

“There has been an accident, dear. Dr. Miller is coming to your father.”

I burst into tears and clung to her, for somehow my young soul was not to be fooled. She was only a little thing, but she picked me up, and clasping me to her, walked round and round the room with me, her dry, white face close to mine.

“You must never forget your father, John.”

That is how it happened, and though I did not know it then, I discovered the truth in a little old diary of my mother's, after her death. I have always regarded this act of my father's as a deed of desperate courage conceived for the sake of my mother and myself. It was not the cowardice of a poor, ineffectual failure that had inspired him to end his life in a way that should cheat scandal. He had planned it so simply and so shrewdly. He had just gone bathing, and got himself drowned.

All the evidence proved it to have been an accident. Mr. Abraham, who owned the swimming-bath, was able to swear that my father appeared in the best of spirits, and joked with him just before taking his plunge into the sea. Dr. Miller's suggestion was that it had been a case of cramp.

My mother could not be choused out of his insurance money. By that last

act my father had assured her the sum of five hundred pounds. My father was buried in the Westend cemetery, and every year I have visited his grave. He was forty-three when he died, and I was nine.

My mother kept on the shop in Alexandra Street for three months, and that too was an act of heroism. I suppose that Mr. Bowker had his blood-money, and that the mortgage was paid. My mother must have been able to dispose of the business as a going concern, and to leave Westend with some capital behind her, but what she suffered during those weeks is recorded in her diary.

I have read and reread those brief entries. There was no self-pity in them, no false emotion. They were the stark, curt confessions of a woman whom life had wounded, and who neither forgave nor forgot.

My mother had been a religious woman, and the bitter sincerity of these confessions showed that she was no conventional Job.

“God is on the side of the people with money.”

“Cash casteth out compassion.”

“I will work and plan that my son may not suffer shame.”

“My husband was murdered by a mortgage.”

My mother had ceased to humbug herself. I suppose she accepted the hypocrisy of an age that sent out missionaries to the heathen, and imprisoned its servants in dark basements, and underpaid its working men. She became the gentle yet remorseless realist, a woman who conformed to the commercial creed, but refrained from polishing the Sabbath hat. My mother rarely went to church again after my father’s death.

That, too, considering the situation in which she found herself, was an act of courage.

CHAPTER THREE



OUR coming to Sandbourn in Sussex was yet another act of courage on the part of my mother.

We began our life in Sandbourn, as lodgers in a little stuccoed house off the King's Road, while my mother explored the place before launching her adventure. I do not know how much capital she had, perhaps a few hundred pounds, but when she risked it in her throw with fate, she took her chances gallantly. A house, No. 42, in Regal Terrace, was to be let, and my mother obtained the lease of it, and opened it as a lodging house. Such furniture as we possessed went to the garnishing of our own rooms at the top of the house. My mother had to furnish the place out of capital, nor was she niggardly in her purchases, and I imagine that most of her capital must have been swallowed up in the experiment. My mother's courage in risking her all in this adventure made a most profound impression upon me when I was sufficiently wise to appreciate her courage. She dared to do, what for her, must have been the big thing, and for a woman who had spent all her life in being careful, the risks she took were all the more singular.

But let me describe this little Sussex seacoast town as it was in those days. Planted on the curve of a shallow bay, with uplands and wooded hills rising behind it, the place had a beauty that even utilitarianism had failed to destroy. In the east the Old Town crowded under the Black Rock cliffs. Coasting schooners used its small harbour, and a row of black tackle-houses like huge sentry-boxes lined the shingle. The Old Town was all periods to all men, Elizabeth and Queen Anne, a delicious jumble of pride and prejudice in brick and tile and timber, full of little alleys and winding steps, and passages across which ancient houses seemed to rub noses. It delighted in rich, individual smells, suggestions of tar and hemp and paint, of fried fish and soapsuds and slops. It swarmed with very dirty and vigorous children who were ready to set upon any stranger in a white collar, as I soon discovered. Two bluff, square stone church towers rose above the jumble of red roofs, and against the eastern sky Furze Hill heaved itself like a great green wave. In the spring of the year this hill was all yellow with gorse, and when you climbed it on some still day that was dimly sunlit you looked down upon old Sandbourn through a haze of smoke.

The old town ended abruptly just short of the Monument, a pseudo-classic column capped by a clock. This grey and austere emblem stood on guard, and confronting the Old Town with one solemn clock-face, seemed to say "Thus Far and No Further." The Monument set a boundary between the rude toilers of the sea and the segregated gentility of Sandbourn's west-end. It was like an exclamation mark confronting Black Rock and its irreverent democracy. Beyond it and westwards stretched the Sandbourn of George and of William, Regal Terrace, and Regents Parade, solid, white houses with green roofed balconies, Regal Terrace bow fronted and brightly buttoned with polished brass, Regents Parade even more solemn and stately, with its high steps and porticoes, and little gardens behind painted balustrades. Sandbourn of the Regency looked as solid and eternal as some white cliff controlling the sea. Its thousand windows were scintillant and belaced, and like the eyes of a superior people they could make a casual urchin like myself feel infinitely obscure and small.

The original cliff face rose steeply behind Regal Terrace and Regents Parade, and here the cornices and chimneys of other houses cut the sky. These upper terraces were slightly later as to period than those below and behind them and their gardens open country swelled in the green fields of Pink Farm. Pink Farm itself, a Victorian fantasia, with its high gables and spired barn, and pink-washed walls, will always stand for me like a pharos. Some eccentric amateur agriculturist had built it in the 'forties, and its flamboyant cheekiness had become somewhat tamed by trees.

From the Monument, Sandbourn's High Street ran directly north up the old Sandbourn valley, to the station and St. Jude's Church. This was Sandbourn's shopping centre, and much of it still retained a Georgian flavour. Many of the shops had been added to the original houses, and behind and above them, bow fronts and cornices and balustrades gave to this broad street a pleasant dignity.

Now, for Stuccoville. That is the name I gave to the conglomeration of splurging ugliness that the speculating builders of the 1860's had crowded into the upper reaches of the Sandbourn valley. Here was every sort of cheap nastiness, shoddy little terraces, grey faced and grim, rows of semi-detached villas with absurd high steps ascending to mock-oak front doors. Every miserable front garden had a stuccoed wall compressing it, or cast-iron railings set in cemented pillars. The hideous, cheap artificiality of Stuccoville seemed to symbolize the smudgy humbug of its generation. Shoddy brickwork had been concealed behind cement. Even the pretentious ornamentation of some of the villas, the wretched shallow cornices and mouldings, made these buildings more vulgarly genteel. Hedges of euonymus completed the convention, and in

the background bulged the red gasholders of the local Gas Works. Finally, one's eye might rest on the mock-gothic spire of St. James's Church, a fitting symbol for the concrete falseness of Stuccoville.

Here too, amid this mass of cement-daubed walls, stood the railway station, all yellow brick and iron sheeting painted ochre, and blue slate. It was a particularly hideous station, but it served a utilitarian purpose, and so was less dastardly than the houses that surrounded it. At one corner of the station-approach a firm of brewers had rebuilt the Victoria Hotel in white brick, with terra-cotta adornments. It had an absurd Mansard roof of blue slates with cast iron excrescences bristling on its summit, a blatant and ridiculous temple sacred to gods Bung and Beer.

Beyond St. Jude's church and the Gas Works, Sandbourn High Street divided into three roads, the main Rudlake and London road on the left, that to Beaulieu and Petling in the centre, and the Stonestile-Winchfield road on the right. Stuccoville ceased with strange abruptness, and beyond a few market-gardens and orchards open country raised a great, green placid forehead. Three lovely valleys ascended to the Forest Ridge, and the woods of Beaulieu and Maskell's Manor. To a boy who had seen no country other than the flat agricultural plain behind Westend, this Sussex landscape seemed miraculous. To me, even as a child, it was full of mystery and romance, high, spacious and lovely, God's country after man's Stuccoville. All of it was farmland, mostly grass, with a few arable fields on the lower slopes. The hedges were of thorn, big and bushy, and smothered in May with white blossom. Here and there a high wood capped some ridge. The wild flowers in spring were wonderful to see, violets and primroses on the banks, anemones and bluebells in the woods, purple orchids in the meadows.

Crowning the skyline was Beaulieu Park, with its five miles of grey stone wall, and the splendour of its park and woods, a serene and stately place that seemed to hang like Olympus in a more majestic sky. Its great trees, oaks, beeches, chestnuts, pines, seemed to rise dome on dome and spire on spire into infinite distances. There were ancient cedars, and a sequoia that could be seen for miles, and an avenue of old ilexes like lace cut out of black marble. The park was wild with fern, and thickets of old thorn and yew. On its highest knoll near the south lodge a group of magnificent Scotch firs rose like the red masts of ships lying crowded and at anchor.

Beaulieu belonged to the Bullstrodes, and in Sandbourn the name of Bullstrode was the sign and symbol of that other world that lived aloof in a serene arrogance of its own. The first Sir Beverley Bullstrode had been born in the last year of Elizabeth. There are baronets and baronets, and the Bullstrodes

were not ormolu, but old gold. They represented to *bourgeois* Sandbourn all that was “County” and Olympian. Beaulieu and Stuccoville were two extremes.

My mother moved into No. 42 Regal Terrace in the month of March. It seemed to me a vast and imposing house. My mother was in a position to let three sets of rooms. We began with one maid; a stout, strong, genial creature called Mary. No. 42 had no basement. The kitchen quarters were built out at the back, and our sitting-room was a queer, stuffy little place on the ground floor, with a stained glass window that did not open, simply because it gave on to a passage that was lit by a skylight. We and Mary slept in the attics.

We sat down and waited. A neat card hung in a ground floor window. “Apartments.” I believe that my mother had registered her house with Miss Nelson who kept a library and stationery shop, and ran an agency in the High Street. Young as I was I was conscious of a feeling of anxiety and suspense. It happened to be a particularly poisonous March, windy and wet and drear. My mother sat perpetually at one of the ground floor windows, and watched that tumbling sea, and the deserted parade. She was like a little black spider waiting for flies.

She must have suffered agonies of suspense during those first empty weeks.

No one rang our bell.

I used to go wandering over the house, and thinking what a wonderful and splendid place it was, and that if only one could persuade people to enter and view it they would immediately come to live with us.

I felt like going out and catching respectable strangers by the sleeve, and imploring them to visit my mother’s house.

Rain, and wind, and a dirty sea that came splashing over the promenade. Rain beating on the windows. My mother sitting there, patient and still, and no doubt, a little frightened.

April. It had been raining, but in the afternoon the sky cleared, and I went down to play on the beach. Scattered sunlight was falling on the sea from a pale blue cleft in the clouds. I found a corked bottle on the beach, tossed it into the sea, and threw stones at it until a lucky shot broke the neck of the bottle, and it sank. It occurred to me that it must be nearly tea time and I bolted home.

Men had been repairing the road between the parade and Regal Terrace, and it was a muddy squelch; it did not occur to me that my boots would carry mud into the house. I was moved by a sudden childish desire to re-explore all the front rooms now that the sun was shining into them, and I went trotting up the stairs.

My mother must have been sitting at her window, and had seen me rush in, for I had reached the first floor sitting-room when I heard her calling me.

“John, dear.”

“Yes, Mum.”

She came up the stairs and into the room, and her face wore a look of wounded severity.

“O, John, your boots!”

Only then did I realize that I had left muddy marks on the new Kidderminster carpets, and that my mother was pained.

“Look, dear. Do try to think. Supposing people were to call—”

Hardly had she spoken when the front door bell rang. I can see her now standing there with her head slightly on one side like a listening bird, and her face bright and excited.

“Tell Mary to get a cloth, dear. Quick.”

She went rustling down the stairs, while I sat on the floor and removed my inconsiderate boots, and then dashed down for Mary. In my hurry I forgot my boots and left them lying on the floor. My mother was opening the front door. I had a glimpse of a lady and a gentleman standing there. The lady was dressed in black silk and had a white shawl over her shoulders. The gentleman wore blond whiskers and a top hat.

I heard the lady say to my mother: “You let rooms, I believe?”

“Yes, madam,” said my mother; “may I ask you to step in.”

They entered, and my mother led them into the ground floor sitting-room. She did not close the door, and having warned Mary I crept back along the passage and listened. The lady was in charge of the conversation. She had a high-pitched, mincing voice, and she spoke to my mother as though my mother belonged to some inferior world, which, I suppose, in those days, she did.

“Mr. Sweeting and I have been staying at the Royal Hotel. It contains some very vulgar people whom we do not wish to associate with. I am not very strong, Mrs.—”

“Lancaster,” said my mother.

“Such associations do not suit me. My doctor insists on much rest and no fatigue. Vulgar people fatigue one. Have you any apartments vacant?”

“Yes, madam,” said my mother, “the first floor.”

“And what are your terms?”

“Ten guineas, madam, in the season. Six from October to April.”

“Tut-tut, that is very dear.”

Even now I can pay homage to my mother for her courage in sticking to her figures.

“Regal Terrace is fashionable, madam, and my terms are inclusive, and my house has been newly furnished.”

“Do you take children?”

“No, madam.”

“In my delicate state I cannot suffer children.”

“I have a small boy myself, madam, but he is a quiet child.”

“How old?”

“Ten, madam.”

I heard the gentleman say in a weak but pleasant voice:

“Supposing we look at the rooms, Angela. I believe there is a balcony, the very place for you, my dear.”

Her voice snubbed him.

“One moment, Edwin. You always forget how stairs try me. What are your stairs like, Mrs. Lancaster?”

“Not too difficult, madam. May I ask you to try them?”

I bolted back towards the kitchen, and then crept out again to watch the gentleman arming the lady up the stairs. She ascended them with fastidious deliberation, pausing once or twice to rest, and I remember thinking how sad it was that so comparatively young a lady should be so delicate.

“It is my heart, Mrs. Lancaster. I am not allowed to hurry.”

“There is no need to hurry, madam.”

Just as they reached the landing I remembered my wretched boots. Had

Mary rescued them and removed them to some unseen place? But what if my dirty boots were still lying there? I felt that so much depended upon this occasion, and that a pair of muddy boots lying in the middle of the floor might disgust this delicate lady. I crept up the stairs to listen, but all seemed well. My mother was opening the French windows that gave on to the balcony.

“You see, madam, you could have your chair here.”

I heard Mr. Sweeting say: “Fresh air without fatigue, Angela.”

I had to disappear abruptly up the second flight of stairs, for my mother was suggesting that they should view the bedroom. I found Mary up above, holding my dirty boots, and listening with dumb concentration to the conversation below. She smiled, held up my boots, shook her head at me and whispered:

“It’s a good thing I got there first, Master John.”

All was well. Mrs. Sweeting approved of the rooms and my mother, and that, I was to gather, was all that mattered in the Sweeting ménage. They moved in next day, and their coming was the beginning of an association that was to endure during most of my mother’s life. The Sweetings were to be like gilt-edged securities to us for six months or more in every year. Mr. Edwin Sweeting was an amiable and rather dudish ass with a considerable private income, and with no urges to express himself save in little flirtations and the painting of sentimental pictures. Mrs. Sweeting allowed him his pictures, though she was careful to insist upon people knowing that Mr. Sweeting painted as an amateur and a gentleman, and not for money. As to his flirtations, she retained so remorseless a grip on him, and was so completely the exacting invalid that the poor man spent much of his life in humouring and appeasing her moods and tantrums.

I gather that my mother’s handling of sweet Angela must have been a superb piece of dramatization. She sold her sympathy as well as her service, and suffered in the cause of commerce the exactions of this fierce egoist. I know that I disliked the lady, and kept out of her way, and my discretion was mutually acceptable. Her thin, peaky prettiness suggested to me the smell of vinegar, and the smell of vinegar was a thing my stomach loathed. As for poor Mr. Edwin, he and I became very good friends. He would take me out with him on some of his rambles, and I gather I served as a certificate of virtue.

“Where have you been, Edwin?”

“Takin’ a stroll, dear, with Johnnie Lancaster.”

He gave me half-crowns.

He was not allowed to smoke in the house. He had to take his pipe to the far end of the balcony, and even when he smoked, convention insisted upon his wearing an absurd black velvet cap with a gold tassel.

In May of the same year Miss Porter came to us to occupy the second floor, a stout, placid old person in a white lace cap. Miss Porter was to become a permanent resident in No. 42. She just sat down and stayed put. I can remember nothing very dramatic about her save that on one windy day I happened on Miss Porter just as she had reached our steps. A gust of wind caught the house, and was reflected back upon the lady, and catching her bonnet, lifted it and left it pendant at the back of her head. All Miss Porter's hair appeared to be attached to her bonnet, and her cranium was as bald and as white as an egg.

Miss Porter was not in the least disconcerted. She smiled at me.

“How very rude of the wind, my dear.”

I remember asking my mother whether Mrs. Sweeting's hair came off in the same way. My mother took the question very seriously.

“Little boys mustn't be inquisitive. As a matter of fact, it doesn't. Mr. Sweeting might be happier if it did.”

But why? When I tried to explore this mysterious subject my mother suppressed me. I suppose that I was still too young to be initiated into such mysteries.

Before June was out my mother had let her other two sets of rooms, and from that day her financial worries must have ceased. She had dared success and she deserved it; that it came to her in her small way was not a gift from the gods. And during those summer months I found myself involved in my mother's adventure. She did all the cooking; and even helped our good Mary with the rooms, and in this crisis I constituted myself a kind of amateur page. I cleaned boots, carried up hot water, answered the door.

Some kind people could wag their heads in later days and say of me: “Yes, he used to clean the boots in his mother's lodging-house.”

Shameful occupation! But I liked polishing boots, especially Mr. Edwin's boots. I felt that I was making a return for the half-crowns he gave me.

My part as self-constituted household drudge did not last beyond the

summer. My mother engaged a cook, one, Martha. My mother was most careful and deliberate in her choice of a cook. She knew that if the success of No. 42 was to be what she intended it to be, permanent and singular, the pleasing of people's palates was essential. Mrs. Sweeting possessed not only a febrile temper but a most exacting stomach. If Martha could satisfy dear Angela the test might be regarded as crucial.

Martha did not fail us. She was a somewhat unusual woman, dark, farouche, and reticent, and she allowed it to be known that she had spent part of her life in France as cook to a French family. She could be both English and French in her cooking, and the *la française* in Martha was just the spice that was needed to placate Mrs. Sweeting's temperamental exactions. A French cook! That was quite distinguished. Martha used to send up special little dishes to dear Angela complete with their French names.

I realize now that both Mary and Martha conceived genuine affection for my mother and that the service that they gave was personal. My mother was a lovable creature, and her integrity and kindness were absolute. She fed these women well, sent them out of doors whenever it was possible, and arranged that each of them should have a yearly holiday. She trusted them, and proved, what I was to prove in my own world, that if you trust the common people as individuals, not in the mass, good faith will be returned to you.

I come now to one of those periods in my life, the memory of which is a little shameful to me.

In September of that year my mother entered me as a day-boy at St. John's College.

St. John's College was a private affair, owned and presided over by a gentleman named Barter, Mr. Theophilus Barter. The school housed itself in two large, semi-detached, stucco villas in Hart Lane off the High Street. The villas had been connected up to form one building, and the back gardens formed the playground. There were about sixty boys at St. John's College, and their ages ranged from ten to eighteen. We were a very mixed lot, for though Mr. Theophilus Barter had christened his school a college, commerce compelled him to be tolerant in the matter of social status. Our school roll included farmers' sons, boys whose fathers were leading tradesmen in Sandbourn, and sons of auctioneers, builders, and minor business men. I suppose that, socially, I was bottom boy in this collection of middle-class savages.

For savages they were, many of them. I was a sensitive, shy child, and I

was destined to suffer.

To me on that first September morning in the St. John's playground came two ominous boys who were three or four years older than I was. One, Bob Snode, was sallow and fat and bulging in a curious black velveteen suit; the other, Percy Pym, was a thin lad with an impudent pallor and flickering cruel eyes of a sinister pale blue. Snode's father was a builder, Pym the son of an auctioneer and estate agent, and even in those school days they hunted together in partnership.

They cornered me in the yellow brick walled playground. It was a dusty, dreary space with a lavatory building in one corner, a sycamore tree in the other. In the centre of the playground stood a pair of parallel bars and a horizontal bar that were in official use only when an ex-sergeant major came to drill us and give us gymnastic lessons.

"Hallo, you kid, what's your name?"

I was eager to propitiate these truculent fellows.

"Lancaster, sir."

Snode gave me a push, and I collided with Pym. Master Pym jerked me back against Snode, who smacked me across the mouth with the back of a hard red hand. His knuckles hurt, but I swallowed and tried to be brave.

"Here! What d'you think you're doing?"

"He pushed me."

I heard Pym's drawling voice behind me.

"Do you refer to me as he, you little squirt?"

Pym got me by the ear. I was to discover that he posed as a cynic and a humorist.

"Mother keeps a lodging-house, what?"

"Yes."

"Say, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"His mother takes in lodgers, Mr. Snode. Nasty business, that. What do you do at home, kid?"

I was thinking of something to say, and in my innocence I blurted out the truth.

“I clean the boots.”

This seemed mightily to amuse the pair. Pym gave my ear a twist, and pushed me at Snoad, who smacked my face again with the back of his hand.

“Boots! We’ll christen him Boots, Mr. Pym.”

We were in the corner by the sycamore tree, and Pym gave my ear another twist.

“Take your boots off. Stuffy little kids from lodging-houses don’t wash their feet. I think we’ll inspect them, Mr. Snoad.”

“Off with your boots.”

I was on the edge of tears, and I assured them that my feet were clean.

“The little beast argues, Mr. Snoad. Kick him for me, please, will you?”

I was kicked, and with sudden tears I sat down under the tree, took off my boots and unpeeled my stockings. They had been darned, and this carefulness caused my two persecutors to exult. They could not criticize the cleanliness of my feet, but my darned stockings were subjects for ridicule.

“Potatoes, Mr. Snoad!”

Other boys had gathered, and I was ordered by Pym to get up and parade across the playground, holding a stocking in either hand. I must have been a miserable little object, blubbering and paddling around on my bare feet, holding up those darned stockings. The school mocked me. No masters appeared to curtail my humiliation. And then the bell rang, and I was left to get back into my boots and stockings as quickly as I could, and to mop up my face with a crumpled handkerchief. I sneaked into the classroom half a minute later, but the master who took the two lower forms was a very short-sighted young man, and he did not appear to notice me.

In fact, Mr. Theophilus Barter, M.A., and his two assistant masters cultivated a shrewd myopia with regard to many of the things that happened in the playground. St. John’s College was a day-school, and I can imagine Barter thanking his Snob God for it, and washing his hands of all the problems that are associated with sadism and sex. He was a smeary little man with a surreptitious smile, very polite to parents, and, I suppose, bitterly bored by having to educate boys, who, most of them, resented being educated. Mr. Barter’s favourite phrase was “Boys will be boys,” and he washed his hands in invisible soap, and did not see what he did not desire to see, and like his generation, hid himself like the spittle insect, in a froth of humbug.

The two assistant masters were bored young men who appeared to have accepted Barter's sentimental cynicism. Keeling of the high-powered spectacles was held in contempt by most of the school. Sandys, a florid young man whom I used to see haunting the parade in the evening, very much dressed up and in search of adventure, had a hot temper which made him more feared than the other. He was supposed to be responsible for our games, but he was a poor performer with bat and ball, and the work of the playing field was as perfunctory as that of the classrooms.

During those first weeks I suffered torture from the cruelties of Messrs. Snoad and Pym. I suppose I was the predestined victim, a small and sensitive creature who could be persecuted with *éclat* and impunity. Some of us went home for the mid-day meal, and I used to bolt out of the gate and run for my life, but the ten minutes interval in the middle of the morning when we all poured out into the playground was my time of torture.

How was I to escape from Pym and Snoad during those ten minutes? We were not supposed to leave the playground. And then I had an inspiration. In the junior classroom I sat on the bottom bench, and nearest the door, and when the class broke up for the interval I bolted like a young rabbit. The lavatory in the playground was divided into three compartments, each with a cheap wooden door, and I fled for this refuge.

I hid myself in the lavatory, bolted myself in and as though to make the business appear more rational, unbuttoned my braces, lowered my knickers, and sat on the seat.

For two mornings the ruse succeeded. I suppose Messrs. Snoad and Pym came to the conclusion that I had flouted the regulations and escaped into Hart Lane, but they must have posted a minion to watch the gate, and so come to realize that I was hiding somewhere about the school.

On the third morning I heard their voices. The lavatory compartments were divided by seven foot partitions, and the next thing I remember was seeing a pair of hands hooking themselves over the top of the wooden screen. Pym's face appeared. I can see him now looking down at me with his pale and mocking eyes.

A boy strolled through the crowd, elbowing through with his hands in his pockets. It was Lugard, a farmer's son, a senior boy who to me was a creature of grandeur and aloofness. Lugard was one of those youngsters with a

beautiful, ruddy skin, very black hair, dark eyes, extraordinarily strong, and in spite of his high colour and his glowing strength, of a serene, sweet temper. He was somehow different from these others. He had a dignity, compassion. I can remember the way he looked at me, and the way he looked at Snoad.

“What’s this?”

“Boots has been hiding in the lav.”

Lugard’s hands were still in his pockets. I remember him telling me afterwards that he had been watching the activities of Messrs. Pym & Snoad. But the suddenness with which he smote those two was to me one of the most dramatic and suggestive incidents in my life. He said nothing at all. His two fists just went smack-smack into the faces of Pym and Snoad. He distributed one or two casual cuffs to other heads, and then took my pants and breeches and with deft and deliberate kindness, buttoned them up for me.

“I’m not going to have any more of this, Snoad.”

The lout was holding a handkerchief to his nose. He looked cowed and evil.

“I’ll lick you for this, Lugard.”

“Lick me, you black slug!”

Lugard just moved a step in Snoad’s direction, and my chief enemy backed quickly through the crowd.

“I’ll not have this kid bullied any more. You understand.”

That was the end of the business, though I believe Pym went and sneaked to Barter. If he did, he obtained no satisfaction from the “Head,” who, we suspected, was a little afraid of Lugard.

The only piece of pride left me was that I had not gone puling to my mother. Was it that I did not want to worry her, or that I was ashamed of the poor little figure I was cutting at school? I can remember her looking at me anxiously, but she did not question me as to my happiness at St. John’s. I know that she was proud of having been able to send me there, and I did not want to spoil her pleasure, and I held my tongue.

But I had my hero. How could I show my gratitude to the great man who had rescued me? for to me, Lugard was a man. He was bigger and stronger than either of the junior masters. I had begun to collect stamps at the time; the whole school was trading stamps, and Mr. Sweeting had made me a present of a set of Cape Colony triangular stamps. They were of some value, and unique

so far as the school was concerned.

I put those stamps in my pocket, and when the interval came I waited for Lugard to appear. He had a football under his arm, and when I accosted him shyly, he punted the ball across the playground, and smiled at me.

“What’s the trouble, Lancaster?”

“There’s no trouble, sir. I wondered if you would like these?”

I brought out the precious stamps and offered them to him.

“I’d be awfully pleased if you’d take them, sir.”

He held the stamps in his big hand, smiled at them, and then smiled at me.

“No, I’m not going to take your stamps, Lancaster.”

“Oh, please do, sir.”

“Well, I’ll take six of them, and leave you the rest. They’re pretty precious, aren’t they?”

I was aware of Pym and Snoad watching us, and I knew they could accuse me of sucking up to Lugard. He too was aware of the two bullies, for he turned and spoke to them.

“Snoad.”

“What do you want?”

“Come here. And call me sir. Go and get that ball for me, and be quick about it.”

Snoad went, and Lugard smiled down at me.

“Learn to bite, young Lancaster.”

“Bite, sir?”

“Yes, if anyone snarls at you, bite. It’s better to bite than be bitten. Snoad’s too big for you, but Snoad’s my pigeon. If any of the other kids try it on with you, bite. You’ll find they will let you alone.”

I took Lugard’s advice. His championing of me had made me a different creature, set me alight with a new kind of courage. I think I was burning to prove to my great man that I was no mere little funk and cry-baby, and that his faith in me could be justified. I was both afraid and quivering to tackle my enemy, and whenever I have fought it has been with a fury of sensitive terror

and recklessness. As I grew older I taught myself to take my battles more coolly, with a kind of confident ruthlessness, and a nonchalance that puzzled the other fellow.

A kid in the form above me jostled me as we poured out into the playground.

“Hallo, young Boots.”

He was a little, flat-faced urchin with freckles and a snub nose, impudent and cocky. I imagine that he had been prompted by Snoad, Pym & Co. to hector me, for Lugard could not intervene between me and a boy of my own size. The child’s name was Jukes, and I flew at young Jukes in a frenzy, and got my fist on his nose and drew blood before he had realized that he had caught a Tartar. It must have been a funny fight, a little whirlwind affair, all over in half a minute. There was a crowd round us, and I was aware of Lugard up above on the school steps. My fury was such that it seemed to paralyze and bewilder the other boy. We both hit wildly, but my wildness was luckier than his, and my ferocity more inspired. I was fighting under the eye of my hero.

I had young Jukes down twice, and after the second tumble, he got up with his face looking all funny. He was in tears. Instantly, something in me was moved to compassion. I found myself with my arm round the other child, and offering him my handkerchief.

Lugard came down to us through the crowd of boys.

“Well done, you two kids. Shake hands and make it up.”

He took the two of us down to the school cloakroom, and like a father, attended to Jukes’s face.

“Buzz along, Jukes.”

But he held me back by the arm.

“Good kid, Lancaster. You came very well out of that. I like you.”

It was one of the great occasions in my life.

I took Jukes home with me after school, and gave him two of my precious South African stamps.

CHAPTER FOUR



I THINK that the most unlovely years of my life were those between fourteen and twenty.

It is difficult to write dispassionately of sex at a period when it was treated like some dirty and unregenerate child to be shut up in a dark cupboard for punishment. The thing had to be frightened into furtiveness. I was living in a world of antimacassars, bric-à-brac, mantelboards, ormolu, lace curtains, wool mats, chiffoniers, over-ornamented stuffiness. Women wore bustles, leg of mutton sleeves, and high boots. They seemed to swell suggestively about the hips and bosom, though tight corsets compressed their waists in the clasp of a convention. The Victorians, in their determination to conceal sex, only emphasized it.

All this now is mere domestic history. The Naughty Nineties began the revolution, and the Great War completed it. I will admit that the Victorians in their cold passion for moral completeness were up against nature, and that as Die Hards in the sex-war they were doomed to defeat. Whether any normal man has ever attained complete chastity I do not know. The ideal may be a splendid one, and possible for the few, but I confess that my own chastity was a relative virtue, and that my sex world was chaos until I met the one woman who made fleshly crudities appear like meat in a butcher's shop.

Lugard had left, and a boy named Porter ruled the school. He was a tall, bleached, dandified youth with queer, staring, blue eyes. It was Porter who introduced me to sex. He took me up to the Furze Hills one summer day after school, promising to show me a grass-snake which other boys swore they had seen. It was credited with being six feet long.

“I know all about snakes, Lancaster.”

Sex was my snake in the grass. Porter discovered it to me among the furze bushes, and I fled from him in disgust and shame. The thing shocked me. I wanted to run to somebody and ask them to tell me the truth, and to be comforted and reassured, but there was no one to whom I could go. I could not bring myself to tell my mother, for somehow she seemed to have become involved in the revelation. If my father had been alive I could have made my

confession to him, and being a gentle soul he might have been able to help me.

I had changed, and so had my mother.

I had been promoted to trousers, and the new garments seemed to stimulate my growth.

We had window-boxes now at No. 42, and sun-blinds, and a curtain over the front door when the sun was in strength. The summer life of Sandbourn became more vivid to me. There were the donkeys, the bathing machines with their striped awnings, and the winches that drew them up and down the beach, the nigger minstrels, and the man who sold Chelsea buns. I had a passion for Chelsea buns. Bath-chairs and parasols passed up and down the parade. Mild and respectable families spent their holidays upon the beach, with children and buckets and spades. Even now I can hear the massed murmur of voices that rose from the Sandbourn front on the hot day in summer, like some insect hum, with the drone of a barrel-organ threading through it.

I often think how ironical and strange it was that my father's suicide should have given my mother the opportunity and the provocation to make a success of her own individual adventure. No. 42 had become a super-lodging house. My mother's position was such that she could sit with dignity and select her clients. I cannot remember an occasion when any of our rooms were empty for more than a week at a time, and I believe our establishment raised its charges. My mother seemed different. It was her black satin period when she wore a heavy gold chain set with amethysts, and a lace cap. She was a very dignified person, and growing rather stout. She had resumed her association with the established Church, and paid for two seats at St. Jude's on the Parade.

I think my mother must have fashioned herself upon that cynosure of all good women, Queen Victoria.

She became the little autocrat of No. 42 Regal Terrace, and a woman of property, and I suppose I was the most precious of her possessions. My collars and ties and teeth were under her supervision. She read my school reports with an air of gentle severity. What was I learning at St. John's College? A little Latin, some trigonometry and algebra, a little bad French, some English history, but nothing that was likely to be of use to me in my attack upon life. The school bored me badly, and already I was dreaming of the days when I should escape from it, and could, if I so chose, cheek old Barter with impunity in the public street. Education was like most academic interference with the young, completely unimaginative and sterile. The masters were bored, and so were we.

The academic interference of a day-school is confined to stated hours, but my mother's emotional interference with my young life was limited by no casual clock. It was a kind of universal, an atmosphere, an affectionate but exacting face that waited for my comings in, and asked questions about my goings out. My mother's love was like Queen Victoria watching with severity over the morals of her people. Many of my escapades would have left my mother completely unamused. She did not understand the cheerful, engaging swashbuckling side of life. So many material things were to her, not nice. I suppose some little Lord Fauntleroy would have been her ideal, but I did not belong to the pale breed of prigs. I was a dark, mercurial, imaginative child, and a veil of secrecy descended between me and my mother.

In fact, there were two mothers in Edith Lancaster, the consoling creature I had loved, and the possessive little maternal empress whom I feared and hated.

My mother wished me to learn to play the piano.

I had no urge towards music, but I persuaded her to compromise and allow me to have drawing-lessons. Mr. Sweeting, hearing of my urge, offered to give me lessons, of course without charge. I can understand how bored poor Edwin was with his Angela and her tyranny of temper and of tears, and I believe he found refreshment in teaching me draughtsmanship. Like many performers with the pencil and brush, he was a better pedagogue than painter. He gave me three evenings a week, and the things he taught me were to prove of infinite value.

It is obvious to me now that my mother, like most of the Victorians, was terrified of sex. Even sofa and table legs were draped on occasions in chintz trousers, and my mother treated sex with the same secretive prudishness. Socially, we were in a position of peculiar isolation. The social grading of Sandbourn was arranged on a scale of absurd and delicate snobbery. We could not know the professional classes. Nor were we considered sufficiently important to mix with the more eminent tradesmen, the Brighthouses and Sandmans and Pembertons who were the leading drapers, grocers, and iron-mongers. The society of the second grade shopkeepers, and in particular that of the butchers and fishmongers would have been allowed us, but my mother refused to cultivate it.

How ridiculous this artificial segregation seems to me now! Here in Sandbourn were some twenty-thousand specimens of Homo sapiens living in little cliques and coteries, and refusing to recognize the realities of their common flesh. The professional people might accept my mother's fees for

professional attendance, but they could not recognize us as socially knowable. The Brighthouses could not mingle with the Snapes, because the Brighthouse shop had six windows, the Snape shop a paltry two. The vicar of St. Jude's called twice a year upon my mother who was a member of his congregation, but my mother was not admitted to the vicaress's drawing-room. The complacencies and snobberies of a country that called itself Christian may seem incredible to a community that flatters itself that it has shed such absurdities, but this isolation had its effect upon me.

I had no accredited girl friends.

Nor was any comradeship possible with young things of the other sex. At the best it would have been a giggling, genteel, silly business, parentally censored. They tell me that the girls' schools of those days were as full of "smut" as was our precious college, the product of a cheap curiosity that was thwarted. Our unwise virgins would not allow the lamp of life to burn.

My mother seemed to avoid all social contacts. She kept me like a young celibate, a colt alone in a field with the gate padlocked. I was driven back on dreams, a dramatization of my romantic urges. Always I was very conscious of her gentle severity, of a watchfulness that never relaxed. My mother might repress the young animal in me, but she could not dominate my dreams.

I was full of dreams.

I was allowed to read Scott's novels, except on Sunday.

My mother even allowed me Tennyson.

Swinburne would have shocked her.

I dreamed myself into some of Scott's heroes, especially into Ivanhoe. I was the knight on horseback, rescuing blond damsels. I spurred my destrier, fewtered my spear, and sent other fellows crashing.

It happened that I was on the balcony of No. 42. The Sweetings had gone to London for a week. It was a Wednesday afternoon in April and a half holiday. I had no right to be on the balcony, but in a mood of self-glorification I was a young Richard of the Lion Heart watching from my place of privilege imaginary champions contending in the tilting field.

I saw three young men on horses ride down the stone ramp leading from Regents Parade to the beach. At low tide a half moon of firm and yellow sand stretched from The Monument to Signal Hill. There were no groins here, and the bathing machines had not yet trundled down to their summer quarters, and no children were busy with buckets and spades. These three young cavaliers

lined up their horses on the sand and went galloping eastwards, racing each other.

I knew them by sight. All Sandbourn knew them by sight. They were the three young Bullstrodes of Beaulieu, Beverley, Fitzroy and Gavin. They might ride down into Sandbourn like young gods from Olympus, but in those days Beaulieu and Sandbourn were worlds apart. I have it on good authority that even Dr. Warwick, the leading Sandbourn physician, had to enter Beaulieu House by the back door. The Ionic portico with its stately steps was sacred to the chosen few. I was not conscious of feeling jealous of the young men. They rode reality on horseback, and my obscure self was only mounted on dreams, but I was able to translate them into my dreams, and to regard them as mysterious, stately and romantic creatures who moved in a more spacious and wonderful world than mine.

I left the balcony and ran down on to the beach. It was not mere curiosity that moved me. These young men had for me an illusion of otherness; I was attracted by them. It was as though I wanted to look into their faces, and perhaps to be noticed by them as they passed. It did not occur to me that they might regard me as a casual and obscure little cad whom men of honour ignored.

The three Bullstrodes had turned their horses and were coming back, and I stood in the centre of the sandy trackway and watched this miniature cavalry charge. It so fascinated me that I forgot that I might be in the way. The lad on a black horse was leading, a big brown figure, bending forward in the saddle, hatless, and with the sun shining on its reddish head. This was Beverley the eldest. Gavin, on a roan, came next, and Fitzroy's bay seemed to be falling behind. I could hear the heavy breathing of the horses, and the soft thudding of their hoofs. They had an April sky behind them, and that yellow sand, and a slip of the shimmering sea.

I don't think I realized that I was in the way until Beverley Bullstrode was within thirty yards of me. I could see his big, ruddy face with its high, baldish forehead, and jug of a jaw. His very blue eyes seemed to glare. He came straight at me like some hot and arrogant young colonel of horse leading a charge that should trample all cropheads into the dust.

I can remember him shouting at me.

“Get out of the way, you damned little fool.”

I stood quite still, for his hot and galloping arrogance had shocked me. He made his horse swerve, and as he passed I felt the wind of his passing hit my cheek.

Again he shouted: "You silly little fool."

The other two went past me, Gavin, with a smile on his mischievous face, Fitzroy sweating and grim. I turned about, and watched the sand flying, feeling like some scullion lad who had been cursed and mud-splashed by these young lords of the earth.

It was my first moment of conscious and deliberate hatred. I had hated boys like Snoad and Pym, but such hatred had been mere childish emotion. This sudden blaze in me was different; it was like a red weal left by a whip on the proud flesh of my young manhood.

"Get out of the way, you silly little fool."

I faced about again and walked away along the sands, suddenly and acutely conscious of the significance of this incident. I had dreamed dreams of that other and mysterious world, and behold it had descended upon me and scorned me as a mere human excrescence on life's sands. The wise men may say what they will about hatred being the stigma of an inferior culture, but in the season of one's burning youth such a stigma may be a stimulus, a secret and passionate wound. I did not forget. I did not want to forget. I cherished my hatred. It was as though the thing was to be one of the leit motifs of my insurgent life.

CHAPTER FIVE



*T*HOSE were difficult days for me.

My young urges and ambitions could strut only upon a dream stage, and at No. 42 I lived in a little prison house of secrecy and suppression.

I had no one to whom I could pour out my soul. I admit that the confessions of youth must be infinitely embarrassing to the mind that has concealed itself in the clothes of convention, and had I tried to display my nakedness to my mother, she would have been shocked by it. None of the St. John's masters invited our confidences; in fact, they avoided adding any such complexities to the curriculum. I suppose the attempt to stuff mathematics into unmathematical heads was sufficiently boring, without the business of inculcating morals.

I was not what the Victorian world might have dubbed me, a disreputable lout. I was torn and troubled by the eternal negation in a world that seethed with positive and natural urges. I wanted someone to tell me about things, to explain why so many of the normal functions of one's body should be regarded as obscene and disgraceful. Why this, why that? I did make one attempt to confide in my mother, and I can recall the shocked dignity with which she seemed to stiffen in her armchair. My mother shut my troubles up in a cupboard and turned the key on them. I realize now that the poor soul had no solution to offer me save the dreary "Thou shalt not" of the Old Men whom age had made bitter against youthful things. My questions terrified her. It was as though the Serpent himself had come crawling up the stairs and across her nice Kidderminster carpet.

It occurred to me that Mr. Sweeting might be able to help me. We were sitting on the warm shingle together, sketching a fishing-boat which lay at anchor. Two young women carrying parasols and walking with Victorian self-consciousness, passed between us and the sea. One of them glanced at us. I met her eyes, and she looked quickly away with fluttering eyelashes. I heard the girls giggling.

I said suddenly to Mr. Sweeting: "Why should it be sinful to think about women?"

Had I upset a pot of paint over his trousers he could not have been more

flustered. He drew up his long legs and seemed to cringe. His face, with its fair fluff of beard and whiskers, grew small and prim.

“One does not discuss that sort of thing, my dear boy.”

He seemed almost as shocked as my mother, and ready to regard me as a sizzling bomb on the point of exploding.

“Just the Ten Commandments, sir?”

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Exactly, John. Self restraint. A Christian gentleman does not let himself think of what is vulgar and carnal.”

“But if one can’t help asking questions?”

He had resumed his sketching with eager concentration.

“Don’t ask questions. Read your Bible, John. What did our Lord say? To dally with such curiosity is to be tempted.”

I left it at that. I realized that my probing of the problem was rendering Mr. Sweeting acutely uncomfortable, and that he might accuse me of behaving like a nasty, inquisitive child. But why this starched terror, this panic in the presence of natural things? I think it was then that the sinister suspicion first entered my mind. Was it possible that all these respectable people were humbugs, and that, like creatures who were shamefully and secretly infected by sin, they carefully concealed it, and became shocked and indignant when some faint odour of fleshliness threatened to betray them?

I clung to the Ivanhoe inspiration, the Tennysonian dream. I too would be a Galahad, and not the unclean-minded little wretch who was an offence to his elders. I tried to suppress both my sex and my suspicions, for I did so want to believe in the sincerity of the Edith Lancasters and the Sweetings of this world. My experiences at school had taught me that sex sometimes had an ugly and an obscure face, and emotion could move me to swear that my elders were wise and good people who knew that if life was to be lived with dignity, the body must be brought into subjection. I had been confirmed at school, and in my struggle to conform to the ideals of my generation I became for a while a religious child. I went to Communion with my mother, and kneeling beside her took the sacrament with inward thrills and passion. Surely, this Mystery would sustain me, and in bringing me into the presence of the Unseen God, conjure away my young urges?

I did not betray my piety to the other boys at St. John's College. I knew that most of them would have mocked me, and I was no little St. Paul. My exaltation was secret and individual, a mysterious lamp of my own which I carried concealed within me. I said my prayers night and morning, kneeling beside my bed.

But those lapses!

I used to be shaken with remorse and shame. I would get out of my bed at night, and kneel and abase myself before God.

Could anything, God himself, give me strength to chasten my insurgent flesh?

I had miserable days, and then, somehow, I would forgive myself, swear that I had renounced such shameful things, and relight my little glimmering lamp, and feel full of hope.

But the persecutions of the flesh gave me no peace. There was a curate at St. Jude's, a dark, intense, eloquent man whose sermons were as handsome and reassuring as his person. It seemed to me that the Rev. Mr. Harting was the very friend I needed. He was a bachelor, and I found out where he lodged, and plucking up my courage I dared to call on him one evening.

"Can I see Mr. Harting, please?"

His landlady let me in, and leaving me in the passage, went upstairs. I heard Mr. Harting's deep, rich voice in conversation with her.

"Send the boy up."

I ascended like a trembling child about to be ushered into the presence of some mysterious and enlightened seer. Mr. Harting's room was full of tobacco smoke, and I remember noticing an empty glass on the sideboard. Mr. Harting was sitting in an armchair by the window, wearing a shabby black coat, and a collar that looked a little soiled.

"Well, my lad, what can I do for you?"

I stood there fidgeting with my cap, and feeling horribly embarrassed and self-conscious. My courage and my desire to confess to him seemed to ooze away. I felt ashamed. Could I expose my wretched nakedness to this great man?

Let me be honest, I farked it. There was something in the atmosphere of the room that confounded me, and Mr. Harting's buxom and confident

cheerfulness made my secret shame appear so poor and shabby. I prevaricated.

“I wonder if you can help me, sir.”

He smiled at me.

“Sit down. I know your face. Mrs. Lancaster’s son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is your trouble?”

I sat down on the edge of a chair, with my school cap in one hand.

“I’ve had doubts, sir.”

He had put his pipe aside, and he sat easily in his chair, observing me carefully.

“Doubts, about religion, Lancaster?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That happens to all of us, my dear boy.”

“Even to you, sir?”

His face seemed to close up for a moment.

“It did. But prayer, prayer brings back one’s faith. Do you say your prayers, Lancaster?”

“O, yes, sir.”

His face opened out again.

“That’s as it should be. These doubts will dissolve. It is a sign of grace, my dear boy, that doubts should come to you. It is a trial sent by God.”

“Is that really so, sir?”

“Believe me, it is. Pray for faith, and faith will be yours.”

And then I became dreadfully embarrassed, perhaps because I divined a bland uneasiness in him. Somehow, neither his voice nor his words convinced me. Was it that a kind of studied and defensive unctuousness repulsed my young soul? I have wondered since whether he was afraid that I might splurge into a sex confession. I think I did realize in a vague sort of way that even in this sanctum certain subjects might be taboo. Sex was a thing you did not talk about even to the Mr. Hartings of that Victorian world. It was lumped vaguely and conveniently into the syllabus of sin.

I fidgeted with my cap, blurted out my thanks to Mr. Harting, blushed and got up.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Come to me again, my boy, if you are troubled.”

“I will, sir.”

I escaped with a strange feeling of relief. I can postulate now an equal relief in the Rev. Mr. Harting. How long it was to take me to learn that the sex problem is insoluble, save by the compassionate wisdom of a supreme love, and that even then there may be lapses. Does a woman understand and forgive? This organic grit can be so trivial and evanescent. And then, in the serenity of a comprehending comradeship such little turgid disharmonies cease from vexing one's colour-loving soul. A greater and more creative kindness comes to man, and little greeds are chastened by compassion.

I became very restless about this time. There was a spirit in me that cried out and would not be appeased. The school was boring me very badly, and so was No. 42 Regal Terrace. I was in the sort of mood when a lad runs away to sea, or becomes the little amateur burglar or thug. But always there was a passion for beauty at the back of my restlessness, and it was to save me from the extravagances of mere loutishness. On half holidays I walked miles into the country, to Ringwood Castle, Winchfield or Rudlake. Ringwood fascinated me. One could climb up the old grey black towers where the jackdaws built, and look down the Rote Valley to the marshes and the sea. There was one occasion, when, greatly daring, I climbed the most ruinous of the towers, to find that the return journey was more desperate than the upward climb. I hung over the verge, feeling for a place on which to plant a foot, and for a while I clung there in palsied terror.

What a fool I had been to climb this crumbling wall! And then I heard a strangely familiar voice below me.

“Hallo! Got stuck?”

I scrambled back on to a ledge and looking down, saw Luard there and a girl, a pretty fair creature carrying her hat in her hand.

“Hallo! It's young Lancaster.”

My courage came back to me under Luard's eyes. I remembered that the Luard farm was beyond the river. I threw my cap down and laughed.

“I just felt a bit giddy. I’ll come down now.”

But Lugard would not have it. “Wait a moment, my lad.” He came climbing up, and bracing himself against the wall, guided my foot to a projecting stone. “Now, then, a bit at a time.” It seemed easy to descend with big Lugard guiding me, and in a few seconds I was on the grass and brushing the knees of my trousers. The girl was looking at Lugard with sparkles of light in her eyes, and I saw Lugard glance at her, and their secret was revealed to me. It was beautiful the way they looked at each other, and I felt some deep emotion stirring in me.

Lugard had found out the secret of self-appeasement. His eyes and face and voice seemed those of a man who had discovered some inward strength. Lugard was in love. Lugard was happy.

They took me back to tea at Rote Farm, and all the while that I was with him I wanted to watch these two comely creatures who could not keep their eyes from each other’s faces. Their love seemed so good and clean and inevitable. It both soothed and hurt me. I was only a boy, but I understood, and I wanted to be Lugard, and to love as he did.

On my way home I passed along the grey wall of Beaulieu Park. It was about six o’clock on a June evening; and the sun was shining through the trees. I had climbed one wall already, and somehow this park wall piqued me. That it was forbidden country to me made it all the more alluring, and the temptation to trespass was so strong that I scaled the wall and dropped down amid the trees. Beaulieu Park was surrounded by this belt of trees, save where three broad vistas had been left on the southward side so that the eyes of the house could look over the rolling country to the sea.

I remember the thrill with which I found myself among those trees. This was adventure. I felt that I was challenging the Bullstrode pride, and revenging myself upon those three young men for the affair of the Sandbourn beach. The “cad” had climbed their sacred wall and was flouting the Bullstrode arrogance. But no sooner had I penetrated beyond the belt of trees, and gained my first glimpse of that glorious parkland, than the little petty self in me was dissolved in an almost breathless wonder at the place’s beauty.

It was the heaven-ordained hour for the lovely stateliness of Beaulieu, early evening when the sun was sending great slants of light over this green world. The ground fell away into a deep valley, or rather, into a series of little valleys, secret spaces padded with sweet turf or feathery with fern. There was a kind of crumpled duskiness about the great woods spreading along the ridges. They

seemed to touch the sky. Here and there thickets of gnarled old thorns and yews suggested the tents and pavilions of an army. Beeches and oaks rose dome upon dome, with the sunlight on their tops, and a mysterious gloom hanging like a curtain between their crowded trunks. The place had for me so wild and strange a beauty that I could have dreamed myself into the world of Arthur and of Guinevere, or sworn that in the shade of one of those thorn trees Tristan and Iseult had stood gazing upon each other.

I forgot the Bullstrode family in the splendour of their towering trees. I went down into the valley, and up the further slope to a wood of beeches. Never before had I seen such trees. Their great, grey, smooth-skinned trunks stood like pillars, and overhead the foliage spread and met in a canopy of green leaves and glimmers of sky. The light that filtered through seemed to have a greenish tinge. The floor of this great wood, carpeted with patches of moss and the brown litter of last year's leaves, seemed to go on and on into infinity. I could see nothing but tree-trunks and green foliage. The silence was utter. The mystery of the place both scared me and lured me on, and I would stand quite still, and look about me and listen. Presently, like rents in a curtain, streaks of light showed between the tree-trunks, and I found myself looking down into another valley. It was broader and less deep than the previous one, and on the further hill I saw two clumps of Scotch firs, and between them and standing higher than the trees, a little circular temple. The sunlight was shining upon its white dome and pillars. The hollow of the valley was patched with fern, and in the distance deer were feeding.

The little temple fascinated me. I wanted to climb up and explore it. I think I must have forgotten that I was a trespasser in this romantic wilderness, and I left the shelter of the beech trees and went down into the valley. I must have been half way across it when I saw three figures on horseback come suddenly over the opposite hill. For a second or two I stood staring.

There was a patch of fern not twenty yards away, and I made a dash for it and dived in, and then, raising my head among the fern fronds, looked towards the slope of the hill. Had they seen me? I had heard a shout, and seen one of the riders waving an arm. They had seen me. They were trotting down the hill towards my patch of fern.

I decided to make a dash for it, and I got up, left my cover, and ran. If I could reach the beechwood ahead of them, I could dodge in among those crowded trunks and fool them. They would have to leave their horses and hunt me on foot, and in those days I was pretty quick on my feet.

I ran. But I could hear the thudding of hoofs coming nearer. The Bullstrodes had put their horses into a gallop, and looking back over my

shoulder, I realized that they would be on me before I could reach the trees. I was a little scared, and out of breath for the slope of the hill was against me. Why should I run like a frightened kid, and give them the pleasure of chasing me? This was God's earth, even though it lay within the Bullstrode wall. My pursuers could not eat me.

I turned about to face them.

Beverley had outdistanced his brothers, just as he had out-riden them on the sands. He came straight at me as though he would ride me down. I did not flinch. I remember looking straight into his eyes, and feeling relieved and a little exultant when he had to pull his horse aside. He overshot me, and I turned to face him as he came about.

He rode up to me and stopped his horse so that the beast's nose was within a foot of my face. We were so close that I could see the peculiar blueness of his eyes. They were of an intense, hard blueness, and streaked with rays of darker pigment that seemed to intensify their blue glare. His red skin had a polished glow. It was one of those coarse skins, which, in later life would look blotched and inflamed, the skin of a man whose turgid appetites had become smeared upon the surface. He had very large front teeth, the kind of teeth that grow long, and turn yellow. His lips were thick and pink, and ribbed with faint, vertical lines.

"What do you think you are doing here?"

He had a riding-crop in one hand, and he threatened me with it, but his riding-crop moved me far less than did his voice. The insolent self-sureness of it made me hate him.

"Looking at the landscape," and I added: "You didn't make it."

I had cheeked him, and he raised his crop, as though to lay it across my shoulders, but the other two had come up. It was Gavin of the sleepy and insolent face who intervened in my favour.

"Hold hard, Bill. Let's hear what the cad has to say."

The three horses were ranged round me like the rays of a star, and as each Bullstrode spoke to me I turned and faced him.

"Why, cad?"

This was to Gavin, and it seemed to amuse him.

"Genus, cad. But the creature has a school cap. I seem to recognize it."

Fitzroy guffawed. He was a smaller edition of Beverley, but without

Beverley's cleverness or his grand manner.

"St. John's College; not Isis or Cam, but Sandbourn."

I was facing Fitzroy now.

"Eton or Harrow, I presume?"

Again he guffawed at me.

"It's a cheeky little cad. What's its name? What's your name, fellah?"

"That's no business of yours."

"Oh, isn't it? Poaching, and a case for the police. Let him turn out his pockets. What's your name?"

I did not answer Fitzroy, and again Beverley took charge.

"What do you mean by trespassing? We have a right to demand your name and address. Out with it."

His eyes threatened me and I hated him.

"You won't make me answer questions."

"Is that so?"

"I'm ready to fight any one of you."

He swung off his horse, and still holding the bridle, stood over me contemptuously. He seemed to tower. The very bulk of him was contemptuous.

"Don't be silly. We don't fight with cads. We may lick them."

"If you touch me, I'll—"

He let his bridle go and got me suddenly and roughly by the collar.

"I'd advise you to be a little less cocky. Fitz, take my crop, while I turn the fellow up."

I struggled, but he was ever so much stronger than I was, and in a second or two he had me trussed up, with my face about a foot from the grass.

I heard Gavin's voice.

"Hold on, Bill. I have a much more subtle notion."

"What?"

"Let's take off the little cad's trousers and send him home without them."

Fitzroy's laughter was like the exulting of some monstrous bird.

"Great idea! Hold on, Bill."

I struggled, but Beverley held me flat on my face while the other two dealt with my buttons. I felt my legs being skinned of their breeches. Something tore as they were peeled over my boots. I kicked and squirmed, for I was like a mad thing quivering with impotent fury.

"You cads."

Beverley let me go, and I scrambled up and confronted those three laughing faces. Fitzroy had my trousers in his hand. I made a dash at him, but he put out a big brown hand, and catching me in the chest, sent me staggering.

"Run home to mother, my lad."

I stood in the white kilt of my shirt, while they got on their horses. I can remember Fitzroy shaking my trousers at me, and a faint clink of metal coming from them.

"Hallo, the cad has some cash. We don't take money, do we, Bill?"

He felt in the pockets, found three pennies, and tossed them to me, and they rode off and up the hill, while I stood in my shirt and watched them. I saw them pause on the skyline. Fitzroy waved my poor trousers like a trophy. Then, the three of them disappeared, and I was left looking at that little temple, and the two groups of Scotch firs. Twenty minutes ago I had been conscious of nothing but the beauty of this English scene; now I was a little human vessel filled to the brim with bitter feeling. The ignominy of it! I was just a cad left minus his trousers, but they had stripped me of something that was far more precious, the illusion of myself as a little romantic hero. I looked down at my bare legs, and saw that in the rape of my trousers my socks had been turned down over the tops of my boots. I bent down and pulled them up.

How was I to regain No. 42 Regal Terrace without betraying my shame to all the world? How was I to explain the loss of my nether garments to my mother? Could I call at some cottage, and try to borrow a pair of pants? I was in a ridiculous dilemma, and feeling stung with shame, which goes to show how the conventions of civilization can make cowards of us over a few square inches of bare flesh. I decided to hide until darkness came, and then to sneak home as best I could. I knew of a field path that would take me down to the Rudlake Road, and that an old grass track skirted round Pink Farm, and through some market gardens to the western outskirts of Sandbourn.

I hid in the belt of trees by the stone wall until it was dark, and in climbing

the wall I barked my bare knees against the stone. I remember running down the road until I found the gate leading to the field path, and from the high ground I saw the lights of Sandbourn pricking the darkness. Those lights scared me. I told myself that I could not venture into the town until all blinds were decently drawn and the lamps extinguished. But what if I should find myself locked out in my shirt-tails? Surely, an anxious mother would be sitting up for me? More humiliation? I should have to confess to my mother. A light breeze was coming off the sea, and I began to feel chilly on these uplands, and with my white shirt blowing I carried my ridiculous and shameful flight across the Rudlake Road and along the grass track skirting Pink Farm. I met no one, but I was still afraid of all those lights and of the people who might be strolling along the Parade. I sat in a ditch, feeling cold and miserable, and nursing a hatred of the whole Bullstrode clan. If only I had had Lugard's strength and could have smashed the face of the man I hated most, that burly brute, Beverley. I heard a clock strike eleven before I ventured out of my ditch, and sneaking into Cliff Road made for the flight of steps that led down to Regents Parade. I poked my head round a pillar and peered. The Parade appeared deserted, and I decided to cut short my anguish. I sprinted along the pavement.

Just where The Ascent separated Regents Parade from Regal Terrace I nearly blundered into a police constable who was strolling down the Ascent on patrol. I dodged past him and fled.

“Hallo, my lad, what's on?”

I ran, for that was my trouble and my inspiration, the lack of something on. He did not bother to follow me, and I imagine that with a large and human tolerance he must have stood there chuckling. I was flying like winged death for No. 42. I gained the gate, flung it back, and bolted up the three steps to the door.

There appeared to be no lights in the house. My knees were shaking under my shirt as I rang the bell and waited. I wanted that door to open. It did not occur to me to wonder at the moment who might open it.

The glass panel above the door grew bright. I heard footsteps. Bolts were withdrawn, and the door opened. I saw Mary standing there in the hall, with a white gas-globe inconsiderately brilliant behind her.

I shall never forget her face.

“Bless us, Master John!”

I suppose I must have looked a funny object, but it took me a long while to forgive her for laughing, though her laughter was as transient as my skirts. She

must have been touched by my poor, stricken, shameful face, for she drew me in and gently closed the door.

“O, my dear, what have you been doing?”

I could not tell her. I could not even find a lie.

“Someone stole my trousers.”

I was to discover that Mary was not shocked by things as my mother was shocked by them. Mary might put on a starched frock and a staid appearance in the presence of her so-called betters, but she came from the soil and was a human and honest creature.

“My dear, your mother’s sitting up in her room.”

“Is she very upset, Mary?”

Mary reached up and turned down the gas. She put her arm round me, and I felt myself in contact with a soft, warm shape.

“Just a little. You must be cold.”

“Yes, Mary.”

“Had any supper?”

“No.”

She gave me a human hug, and suddenly I turned and kissed her, and found her strangely pleasant to kiss.

“There, there, my dear. Martha’s gone to bed. You run along into the kitchen, and I’ll find you something.”

“Mary.”

“Yes.”

“You couldn’t get me my Sunday trousers, could you?”

“Of course I can. I’ll just drop in and tell your mother you are safe home.”

“Don’t tell her anything else, Mary.”

This time she kissed me, and I felt suddenly warmed by her kiss. Somehow, I had never appreciated Mary as woman, and suddenly I seemed to sense her as a comely, lovable creature. I caught her hand and squeezed it, and she went running up the stairs. I heard her go into my mother’s room, emerge a moment later, and cross the landing into mine. Soon I was sitting clothed at the kitchen table, while Mary put some cold meat, etc., in front of me.

“I just told your mother that you had been out in the country bird-nesting.”

She was sitting opposite me, her elbows on the table, and her broad face cupped in her hands. It occurred to me that Mary had beautiful eyes.

“You needn’t tell me anything if you don’t want to.”

I looked at my plate.

“I got caught trespassing in Beaulieu.”

“Beaulieu! By the keepers?”

“No, the Bullstrodes. It was they who—”

“The young blackguards! If I were you, Master John, I’d say nothing about it to your mother.”

“No?”

“She gets so upset about things.”

“But, my trousers, Mary?”

Mary was looking at me with very steady, round blue eyes.

“I’d say you tore them so badly that you gave ’em to me to mend. Have you got any money, Master John?”

“Twopence.”

“I’ll give you some money. And I’ll say I gave the old ones away to the dustman. You can buy another pair on the way to school.”

Mary’s sympathetic arguments did not convince me. Perhaps I felt that I knew my mother better than she did, and that a complete confession would be less embarrassing.

“It’s awfully kind of you, Mary, but I think I’ll tell her. She might find out.”

Tell her I did. I found my mother sitting up in bed in a night-cap, reading the parish magazine. I stood at the bottom of the bed in my Sunday trousers, and made my confession. My mother was angry. I had never seen her so angry before.

“You came here with bare legs?”

“Yes, I couldn’t help it. No one—”

“It’s disgraceful. I’ll have the law against the Bullstrodes over this. I will go and see Mr. Gregson to-morrow. And they call themselves gentlemen!”

I was growing very sleepy, and I yawned.

“Yes, go to bed, dear. What a horrid experience for a nice boy.”

I went and kissed my mother. I had reached the door when she asked me that sudden question.

“Did Mary see you, like that?”

“Yes, Mater.”

My mother’s face seemed to grow sharp and thin.

“How, how abominable! Most certainly I will go and see Mr. Gregson tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SIX



SO BEGAN my feud with the Bullstrodes.

In those early days it was to be no more than an obscure and distant hate, and Beaulieu enemy country somewhere on the horizon. If we met and passed, as meet and pass we did, these Bullstrode demigods were like figures on a lofty frieze. I might be hotly aware of the sleepy, insolent comeliness of Gavin, and of the large, imperious arrogance of Beverley, but I was no more to them than a cocky cad upon the pavement. Gavin might glance at me as though he both saw me and did not see me, with an inward and ironical smile. Beverley, I am convinced, was unconscious of my existence.

But it was Beverley upon whom my secret hatred fastened, perhaps because he was so utterly my antithesis, so seemingly sure, so floridly serene. This heir to the Bullstrode baronetcy was no mere blond brute, all blue eyes and bouncing belly. Beverley had more and more the grand air as he grew older; Beverley was much more clever than he looked. He wore his harness like a *grand seigneur*, and in the old days he would have passed as the patron of poets and of men of letters, and his portrait might well have come down to us by Kneller, Reynolds or Romney. His very clothes, and the supercilious solidity of his manner were to be a challenge to me, and as a man of the world he could make me feel a mere ignorant lout in fustian. Yet, let me confess that I owe much of my material success to my hatred of this man. It and its counterpart were to be my chief inspiration, a flame curling itself about my consciousness a bitter and merciless urge, a secret exultation.

That other anticlimax lies in the past.

Strange, how those who love us can humiliate us! My poor mother did recover my trousers for me. She went off besilked and bonneted to interview Mr. Gregson, and I can only suppose that Mr. Gregson indited for her a legal letter. He was to be a good friend to me in the future, and being a staunch Liberal he was not in the Bullstrode service. At all events a groom arrived on a horse, and left a parcel on our doorstep. It contained my trousers, and a polite if ironic note from the head of the clan.

“Madam,

The property in dispute is returned to you. May I suggest that in the future your son should not hazard the garments by climbing other people’s walls.”

Jocund, easy laughter! My poor mother did not hear it. She displayed my recovered nether garments to me as though she had won a victory and secured a trophy. She did not understand my hatred of those poor pants, and was indignant and a little hurt when I refused to wear them. They were garments of shame and humiliation.

“But they are perfectly good trousers, John. You mustn’t be so sensitive. Besides, we made Sir High and Mighty give them up.”

“I won’t wear them, Mother.”

She was a persistent little person, and so pestered me about those pants that, at last, I took them and threw the things into the sea. She did not understand my passionate perversity. She lectured me on it with grieved severity, until I sulked and was mute, though filled with a sense of the ridiculous paltriness of the squabble.

But my mother was to humiliate me much more shamefully by making me appear a thing of shame. Looking back now upon the incident I am moved to wonder how I should have dealt with it had I been a modern and tolerant father. Should I have understood that there was beauty in the thing, and a loveliness in the way it happened to me, and that a woman could see all that my mother failed to see, and be compassionate and giving? The Victorians drove love to sneak surreptitiously up darkened stairs, and to appear false and ashamed unless it wore the mask of a hypocritical sentimentality. Suspicion and fear are the poisoners of life, and the poison may linger with us till we die.

Mary was walking out with a bricklayer who worked for Messrs. Hickman & Snoad. He was a good oaf of a fellow, and once a week he would wait for Mary at the corner of Regal Terrace. My mother would not allow him inside the house, or permit these two creatures to meet outside our gate. Almost, it would seem that my mother considered it indecent for a girl working in her house to have a lover. I used to wonder about Mary’s love-affair and how she could have any romantic feelings for the man she had chosen. Romantic feelings! The man had bulbous blue eyes, and a ragged red moustache, and his little legs did not seem to belong to his body.

June, and a half holiday. It was Mary's afternoon out, but that did not concern me. I was in a restless mood, yearning for I know not what. I idled out, and climbed the Fire Hills where fern had sprung up among the gorse. Here and there a wild rose trailed pink sprays. The sea was very blue, distant hills hazed in heat. You could wander as you pleased here along little grassy paths, and lie down to dream in little, sunny, secret places.

I came upon Mary sitting in such a place. She was wearing a simple, pink cotton frock, and a hat of straw shaped rather like a sun-bonnet. My mother did allow her servants to wear some sort of frock of freedom when the day was theirs, but I am sure she must have thought herself extremely broadminded, and that the wearing of such a frock by Mary was a little bold and unseemly.

I remember the way Mary looked up at me and smiled.

"Fancy seeing you, Mr. John."

I could only suppose that she was waiting for her bricklayer here, and I had no intention of being superfluous.

"Just going for a walk."

She said that it was too hot to walk, and that she had felt like sitting in the shade of the gorse after climbing the hill.

"It's nice here, Mr. John."

I hesitated, looked at the view, looked at her again and saw that there was room beside her, and sat down.

I have no remembrance of what we said to each other, and I do not suppose that our conversation was of more significance than the insect hum or the twittering of birds. I found myself suddenly shy of Mary, and her mood must have matched mine. She took off her hat and lay down in the shade and it seemed to me that her hair changed its colour, and was almost as dark as her closed lashes.

"This hot weather makes me feel sleepy."

"You have to get up so early, Mary."

"I don't mind that, Mr. John."

Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be smiling in her sleep, and to me she appeared a different creature, somehow strange and mysterious and very pleasant to look at. I half lay, resting on one elbow, watching her face.

"You there, Mr. John?"

“Of course.”

“Don’t you feel sleepy?”

“No.”

Her eyes opened for a moment like shadowy slits.

“It’s nice here,” and she closed her eyes and seemed to sigh.

I don’t know what made me pull a fern leaf, and gently tickle her chin. She opened her eyes at me suddenly, and made a playful clutch at the green plume. I jerked it away. Again she closed her eyes, and this time I put the fern leaf to her lips.

“O, Mr. John!”

She was quicker this time, and caught my wrist. Something must have been struggling in us both, for we tussled playfully for the piece of fern. Her face had a queer, warm radiance, and her lips were parted over her teeth. All I know is that I seemed to overbalance and fall towards her, and that all in a moment we were lying in each other’s arms.

I suppose Mary taught me much that a lad should know, and that it may be more wholesome and good for him to be taught in this way than to explore prurient illusions in the spirit of surreptitious curiosity. I have always been grateful to this working girl for the knowledge she gave me, and strange though it may sound to the purists our love affair harmed me not at all. In fact it did me nothing but good, and instead of provoking me towards a promiscuous greediness, it seemed to soothe and stabilize my passionate youth. Possibly, it was the complete naturalness of the thing that educated me to the realities of sex, and taught me to weigh them up and distinguish between the spirit and the flesh. I often wonder whether without this initiation I should have been capable of transcending mere sex in the great love that was to come to me in later days? Should I have understood the difference between a mere basket of rich fruit, and the cup of immortal and poignant wine? The whole moral of the thing is that Mary was not a slut, nor was I a mere casual little cad. She provoked the good in me by her impulsive giving. She seemed to understand my youth, just as I came to have a feeling for the essential woman in her.

I suppose this affair would have flowered and fruited and fallen upon its inevitable autumn but for my poor mother’s interference. Mary was to marry her bricklayer. I remember how the idea of it hurt me, and how I felt in a way guilty, and a thief of other men’s goods.

“Why must you marry, Mary?”

Never have I been given a more honest answer by any human creature.

“Because I must, my dear.”

“Must?”

“Yes. I’ve got to marry a man who works. I’ve got to have children. It’s in me.”

“Do you want to?”

“Yes. And Bob’s a kind chap. He won’t drink or knock me about.”

“O, Mary!”

“I don’t think I have done you any harm, my dear, and you haven’t harmed me.”

I think I understood, and that life has a sort of inevitableness for people like Mary. We should have gone our several ways with nothing but a jocund memory had not my poor mother’s suspicious and possessive soul appeared like God in our Garden of Eden. I must confess to this sorry, shameful business because it has so much bearing upon what is ugly and piously obscene in life. It is one of the most bitter memories that I possess, in that it completely estranged me from my mother, and made me regard her in secret as an alien and hostile presence, a kind of implacable and prying High Priestess in a lace cap who would allow my youth no privacy or dignity.

There had been a happy, or perhaps unhappy rearrangement of our domestic niches. My mother had been doing so well that she reclaimed for herself a bedroom on the third floor. There were three attics above. I had one, and the other two were assigned separately to the servants. I believe my mother rather flattered herself that she was spoiling the girls by giving them each a bedroom. In those days people did not worry about the air space and the privacy that should be granted to menials.

Mary and I had agreed upon a signal. If she wished me to come to her she would leave the landing window blind only half drawn. Her door would be ajar, and mine the same, and when the whole house had settled down for the night I would steal across the landing and into her room. We had to be as mute as mice lest Martha should hear us.

Shall I ever forget that night when our love affair was discovered?

My mother was in her nightdress, carrying a candle, and wearing a prim little cotton cap. I shall never forget her shocked face, nor the bleak stillness

with which she stood there. Only the candle flame seemed to waver. My mother's figure was like a thing draped in marble.

I saw her lips move.

“Go to your room.”

Her voice seemed to make a sound like something falling upon ice. I felt cold to the marrow as she looked at me. I stood up. I remember glancing at Mary, and noticing that she had buried her face in the pillow. My mother made way for me, and the flickering candle-flame seemed to fill her eyes with a frozen glitter. I went out and across the landing to my room, and sitting down on my bed, remained like one paralysed, save that the whole of me seemed to shiver.

I heard my mother close Mary's door. I heard her voice, cruel and cold and deliberate. Never since have I heard more cruelty in a voice.

“You will leave to-morrow morning.”

Mary was mute. But my mother was saying terrible things to Mary.

“I thought I had taken a decent, God-fearing girl into my house, and not a harlot. Is this gratitude? To teach an innocent boy these disgusting things? I shall tell Robert Prout what sort of creature you are. It is my duty to tell him.”

I heard Mary cry out suddenly.

“I have not done him any harm.”

This seemed to madden my mother. Her voice became even more sharp and cruel, and I heard Mary weeping. I could not bear it. She had been good to me in a way my mother would never understand. I was conscious of sudden passionate anger. I wanted to defend Mary, to protest. I rushed across the landing, and opened Mary's door, and saw her huddled and weeping, and my mother by the bed.

“It isn't true. Mary—”

My mother looked at me with a kind of terrible coldness.

“Go back to your room.”

I went. I slipped into my bed, shaken with shame and bewildered anger. I heard my mother lock Mary's door. She came across to my door, withdrew the key, and reinserted it on the outside of the lock.

“I will talk to you, my son, to-morrow.”

She locked my door, and I heard her go down the stairs. Mary was still

weeping. My urge was to go to her and comfort her, but those two locked doors stood between us.

I sat there in bed, listening until the sounds from Mary's room had ceased. I hated my mother. I hated myself. A kind of horror of life struggled in me.

I did not sleep much that night. It seemed to me as I puzzled over it that Mary and I had not committed a sin until God, in the guise of my mother, had spied upon us and surprised us. What was sin? Doing that which one's heart desired, or being found out by someone who was too old to enjoy life in that way? And why was some function in a church necessary to make love respectable, and when did sin cease to be sin? I suppose that my mother and my father had—But I recoiled from these nude realities, and lay stiff and straight in a bed that was no couch of repentance. I knew in my heart of hearts that I did not regret those romps with Mary. I knew that I was afraid of my mother, and of people like my mother, and that somehow they had the power to make one feel hideously embarrassed and ashamed. But why?

I woke very early. I could hear sounds coming from Mary's room, drawers being opened and shut, the creaking of boards. What was Mary doing? Packing her trunk? And was she feeling bitter against me for having involved her in this disaster? Presently, I heard footsteps on the stairs. Someone crossed the landing, and I heard the key turned in Mary's door.

My mother's voice said: "You can go now."

My mother appeared to pause on the landing before she redescended the stairs. I was sitting on the edge of my bed. I heard Mary's door open, and I went quickly to my door.

"Mary."

"Yes, dear."

"It was all my fault, Mary. I'm so sorry. I—"

I imagine that she had her little tin trunk by one handle. She came to my door.

"No, mine, dear. Are you hating me?"

"No, Mary."

"God bless you, dear."

She gave a kind of sob and hurried down the stairs, and I heard her trunk

bump against the wall. I can remember thinking it strange that she should ask God to bless me, when my mother's God was inflicting upon her dreadful curses. I went to the window, and leaning out, saw that the parade was deserted, and that a haze of early sunlight was spreading over the sea. I saw Mary go down the steps and out through the gate, carrying her trunk. She stood a moment on the pavement as though not knowing which way to turn. What would she do? Where would she go? Home?

I watched her walk away, and when she disappeared I was acutely conscious of a sense of bitter loss, and the provocation of a passionate protest. Why should Mary have to suffer, and be thrust out into the street, because—? I sat down on my bed and gnawed my fingers. I was feeling bitter against my elders and the world as they and God had created it. What would happen to Mary? Would my mother honour her threat and tell poor Bob Prout?

I felt a little guilty when I thought of that plain fellow.

But, after all, Mary was too kind and comely to marry a man like Prout. She would get another place, marry someone else. I tried to will these things, and to console myself by willing them.

I washed and dressed myself and sat on my bed. Sandbourn and No. 42 were coming to life. I heard the clop-clop of hoofs as a milkman's cart went by. I got up and looked out of the window and saw two fishing-boats with brown sails putting out from the harbour. Next door a maid was busy cleaning the front steps. Some early bather with a bath-towel round his neck went strolling along the parade.

I sat down again on the bed. Martha's door had opened some time ago, and she had gone below.

Footsteps on the stairs. Someone knocked at my door.

"Breakfast, Mr. John."

My door was unlocked, and a tray pushed in with a cup of tea and two slices of dry bread on a plate. I did not see Martha's face, but only a big, red, knuckly hand. She re-closed the door, but did not lock it. I heard her voice again, dry and austere.

"Your mother wishes to see you, Mr. John, when you have had your breakfast."

That meeting with my mother! She was dressed as on Sunday, with a white lace cap on her head, and she sat with her back to the window, while I stood with my face to the light. Her eyes looked small and bright, and seemed to fix themselves on me and make me blink and fidget. Somehow she was like a little priestess on a throne, and I the predestined penitent who was to confess and admit my shame.

She began, with gentle severity, to impress upon me the disgraceful and disgusting quality of the sin I had committed, and I began to realize while she lectured me that she was ready to regard me as more sinned against than sinning. I was the innocent lamb, and Mary the black she-wolf. I was to utter Adam's old cry, "The woman tempted me." All the shame was to be fastened upon Mary, and I had only to admit it, and my mother would relent.

But as I stood there confronting my mother and her vindictive goodness I felt myself growing stubborn and sulky. It is not that I possessed more courage and sincerity than other lads, but my emotions had been stirred by Mary's tears, and the magnanimity she had shown me. I stood there and blurted the truth at my mother.

"It wasn't Mary's fault more than mine."

My obstinacy seemed to exasperate my mother. No doubt she had every right to be shocked as a mother by my lapse into naturalness. She was the child of her generation, and she could not help herself or me. She could only abuse Mary, and scourge me with all the old conventional phrases. I had sinned most dreadfully, and I did not appear to be conscious of the heinousness of my sinning. Was it her fault? Had she failed to impress upon me lessons of cleanliness and of self restraint? She was becoming emotional, and her emotion embarrassed and hurt me. Somehow I felt that it was not fair.

"If you won't say anything more about Mary, or tell Bob Prout, I'll promise—"

"John, do you expect me to make a bargain with sin?"

"Well, why should Mary have to suffer when it was my fault as much as hers?"

"Nonsense. The girl's ten years older than you. To take a child and cause him to offend! Unforgivable. I expected a different spirit in you, John."

I stood to the challenge.

"I'll say I'm sorry, if you won't say anything more about Mary."

To my astonishment my mother compromised. She grew more gentle, and

allowed herself to assume that I was behaving better than I knew. I was trying to defend the wretched girl who had overpersuaded me. It was a generous if mistaken gesture, and my mother seemed eager to accept her own explanation of it.

“This has been a terrible grief to me, John. I’m your mother—”

She began to weep a little, and in a little while I was weeping with her.

“It shan’t happen again, Mother.”

“My dear, you’re the only thing I’ve got. Everything I have done is for you.”

“I promise.”

She made me kneel, down and pray with her, and I remember that while my lips uttered the words, my head was examining the realities behind them.

“Now, my son, I will try and forgive and forget.”

Forgive she may have done, but forget she did not.

A very plain and elderly maid was engaged in Mary’s place, and every night my mother locked my bedroom door.

Did she expect me to forgive her that?

CHAPTER SEVEN



*T*HAT locked door remained as a barrier between us. I was nearly seventeen, and old for my age, and my young pride resented my mother's tyranny. I knew that it was a proof of her love for me, but it taught me to fear a love that can be fanatical and possessive, and though I realized that her ambition was all for me I could not feel grateful to her. That was our tragedy. In coercing my young dignity she made me a humbug, and our life together consciously insincere. I did not want to hurt my mother, for whatever our elemental differences might be I had a profound affection for her, and in refraining from hurting her I had to practise all kinds of hypocrisy.

Moreover, my mother in treating sex as a noisome thing, had soiled it for me, and put me in more danger than she knew. I might conceal things from her, but refrain I could not, and part of my life became secret and surreptitious, a thing of excuses and of faked friendships and facile fabrications. My mother never knew of my adventures, nor are they worth recording here, but it was not thanks to my mother that no ultimate harm came of them.

I have always been rather like a bird. Let a hand try to clutch me, and I flew away. Most people bored me quickly, for I seemed to come to the end of them as one comes to the end of a cul-de-sac. This sensitive separateness, the intuitive swiftness with which I summed up and shed some other creature must have saved me from much frustration and many possible entanglements. I was still dreaming and romancing, but I found no Iseults or Guineveres in Sandbourn. The girls whom I met seemed so shallow and silly, and so utterly flimsy even in their crude appeal, that I tired of such affairs even before they were consummated. I explored that sort of sex, and it bored me. Already I was beginning to learn to say no myself, perhaps because of the more beautiful fastidiousness of my dreams. I had two selves, and one self seemed to be waiting upon some ultimate and splendid romance that made the other self's philanderings appear cheap and trashy.

Nor did my mother pander to my vanity in the way of plumage. She dressed me in the plainest of pepper and salt suits; my socks were grey or black, my ties of some neutral colour. She allowed me in pocket money sixpence a week, and one could not parade in shining armour on six poor pennies. Even those dull clothes seemed to drive me inward, and to strengthen

that other self that dreamed in secret of conquered continents and dramatic achievements.

On my seventeenth birthday my mother made of it a solemn occasion. It happened during the summer holidays when St. John's College was closed, and Mr. Theophilus Barter had taken his very large family to the East Coast for a change of air. I am afraid that Mrs. Barter caused the school to jest coarsely and irreverently, and her yearly pregnancy provoked some of us to bet on the probable sex of the next arrival. Sex and holy wedlock as exhibited by the Barters was to me particularly unlovely. But on this seventeenth birthday of mine my mother sat down to breakfast in her Sabbath clothes. A little parcel lay beside my plate, and on opening it I found a gold watch with my name inscribed upon it.

My actual watch was an old Waterbury, and I was secretly ashamed of it, and this much more magnificent timepiece caused me to colour up.

"Mater!"

I got up and kissed my mother, for her generosity touched me in some secret place.

"I hope it will go with you all through your life, my dear."

"Of course."

"And keep good time for you long after I have gone."

I am afraid that I was not affected by her gently prophetic words, for I regarded my mother as a timeless creature, and death, as it might concern her, a mere abstraction. My mother's present included a washed-gold chain, and I was busy attaching the watch to it before adoring my waistcoat.

"I don't want you to wear it until you leave school, John."

I was a little dashed by this, for I wanted to exhibit the watch to my friends.

"Mayn't I wear it just for a week?"

My mother was extracting a sheet of paper from an envelope.

"Yes, perhaps for a week, dear. Now, I want you to read this."

She passed me the letter, and I saw that it was written in Mr. Barter's flowing hand, and that it contained his usual flowery phrases. Other boys had described such letters to me, epistles in which Mr. Barter flattered himself and

his pupils, and put parents in a good temper.

“Dear Madam,

I am happy to be able to assure you that your son undoubtedly has unusual capacity, and that as a pupil at my school he has earned both the respect of the masters and the affection of his fellows. His knowledge of Latin is quite considerable, his skill in Mathematics somewhat less so. If he will apply himself with energy to the work he undertakes I can vouch for his future. At present he strikes me as being a little dreamy, and not sufficiently awake to the practical side of life. He has made great progress under our drawing-master. He has shown much enthusiasm for historical study. As to the career he might adopt, I might suggest that something that would combine the practical with the picturesque would appeal to his particular capacity.

As to character I am happy to assure you that I have nothing but good things to say of your son.”

My mother must have preened herself over that letter, but though it flattered me I was acutely conscious of its insincerity. What humbug! And yet, Old Barter had laid a flowery finger upon a particular quality. Dreaminess. As to my morals he knew nothing about them, and cared less, and had he discovered scandalous scribblings on my moral blackboard, he would have hastened to efface them with a discreet duster.

“I want to talk to you seriously, John, about your future.”

My future!

“Yes, Mother.”

“You are seventeen, my dear, and it is time to think of such things.”

Whither did my dreams and my ambition urge me? What did I want to be? I had to confess that I had not given the matter serious consideration, and still more must I admit that I was full of youth’s passion to play the hero somehow or somewhere without being compelled to submit to the boring process of acquiring the necessary knowledge. I wanted to shine naturally and instantly by reason of my own radiance. But my mother was in a concrete and pragmatism mood. She could say that nothing that is worth while can be accomplished without hard work. She added, with a little regal swelling of her figure, that she had laboured to give me my opportunity, and that she now had the wherewithal to make of me a gentleman. She did not put it quite in that way. She confessed that she could afford to have me educated for one of the

professions.

What would I choose to be? Doctor, lawyer, schoolmaster, priest? I was not drawn to any of these professions. They did not appear to offer me drama or shining armour, or easy and glittering conquests.

“I really don’t know, Mater.”

“You must think, John, think.”

I thanked her and said that I would reflect upon the problem of my future, and I often wonder if she was disappointed in me on that particular day. I did not realize then, as I realize now what all her brave and patient scrapings and economies had meant to her. She might be a little, lace-capped tyrant, but her tyranny had been inspired by a fanatical tenderness which was beyond the deserts and the comprehension of my crude youth. She had been ready to lock doors against me in order that I might go in the way she thought best for me. I had, in secret, resented her interference, without understanding how few people can love one sufficiently to trouble to interfere.

The Sweetings were in residence with us at the time, and it occurred to me that I might consult Mr. Sweeting on the problem of my future. That Mr. Sweeting, as a *dolce far niente* person who had not been driven by economic stresses to the earning of a living, might not prove a wise and adequate mentor and guide, was neither here nor there. Mr. Sweeting had taught me to use a pencil, and to sketch in a desultory sort of way, and when I appealed to him, his advice, rather like his face, was weakly hirsute and desultory.

“Why not one of the A’s, John?”

We were sitting on the beach, and I was lobbing pebbles into the sea.

“The A’s, sir?”

“The arts, my dear boy. I flatter myself that I have helped to rouse in you some feeling for the graphic art.”

Mr. Sweeting was a nice ass, but his bland enthusiasm both pleased and flattered me.

“An artist?”

“Why not? Or architecture? I have noticed that you have a feeling for houses.”

This was true, for I had been spending some of my time in sketching odd bits of picturesques in the old town. I had even made a black and white study of Ringwood Castle.

“An architect?”

Mr. Sweeting was an enthusiast for the neo-gothic and the picturesque, and I myself was a mock medievalist, and too uncritical at that time to realize that the phase was poor, sentimental confectionery.

“I rather like the idea, sir.”

He was pleased.

“Just think of it, my dear boy, if one could rebuild a place like Sandbourn? This horrible, flat, Regency stuff! And the stucco! Philistinism! There’s an inspiration in educating the public, à la Ruskin.”

The idea stuck in my head. It seemed to offer a rather spacious and creative sort of life in which I could display myself to the world in concrete things. I should be the artist and the protagonist, a man who planned and saw to it that humbler creatures carried out the work. So struck was I with the idea that I broached it to my mother, quoting Mr. Sweeting as its instigator.

My mother was not very enthusiastic. I imagine that she had no great faith in poor Mr. Sweeting as a mentor and guide, but she did accept the suggestion. She went to interview Mr. Gregson and to consult him about it.

The outcome of their conference was rather a shock to me.

How would I like to be attached to the firm of Hickman & Snoad to learn the practical side of building before being apprenticed to some recognized architect, preferably in London? Mr. Gregson was a wise old gentleman. I imagine that he proposed to test my whim in the school of realism, and to prescribe Snoad as a possible antidote to Sweeting.

“Bob Snoad’s in the business.”

My mother asked me if that mattered. Considered rationally, it did not, for my old enemy had ceased to grow, and had become a rather undersized and tame person. No longer did he inspire either fear or respect in me. I felt that I could have licked him with one hand, and that, as a creative person, I was his master.

“They don’t do much in the town, Mater.”

“They are the principal firm, John.”

“Yes, I know. But may I think it over? I’ve got ideas rather beyond Hickman & Snoad.”

My mother did not quarrel with my young arrogance. I think she must have approved of it.

“That’s as it should be, my dear. A boy should have ambition, but Mr. Gregson does believe that some practical knowledge may be useful.”

Followed—an interlude.

It was my last year at school, and I had been told to ponder the problem of my future. St. John’s College was a breeding ground for snobs, and though no one talked in those days of the inferiority complex, it was very much in being. I had always been sensitive on the subject of No. 42 Regal Terrace, and I am ashamed to confess that I was secretly ashamed of my mother’s way of earning a living. Also, I was in the spotty and loutish period of my life when an unlovely arrogance may mount a sensitive diffidence and ride it. I think I began to boast at school of the future that was in store for me; I even hinted that I might go up to Cambridge. It was Crawford our cricket captain who called my bluff; he was a sallow, cocky lad with a sharp tongue, and we did not love each other.

“Rot. You’ll never pass an exam, Lanks.”

He had an irreverent way of shortening my name to Lanks, and as the expression rather fitted my physical appearance at that period, the name had stuck.

“I could pass anything if I tried.”

“What’s the idea?”

“I may be a doctor. I think, though, I would rather go to a London hospital.”

Crawford sneered at me.

“You’d never pass the matric.”

“Rot!”

“Besides, a doctor has to be something of a sahib.”

I don’t know where he got that word from, but the implication was instantly evident to me. I went hot about the ears. Crawford’s father was a biggish farmer in the neighbourhood, and Crawford was always boasting of his father’s five hundred acres. I tried to think of something to say that would block Crawford’s insolence, but as is the way on such occasions I could find no bitter and crushing retort. Should I smack Crawford’s face? But I happened to know that Crawford could box, and that if we came to blows he might have

the better of me with fists as well as with tongue.

I tried hauteur.

“I’m not a snob. After all, what have you to be so cocky about?”

He gave me a supercilious grin. I expect he felt that he had my measure.

“Who’s the snob, Lanks? It was you who began blowing off.”

Which was true, and I could find nothing to say, and the laugh was against me. I can remember walking away with dignity and feeling furious with myself. Why had I flunked the crisis and Crawford’s fists? Was it because something in me felt small and inferior, and my own silly, sensitive pride had flinched and slunk away? The absurd incident humiliated me acutely. I found myself brooding over it. The thing was like some ribald King’s Jester bouncing into the middle of my dreams, and chastening them with some mocking jibe. “Prithee, Lanks, why this thusness? Would Sir Lancelot have been afraid of Master Crawford’s fists?” I became rather an aloof and sulky young lout during those last days at school. I refused to play cricket or kick a football about. I hinted darkly that I had discovered other and more significant urges in life, and that I was concerned with a career. Yes, I would be an architect, an artist, no mere games-fool. I persuaded my mother to buy me two or three text-books on architecture. I even took one to school with me, and sat and studied it during the breaks, and when twitted, retorted with dark sententiousness, that I was interested in art.

I remember Crawford telling me that I ought to let my hair grow. This time I found an apt retort. Crawford was one of those fellows who always had inky fingers.

“I will, if you’ll use a nailbrush.”

“That’s damned cheek, Lanks.”

“Oh, go away and hit or kick something. Not me. I’m busy.”

And for some reason unknown to me he left me alone.

But this incident had rankled. It drove me into one of those escapades that seemed to flatter my young vanity. Much to my mother’s annoyance Nos. 40 and 41 Regal Terrace had been converted into a boarding-house whose owner and manager was a large and somewhat colourful lady with golden hair, by name Mrs. Braithwaite. My mother was provoked, not only by Mrs. Braithwaite’s crowding competition, but by the lady’s person, for she was

flowery and flavicomous, and rather suggestive of the bar or the stage. Undoubtedly she was a somewhat sensational and perfumed person, and inevitably offensive to my mother, who was able to say that Mrs. Braithwaite dyed her hair, and was no better than she should be. Moreover, Mrs. Braithwaite had two blooming daughters, Ethel and Lily, both blonde and buxom, with fresh complexions and unabashed blue eyes. These girls were forever on the next door balcony, and I am sure my mother believed that they were there with a purpose, to act as honeypots to attract male boarders. Ethel played the piano, Lily sang. She had a shrill soprano voice, and her singing was yet another offence to my mother. It might disturb the respectable amenities of our much more decorous house. I believe Mrs. Sweeting complained of it, and through the Braithwaites we lost the Sweetings, but not because of Lily's voice.

It seems that poor Mr. Sweeting found the next door balcony humanly interesting. He was caught in conversation with one of the young women, and later there was a scene. I happened to pass up the stairs in the midst of it, and could not help hearing what his Angela was saying to him.

“At your age, Edwin! Perfectly disgusting and ridiculous. Flirting with a young person who might be a barmaid. So undignified!”

Poor Edwin! His Angela removed him from the baleful influence of those hours, and my mother lost her oldest and most profitable patrons.

To me she had issued a warning.

“John, you are not to speak to those young women next door.”

But I am sorry to say that my mother's attempt to coerce me clashed both with my mood of the moment and my inclination. I had begun to look more critically in my mirror, and to be more careful of my tie and hair. I was not a bad-looking lad in a dark, slim way. I had good teeth and rather intense eyes, but my face was too broad and my nose too short. It was rather an Irish face, in those days I was not pleased with it. I gathered that I had no profile, and that my chin stuck out too much, and that my mouth was too large. I did not realize that there is a more vital significance in a face that is a little rugged, and irregular and individual. I was foolishly full of the glorious Apollo idea. Also, my plumage was so inexorably drab. My mother allowed me no colour.

Possibly, it was her doting tyranny that made me mischievous, nor had I any suspicion of how it would react upon us both. I was attracted by Ethel Braithwaite. She was provokingly fair to my incipient swarthinness. We always seemed to be meeting outside one or other of the houses, and when she smiled upon me, I smiled back.

She was the first woman who told me I ought to shave.

Malicious candour challenging my virility!

I found myself sitting on the beach beside her, hidden from our windows by the parade wall. I realize now that Ethel Braithwaite was the complete and perfect jade, a honeypot full to the brim with self-love and vanity. She was ready to provoke anything in trousers, and to ogle promiscuously butcherboys and errant old gentlemen, but in my comparative innocence I found Ethel infinitely disturbing. She could be arch or coy, suddenly sentimental and melting, and just as suddenly farouche and prudish. She had the whole game of sex-appeal instinct in her, from eyes to finger-tips.

How old was I?

I lied to her, and said I was eighteen.

“You look older than that.”

“Do I?”

“A young man like you ought to shave.”

Actually she brushed my chin playfully with a soft, fat hand.

“You ought to get your mother to buy you a razor.”

She seemed to know just how to provoke me. She teased me about my mother. She called me “Mother’s darling.” She would sit and let me hold her hand, and then when I became incipiently tender, repulse me.

“Don’t be silly. You’re only a boy.”

We used to meet in the evening by The Monument, and go and sit by some fishing-boat on the Old Town beach. I suppose she was just amusing herself at my expense, and that the emotions she roused in me flattered her vanity. She too was a creature to whom I owe some sort of gratitude, in that she educated me into understanding what my dream woman should not be. At the time I was just an amorous, sex-plagued boy, not foreseeing the fact that this wench was to be the cause of a tragedy.

I think it must have been one of the maids who tattled to my mother about my intimacy with Ethel Braithwaite. We may have been spied upon. All that I know is that I came back one evening to hear my mother’s voice calling to me from an upper landing.

“John.”

“Yes, Mater.”

“Come here at once. I want to speak to you.”

I knew from my mother’s voice that there was trouble in the air. I found her sitting very upright in her pear-wood chair with its queer barley-sugar arm-rests. Her face looked pinched and thin, and though her hands were clasped in her lap, fingers, and wrists and arms were rigid and tense.

“Where have you been?”

“Out walking.”

I dare say my face betrayed me.

“Don’t lie to me. You have been out with that girl from next door.”

Here was I, a young man who needed a razor, being treated like a small boy, and my self-love was offended. Surely, the time had arrived for my mother to recognize the responsible or irresponsible self in me? Mother’s darling! Ethel Braithwaite’s gibes seemed to prick my skin.

“I’m not lying. I have.”

“Didn’t I tell you to have nothing to do with those people?”

“I must have friends, Mater.”

“Friends! I know just what those girls next door are worth. A boy like you is so easily taken in. Friends, indeed!”

I asked my mother somewhat sullenly what fault she had to find with our neighbours. Had she ever spoken to them? Wasn’t she being prejudiced?

She did not deign to argue with me.

“I am a little wiser than you are, John. I know trash when I see it. Understand that you are not to go about with that girl.”

“What harm is there—?”

“Tarnish, my dear. I won’t have you tarnished in that way.”

Some day I was to realize how right my mother was, even in her prejudices. Tarnish! The word was to remain with me like the title of some book, or the cry of a passionate prophet. I was to learn that it is not life’s elementals that foul one, but our way of hashing them up with humbug. Sentimentality is the drug with which we dose ourselves.

But my sulky young self-love was on its dignity, and I mumbled something about my being too old to be treated like a kid. My mother abated nothing of her tyranny. She forbade me to go out again with Ethel Braithwaite, and there

our conflict ended for the moment. I took myself and a sulky silence out of my mother's room, and she may have been too willing to accept my silence as a sign of surrender. Perhaps, even her protective love did not wish to push me too far.

I did not see Ethel Braithwaite again for some days. Was I avoiding her? Perhaps. To me it seemed rather a silly business, though I will admit that my mother's words had not been without their effect on me. Tarnish! And then raw sex ambuscaded me. I happened to see Ethel sitting on the beach with another fellow, a man who was much older than I was. He had white flannel trousers and a straw hat, and a cocky little black moustache. I was jealous. I hung about and watched them. They appeared to be getting on very well together. The man lay on his back on the beach, and Ethel kept leaning over him.

I was furious. I waited until they separated, and then I followed Ethel Braithwaite back along the parade. I overtook her. I was foolish enough to ask her who her friend was, and foolish enough to show my feelings.

She was supercilious and patronizing.

“What's that matter to a kid like you? Boys shouldn't ask silly questions.”

She had me raw, and I said an unpardonable thing to her.

“I suppose you'd flirt with any cad.”

I had one of the surprises of my life. I have never seen any face grow so swiftly coarse and evil as the face of that girl. I had insulted her shamefully, and she turned on me like a spitting cat.

“You silly little fool.”

Her eyes flared at me. Her full lips, drawn back over her teeth, looked raw and thin. She flounced away, and turned to cross the road in the direction of No. 41 Regal Terrace. And suddenly I felt bitterly foolish and ashamed, as though she had clawed my silly self and left my heart exposed. I stood gawking there, quite forgetting that the windows of No. 42 might be watchful and jealous eyes.

If only my mother had waited for five minutes!

If only she had controlled herself and suffered me to confess that I had seen Ethel Braithwaite as she was! As I stood on the edge of the pavement before crossing the road a dogcart went by with Gavin Bullstrode holding the

reins. He had a girl beside him, and he was looking down into her face with that sleepy, insolent smile of his. He did not see me and I went on and across the road and up the steps to our green front door.

I opened and closed it as quietly as I could. I pulled off my school cap and was about to climb the stairs when I heard my mother calling me.

“John, come here at once.”

There was anger in her voice, and more than anger, a kind of stifled anguish. The sharpness of it seemed to suddenly grow blunt and to splinter itself into strange fragments of sound. Something seemed to be falling. The sound lasted for a second or two, and ended in a kind of thud. Silence. I was conscious of acute and immoderate fear. I stood looking up the stairs.

“Mother.”

There was no voice to answer me. I went storming up the stairs and on the second landing I found my mother lying with her head close to the banisters. There was blood on her forehead. She was utterly and terrifyingly still, but I remember the fingers of one hand making a kind of twitching movement.

I bent over my mother and touched her cheek.

“Mother.”

She did not seem to hear me, and in my fear I went rushing down the stairs, calling to the maids.

“Martha, Jane, my mother has fallen downstairs.”

I did not realize that I should never hear her voice again.

CHAPTER EIGHT



*W*E CARRIED my mother into her room and laid her on her bed. It was Jane who ran for the doctor, old Dr. Warwick who lived at No. 9 Regents Terrace. I sat on a chair beside my mother's bed, while Martha brought a clean towel, and a basin of water, and washed the blood from my mother's forehead. I held the basin for Martha. She had one of those austere, grim faces, and I can remember looking at Martha anxiously.

"She must have stunned herself."

Martha was mute, strangely and grimly mute. She was bending down with her face close to my mother, and I remember being struck by the contrast between those two faces, Martha's with its leathery brownness, and my mother's intense pallor. Suddenly, Martha drew back; her eyes seemed to set in a shocked stare, and her face grew old and crumpled. She was still holding the towel, and I saw her two hands twisting it as though wringing water from some wet cloth.

Martha's face frightened me. I was about to ask her what she thought of my mother when Dr. Warwick came into the room. He was a little old gentleman with a mild face, spectacles, and a halo of white hair, and he wore an old-fashioned, flat-brimmed top hat, and always carried a little black stick with which he tapped the pavement. His stick and his hat had remained below, but I shall never forget the way he looked at my mother, solemn and open-eyed, like a gentle old sheep. I saw him take one of her hands and feel her wrist. He appeared to be looking at Martha, and Martha must have understood him, for she went quietly out of the room.

The silence agonized me. Dr. Warwick was still holding my mother's wrist and hand. He did not take out his watch to count the heart beats. His face struck me as being more perplexed than sad. I realize now that he was wondering how to tell me that my mother was dead.

He looked at me over the tops of his spectacles, and replacing my mother's hand upon the bed, gave it a kind of compassionate and benedictory pat.

"My boy, your mother is at rest."

I stared at him.

“She’s not dead?”

He nodded his white head at me, and sat down as though his old legs felt tired. I remember his drawing a silk handkerchief from his pocket, and removing his spectacles to polish them.

“For one thing we must be thankful, John. She has not suffered.”

For the moment I was stunned. A kind of numbness seemed to possess my brain and body. And then, the terrible thought streaked across my consciousness like a sudden wound. I had killed my mother. She had come to the top of the stairs in a moment of pain and of anger, and her emotion had been too much for her. Had the fall killed her, or was she dying when she fell? I felt bewildered, agonized, stricken to the heart. My knees were shaking. They seemed to give way under me. I flopped down beside the bed, with my face hidden in my arms.

It was a kind of dry anguish. I could not weep. I was overwhelmed and paralysed by the shock of the thing, and by the remorseless thought that I was responsible for my mother’s death. It seemed to me incredible that she could be dead. She was not old, as I understood age, much less old than Dr. Warwick. My remorse smothered me. I knelt there realizing that I had lost the one person in the world who loved me, and whom, in spite of all her austere tyranny, I loved.

I was aware of a hand on my shoulder. It rested there for a moment, and then gave me a number of little pats.

“God’s will, my boy. Her heart just stopped beating. Peace, peace, in that other world.”

The words seemed utterly unreal to me. I did not raise my head.

“I’d like to be alone, sir. May I?”

“Yes, my dear,” and Dr. Warwick went softly out of the room.

I was always grateful to him for the manner of his going, and the human understanding and courtesy of this little old man. He did not treat me like a child. Perhaps he understood that I was suddenly man, and confronting a crisis in my life that the language of convention could not express for me. He must have told Martha and Jane to leave me alone with my mother, for no one came to disturb me.

The shock of my mother’s death and the manner of it were to produce a

profound effect upon me. I had been in a great hurry to think of myself as man, but when I began to realize what had happened to my world, and how my mother had stood between me and reality, I was frightened.

My little world seemed to crumble. Things seemed to slip away under my feet. I understood that the days of No. 42 Regal Terrace were numbered, and that I should be alone and without a home.

I went dry-eyed and scared to my mother's funeral. Martha and Jane, Dr. Warwick and Mr. Gregson were the only other mourners. It was a radiant summer day, but everything seemed as black to me, as black as my clothes. I remember noticing as we drove at a walk along the Sandbourn front, that the parade was crowded with people, and that some of the men raised their hats. A kind of insect hum of human voices rose from the sun-steeped beach. That drive seemed to me interminable. I was clutching a pair of new black gloves. I had forgotten to put them on.

Mr. Gregson and the maids were with me in the carriage. Dr. Warwick had his own brougham. A kind of dreadful silence seemed to possess us all. I remember Martha glancing at my gloves.

“Hadn't you better put them on, Mr. John.”

I struggled with those gloves. It was quite a business getting my thumbs into them, and the ends of the fingerstalls stuck out. I was still struggling with the wretched things when we reached the cemetery.

I felt dazed and self-conscious and awkward. I remember Mr. Gregson taking me by the arm and walking with me up the gravel path behind the men in black who carried the coffin.

I was weeping. I still seemed to hear the dry rattle of the earth when a handful of soil was dropped on the oak lid of the coffin. Mr. Gregson took me by the arm. I found myself alone with him in the carriage. Dr. Warwick was driving the maids back to No. 42.

“You are coming to us, John, for a few days.”

“Not home, sir?”

“Just as you please, but we have a room ready for you.”

“Thank you, sir. Everything seems—”

“Quite so, my lad. Ours is a quiet house, and in a day or two we'll talk about the future.”

In Sandbourn Mr. Gregson had the reputation of being a dry old stick. He

was very tall, six-foot-three, and extremely thin, and he was accustomed to wear a very large black bowler hat that suggested a lamp at the top of a lamp-post. He was precise, a little abrupt, and autocratic, qualities that helped me in my emotional state. His kindness to me, a mere cub, was extraordinary. His wife was an invalid, and their only son was dead, but if Mrs. Gregson had to spend her life on a sofa, I think she had one of the most unsick souls of any creature upon earth. A little, stout, pale woman, she had peculiarly beautiful and bright blue eyes, and a kind of gentle vivacity that expressed all sorts of things without words.

Mr. Gregson took me upstairs and slipped me like a forlorn pup into that drawing-room, with its french windows opening on a green balcony and the sea.

“Here’s John, my dear.”

Mrs. Gregson put out a small white hand to me.

“I’m so glad to have you here, John. I have had Martha pack your things and send them here. Perhaps John would like to see his room, William?”

I was feeling so forlorn that her kindness went to my heart. I burst suddenly into tears. She was holding my hand, and she drew me down and kissed me on the forehead.

“There, my dear. I understand. We’re not going to worry you. Take John upstairs, William, and show him his room.”

The shock of my mother’s death had left me in a subdued and docile mood. I had resented her tyranny, but now that she was dead I felt helpless and lost without her. Also, my remorse had turned me into a passionate penitent. My impulse was to conform to the ritual of her love for me, to do all the things she would have wished, to humble myself before her memory. I was no little Agag. I had been profoundly affected by this tragedy, so much so that the yellow head of Ethel Braithwaite had become almost a thing of horror.

When Mr. Gregson took me into his study on the second day of my sojourn with them, and produced a solemn-looking document that was my mother’s will, I was completely and sincerely chastened.

“It is my duty, John, to talk to you about the future.”

“May I say something, sir?”

“Well?”

“I don’t know what my mother put in her will, but I want to do what she

would have wished me to do.”

Mr. Gregson looked at me with dry kindness.

“We will consider that. I am not a believer in the tyranny of the dead hand, John, but your mother—Well, perhaps I had better explain the situation to you.”

It appeared that my mother had left between two and three thousand pounds invested in first mortgages, plus the lease, and the goodwill, and the furniture of No. 42 Regal Terrace. Mr. Gregson explained that it would be advisable to dispose of No. 42 as a going concern, and that its cash value might be of more use to me than a mass of furniture. He estimated that my inheritance would amount to some three thousand pounds, perhaps more. The capital had been left on trust, and the trustees were Mr. Gregson and Dr. Warwick.

“What does that mean, sir?”

“It means, John, that under the terms of your mother’s will, you will not be able to touch your capital until you reach the age of twenty-three. We administer the estate for you. Under your mother’s instructions we are to allow you an income of £100 per year, twenty-five pounds each quarter. But we are authorized, under special conditions, to draw on capital.”

“What special conditions?”

“Education. Professional fees that might become necessary.”

Three thousand pounds! It seemed an immense sum to me but it would not be mine for another five years. My mother’s hand retained her hold upon my immediate future. I did not resent it. In my chastened mood I understood her wisdom.

“What do I do next, sir?”

Mr. Gregson gave me a paternal look.

“Any ideas, John? I believe that you and your mother did discuss the future.”

“She wished me to gain experience.”

“Quite so. Does architecture still interest you?”

I hesitated.

“Yes. I think you know, sir, what my mother’s plan was.”

“I do.”

“I’m quite ready to go into Hickman & Snoad’s.”

Mr. Gregson smiled his dry, kind smile at me.

“Experience. Practical contact with realities. You know, John, one can’t turn one’s dreams into actuality without having the knowledge of how to do it. Bricks and mortar. I think that would be a very wise choice, a year or two with a firm of practical men. And then, perhaps, something more ambitious.”

I reflected for a second or two, and then I asked him a very simple question.

“You want to see, sir, whether I’m in earnest, or whether I might change my mind?”

He answered me with equal frankness.

“Yes, John, that is so. Youth wants so many things, and it does not always know what it wants. It’s a kind of testing of yourself, my lad.”

“I think I understand.”

But it was not my fate to be attached to the firm of Messrs. Hickman & Snoad. Mr. Gregson, in his wisdom, may have wished me to be thrust against the realities of the life I had chosen, and to discover the texture of the material with which I should have to work. I gather that Mr. Gregson was not thinking merely of bricks and mortar, but of the men with whom I should come in contact and in conflict in any constructive dreams I might have. Mr. Gregson was not one of the world’s humbugs, though he may have disciplined himself into a dry, ironic kindness. I imagine that he was minded to give me a dose of Hickman & Snoad, and to let me discover that the would-be artist may find in his dealings with crude commercialism that unless he has the cunning of the serpent and the courage of his craft, these realists will flout and fool him.

I was spared Hickman & Snoad, save as a hostile inspiration. Mr. Gregson may have reconsidered the situation and its moralities, and sounded a few tentative notes on his horn. I know that I was surprised when he told me he had thought the matter over, and that it would be preferable for me to gain my experience with Messrs. Joseph Banyard & Son. He had interviewed old Joe Banyard and had persuaded him to take me.

Banyard & Son were old Sandbourn, Messrs. Hickman & Snoad new town. There was no son in the Banyard firm, or rather, old Joe was the son. The business had been founded by his father, and Banyard & Son had been responsible for part of Stuccoville. I knew the old man only by name, though Mr. Gregson warned me that he was something of a character.

“If he shouts at you, John, don’t worry.”

Was I to be shouted at?

I had left St. John’s College, and Mr. Gregson had found lodgings for me with a Mrs. Bruce in Lavender Lane. The goodwill and the furniture of No. 42 Regal Terrace had been sold to the Braithwaite woman. I must say that I felt a little sore over this transaction, and over the thought that my poor mother’s creation should end by wearing a yellow wig, but I suppose Mr. Gregson preferred business to sentiment in safeguarding the interests of a very immature client.

It was a September morning when I set out to walk from Lavender Lane, to introduce myself to Mr. Joseph Banyard. Mr. Banyard carried on his business in Roper’s Row under the shadow of the West Cliff and beneath the benediction of the squat stone towers of St. Giles church. I was to discover that though old Joe Banyard, or Uncle Joe as he was called behind his back, lived almost in the odour of sanctity, he never entered a church.

Roper’s Row, a terrace of little Georgian houses, made one think of a regiment of red-coated soldiers with white facings paraded in line under the impending shadow of the cliff. Old Banyard lived in No. 27, the last of the row, and beyond it lay his yard and sheds and office. I found two white gates with J. Banyard & Son, Builders & Decorators painted on them in large black letters, and also the text “No Admittance Except on Business.” I pushed open one of the gates and entered. Shy I might be, but I came on business.

The big yard was paved with cobblestones. On the left stood the red brick office, and another building that was used for stores. Straight before me I saw an open shed in which Mr. Banyard’s white carts and wagons stood with their red shafts raised as in prayer. Next to this shed were the stables. On the right a whole nest of sheds was to sort itself out for my benefit into the carpenter’s shop, the paintshop, the timber store, and the lime and cement shed. Piles of bricks, and heaps of ballast, and one or two collections of builders’ oddments decorated the yard. A carter was leading a roan horse out of the stable, to harness it to one of the carts.

I saw two figures standing by a pile of bricks. One of these figures, that of a lean, round-backed old fellow in a black tail coat and a hard felt hat, had a brick in either hand, and as I entered he clapped those two bricks together like cymbals. They gave out a dull note, and I saw one of the bricks crack and come in half.

“Muck, Bob, muck!”

The man addressed as Bob had a shoe-horn nose, very blue eyes, and a drooping fair moustache. I saw him nod his head thrice at Mr. Banyard, but he did not utter a word.

“I’ll have Sanders & Co. cart the whole lot back. Sending me rubbish like this!”

I was seeing Mr. Banyard in profile, for Mr. Banyard I took him to be. He was a ruddy old man with a nose that was hooked, and a wonderful lower lip that seemed to project and almost fold itself over the upper one. Mr. Joe Banyard was clean shaven, save for two little tags of grey whisker below each ear. I was staring so hard at my new autocrat that he must have become conscious of my stare, for he turned his head and saw me.

His lower lip seemed to shoot out. His grey blue eyes were as hard as marbles.

“What d’yer want here?”

It was not a very debonair welcome, but somehow Mr. Banyard piqued me. He was so unlike those bored conventionalists, the masters at St. John’s College.

“I’m Lancaster, sir.”

He grunted at me. I was to find that a large part of Old Joe’s vocal self-expression was made up of grunts, and strange expletives, and shouts, and occasional eructations. He was completely primitive in the sounds he emitted. He would belch at you unabashed.

“Lancaster. B-rr, blup. My new pup. Come here, young man.”

I approached him and he fixed me with his queer, penetrating eyes. They were tucked away under penthouses of hair. His swollen lower lip looked blue.

“Catch hold of two of them bricks.”

I did so.

“Wang ’em together.”

I wanged them together, and one broke.

“That’s how you’re going to learn here, see. Brub. Bloody rubbish. Want to learn?”

He was scrutinizing my very clean collar.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t want any young Mr. Collar & Cuffs round my place. Bup, plup. Got to take your coat off, know your materials.”

“That’s just what I want to learn, sir.”

He gave me a gleam of his grey blue eyes, and turned towards the office.

“Come in here.”

His abruptness was to make me think of the ring of a trowel on good brick. He had a habit of walking with his hands clasped under the tail of his shabby black coat. This particular coat was growing green with age. Sometimes his fingers would twitch and set the coat-tails in motion, and when agitated or angry those tails flicked and jerked ominously.

The office contained some very ancient furniture, a big deal table, a high desk, a shelf of catalogues, a stove, and a little bespectacled and elderly clerk poised on a stool rather like a seated statue on a pedestal. Mr. Banyard took his hard hat off, and sat down in a Bergère armchair on an old green cushion. I saw that his hair grew in queer, grey curls over his forehead, and that his pate showed no signs of baldness. The little old clerk took no notice of us, but went on entering up figures in a ledger.

Mr. Banyard did not tell me to sit down, and I remained standing before him like a boy before his master.

“Gregson says you want to be an architect.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What for?”

I was beginning to suspect that the naked and unadorned truth was the only coinage that passed with Mr. Banyard.

“Because I want to design houses.”

“I build ’em. Never had much use for architects.”

“No, sir.”

“Most of ’em don’t know whether mortar’s been mixed as it should be. Brup. Easy to fool ’em, if you want to. Fellows that have never used their hands. Couldn’t lay a brick or cut a mortise. Before I came into this business, young Lancaster, I learnt to use a pick and a trowel. I worked for a year in the carpenter’s shop. That’s knowledge, that is.”

“That’s the sort of experience I want, sir.”

He looked at me steadily.

“Sure? Amateur gentlemen aren’t much use in this world.”

“I want to learn.”

“Take your coat off?”

“Yes.”

“Gregson tells me you’ve lost your mother.”

“Yes, sir.”

On a shelf within reach of the chair lay three briar pipes, a tin of shag, and a box of matches. Mr. Banyard selected a pipe, filled it, and struck a match. I watched him light the tobacco, and the way his lips sucked at the pipe.

“Tom.”

“Sir.”

Mr. Thomas Ventriss the clerk revolved on his stool like a figure that had been tweaked by a string.

“Take him in hand, Tom. He’d better learn some of the inside business before I put him outside.”

Mr. Ventriss eyed me over the tops of his spectacles.

“Very good, sir.”

Mr. Banyard got out of his chair, and with his pipe sticking out rather like an insect’s proboscis, walked to the door. He paused there. The fingers of his clasped hands gave his coat-tails a jerk. Apparently he had cultivated the habit of talking with his pipe in his mouth.

“I asked Gregson for a premium.”

“Yes, sir. A hundred pounds, I believe.”

“All alone in the world, aren’t you?”

“In a way, sir.”

“I don’t want your hundred pounds.”

“It’s very good of you, sir.”

“Bup. Don’t thank me yet. Soft soap isn’t in my line.”

Most certainly it was not. I remember smiling at Mr. Ventriss after Joseph Banyard had disappeared into the yard, but Mr. Ventriss did not return my

smile. He was a dusty little person, meticulously exact, who remained stuck on his stool as though he had grown there. In fact, his head was not unlike the head of a mushroom, flat and broad and bald. He took Mr. Banyard's orders with complete literalness, and pointing with his pen at the book shelf, told me to take down a much worn volume bound in marbled cloth. I did so, and opening it, found it full of figures and lists of materials.

“Better make that your bible, Lancaster, for the next six months. Get it at your finger-tips.”

I sat down at the deal table with the book. It contained all that the practical builder should know on constructive work and its materials, on prices, wages, and estimates. It told you how many bricks went to a square, how much cement and ballast into a cube of concrete, how much paint should cover a prescribed surface. It advised you all about tiles and slates and their covering capacity, how long it should take a labourer to excavate a yard of soil, what a plasterer should accomplish in a day. It contained wage tables, and the prices of timber in all its moods and shapes. It initiated you into the mysteries of plumbing and sanitation, cisterns, traps, drain pipes, inspection chambers. I sat turning the pages, realizing that there was more matter in the art of building than I had wot of.

“Where had I better begin?”

Mr. Ventriss was back at his figures.

“At the beginning, Lancaster, at the beginning.”

CHAPTER NINE



I HAVE come to the conclusion that old Joe Banyard was strong, because he did not seem to care a damn about the world's opinion. Man is so vulnerable through his vanity. Our liking to be liked, and our eagerness to please, can make such fools and weaklings of us.

It did not take me long to discover that this abrupt and gruff old curmudgeon was a man of peculiar integrity, and as such, fearing no one. Shoddy work he would not suffer, and a scamped job or a false estimate made him angry. He had no mercy upon slinkers. He loathed servility, being himself the reddest of Radicals. He would shout at his men, and use language of fearful frankness, but he was never offended by an honest retort. All his men were known to him by their Christian names, Tom and Bob and Jim, and many of them had been with him for years. He may have created many an ugly building in his time, but he had never built a dishonest house, or sold his soul to commerce.

Sandbourn was a Tory town, and there is no doubt but that old Joe's frank Radicalism had lost him much business. Also, his candour had made him enemies, for his sharp tongue had a way of transfixing humbug. Also, he was no city father, and was not to be found on the Vestry or the Local Board. He was a bachelor, living alone at No. 27 Roper's Row with an elderly housekeeper and one small maid. Gossips would have it that he looked after his men and was merciful to them if they or theirs were sick.

I discovered two things in my first month, that I was a little afraid of Mr. Banyard, and that I was finding myself rather unexpectedly absorbed in my work. I was like a child playing with a new box of bricks, but I was not playing with them like a child. I was piqued by a passion for a thoroughness, by a desire to know. Perhaps I was realizing that there is no power without knowing. I was committing whole tables of figures to memory, and making myself familiar with all sorts of technical terms. I discovered how to cube a house, and to calculate how many bricks would be needed in the construction of a particular building, and how to estimate the amounts of the various sorts of timber that would be required. Mr. Ventriss initiated me into the mystery of specifications. He was becoming a little less dry and dusty with me, and he allowed me to help him with the ledgers.

I used to escape into the yard for half an hour each morning, and amuse myself in examining and handling the raw earth of my trade. I got to know the feel of the various kinds of bricks, and how clean sharp sand should run through one's fingers. I made friends with Bob Beeson, the foreman-bricklayer, and Jim Pawley of the carpenter's shop. They were good, steady men and I was soon at ease with them. Bob Beeson had a curious, silent dignity of his own, a calm brown face and very honest eyes. Jim Pawley was blond and jocular, a merry soul who liked to tease me and try and catch me out. I learnt a lot from these two men, and the thing that struck me most about them was their readiness to share their knowledge with me. Pawley would take me into the timber-shed and catechise me on boards and battens and mouldings, match and weather-board, and he would let me watch him at work. Beeson though his business was the laying of bricks, was also in charge of the stores. We kept a certain amount of hardware in stock, guttering and piping, locks, hinges, nails, screws, lead and zinc, and various fittings, and I soon became familiar with all this gear. Ladders, scaffold poles and putlogs were stored in a long penthouse behind the stables. The painter's shop interested me less than other places, perhaps because I found the men who worked there somehow suspicious of me and less friendly.

I remember being rather surprised by the meagre wages paid to the men.

Pawley drew ninepence an hour, the painters about the same. Beeson received tenpence an hour, a bricklayer's labourer sixpence halfpenny.

Mr. Banyard left me very much to myself and the company of Mr. Ventriss during the first two months, but I felt that he kept me under observation. Also, I can suppose that Mr. Ventriss had to report to him in private on my progress and keenness, but one November morning Mr. Banyard called me from my table.

"Come out, Lancaster. Put your coat on."

I went out with him into the yard. He was carrying his familiar ash stick, and he pointed to a stack of bricks.

"What d'you call those?"

"Stocks, sir."

"How many bricks to a rod?"

"One and a half brick thick, sir?"

"Yes."

"Four thousand, three hundred and fifty-two."

He grunted at me.

“See that heap of ballast?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“I should say about five loads, sir.”

“Six. Brupp. How many tiles do I want for a square, four and a half gauge?”

“Six hundred and fifty, sir.”

“Laths?”

“Three hundred and forty foot run.”

“Nails?”

“About three hundred.”

“Yes, if the men don’t waste ’em. Not so bad, young Lancaster. Come on, we’re going out.”

Mr. Banyard took me up Tackle Street to a house where one of his occasional hands was laying some new brick steps. I remember him pausing opposite a particular cottage and pointing with his stick.

“What’s that?”

“Brick nogging and timber.”

Again, he grunted. His praise, if you won it, was negative rather than positive, but his dispraise was insistent and vocal. It was to be demonstrated to me that morning. We came to the house where our casual craftsman and his labourer were at work. I remember Mr. Banyard standing in severe silence with his stick tucked under his arm, then, without a word, he approached the lower step, and began to kick the bricks away with the toe of a stout black boot.

“Don’t you try that on me, Smith.”

The man, squatting on his heels, assumed an air of surprised innocence.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

Mr. Banyard was still kicking the brickwork to pieces.

“Rubbish. You know as well as I do. You’ll do that job again and properly, and you won’t get paid for scamping.”

The man looked sullen.

“There was a touch of frost last night, sir.”

“Rubbish. Pull it to pieces, and lay ’em again.”

Afterwards, as we went on to inspect a house that was being repapered and painted, he asked me if I could tell him what had been wrong with that brickwork. I confessed that I could not, and he grunted and gave me one of his fierce, birdlike looks.

“Not pretending you know, my lad?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, the mortar was bad. You’ve got to learn to know when chaps aren’t honest, or you’ll get the blame for their bad work. It isn’t only knowing how a job should be done, but how it shouldn’t be done, and the only way to learn that is to handle the tools and the stuff yourself.”

“You did, sir?”

“Yep. I had a year with a trowel, a year in the carpenter’s shop, and on roofs and floors, and six months with a brush, and I’ve never regretted it. Of course, if you’re minded to be an amateur gentleman like Smeary & Toad—”

I couldn’t help letting out a laugh at his rechristening of the rival firm. Smeary they were, as I was to discover, and my old enemy was a species of human toad.

“I’d rather like to go all through the business in that way, Mr. Banyard.”

He gave me a queer, sidelong stare.

“Not ashamed of it?”

“No.”

“Or afraid of mucking up your hands?”

“No.”

He walked along the path in silence for a quarter of a minute before blurting at me: “Well, you shall, Jack, but mind you, you’ll get backache, but if you stick it you’ll know what no amateur gentleman ever gets to know.”

I shall always remember that first winter of my own, for in spite of, or because of, my poor mother’s death, I was conscious of myself as a somewhat responsible person. I was reading omnivorously, as well as swatting at my

technical manuals. I was liking Mrs. Bruce and my lodgings. Every other Sunday I went to tea with the Gregsons, and I was able to divine in William Gregson dry and paternal approval. Also, The Sandbourn Musical Society had arranged a series of winter concerts, with an occasional artist imported from London, and I went regularly to those concerts. I can remember a little fat German with a mop of hair giving a Chopin and Schubert recital. Something seemed to happen to me that night; I felt both strangely excited, and strangely soothed. It was a clear and frosty night, and after the concert I went and walked for an hour up and down the parade. I saw the lighted windows of No. 41, and heard a piano jangling out a polka. It was the sort of trashy music that Ethel Braithwaite would have produced, and I have no doubt at all but that it was Ethel at the piano.

I seemed to hear a voice saying: "Love should be Chopin, not that false jingle."

Which implied, perhaps, that I was outgrowing the Ethels of this world, and asking of my romance that it should transcend crude sex.

Otherwise, my winter was most unromantic. Mr. Banyard took me at my word, and being a Cromwellian person, he was thorough in his testing of me. He told me to buy myself a pair of corduroy breeches, heavy boots, and workman's shirts, and thus equipped I went out with Bob Beeson and his labourer as understudy to the bricklayer's man. I was allowed to change my clothes in the office, and I can remember Mr. Banyard inspecting me on the first morning. There was a sharp and frosty twinkle in his fierce eyes.

"Let's see your hands, Jack."

I showed them.

"A bit soft, my lad, what! You'll get 'em blistered. That's learning."

A firm of haulage contractors at the upper end of Tackle Street were needing an addition to their stable, and we had secured the contract. A trench had to be got out for the foundations, and Bob Beeson put me to work with his labourer. I was to watch Fred Thomas, and when I had studied his activities with pick and shovel, I was to try a hand at it. The job looked easy, and after half an hour of observation I told Thomas I would take the pick and hack up the soil for him while he shovelled.

I was full of enthusiasm and the swagger of youth. Fred Thomas was an undersized little man with big and freckled fists, and I felt sure that I was stronger and fitter than this labourer. He gave me a shrewd grin.

"All right. Mind your toes."

I got down into the trench he had opened, and fell to with unwise fury. Mind my toes, indeed! I would show the fellow that I had some stuff in me. I tore at the earth with the pick, and he stood waiting and watching me, one foot on his shovel.

“ ‘Old ’ard a moment.”

“Why?”

“We ain’t diggin’ a ’ole in the sand. You’ll ’ave the walls down.”

I had not yet realized that even the excavating of a foundation trench is an art, and that the earth walls had to be squared off like a neatly cut cake. My work with the pick was too eager and promiscuous.

“ ‘Ere, I’ll show you.”

He took the pick from me, and getting into the trench began with neat, shrewd peckings to demonstrate how the job should be done. He explained in his blunt way that such a trench had to be made like a well-trimmed trough to hold the concrete, and that the shovel or spade completed what the pick had begun.

I had to confess my amateurishness, and he let me take the pick again and try my hand, but I soon realized that I had none of his cunning, and that even my strength was what the worker calls gentleman’s strength. I got blown. My back and arms began to ache; I misaimed my blows and pulled down earth that spoilt the symmetry of the show. Fred Thomas stood it for a while, and then chucked me the shovel.

“Better give me the pick. You try shovelling.”

I got on better with the shovel, but I soon discovered that I could not keep pace with him, and that he could break up the subsoil more quickly than I could clear it. Moreover, he did not appear to exert himself, but went on steadily pick-picking.

“There’s more in this than I thought, Fred.”

He paused, gave me a good-natured grin, and spat.

“Found that out, ’ave you! If you’ve got the guts to stick it, you’ll learn.”

I did stick it, but I went home that night with blistered hands and an aching back. The dignity of labour! But I was to learn that sweat is good, and that endurance in manual toil is not what a softer generation would have us believe. Slavery? Humiliating sweat? We have swapped new hypocrisies for the old ones. We have our machines that will gnaw out the soil; we have our tractors

and our pneumatic drills. I am no decrier of the machine. It has given us the age of power, but it has given us the bombing aeroplane, and the stealthy, sneaking submarine. I only ask myself whether the fellow with the tractor is a better man, and happier than the ploughman between the stilts. Is the man who spends his life doing nothing but attach a piece of steel to some metal carcass travelling on a moving platform, happier? I cannot say. All that I know is that much of our mechanical life fills me with distrust and loathing.

But I stuck at my job as bricklayer's labourer. I soon became handier with pick and shovel, and though I could not compete with Fred Thomas, I learnt to know what a good man should do in a day. Our next business was spading up ballast and cement for the foundations, and I found this one of the most exacting forms of work I have had to tackle. Wet ballast weighs heavily on the shovel. I did much of the barrowing of the concrete and dumping it into the trench. Then came the mixing of mortar, and the carrying of bricks. I became Bob Beeson's satellite, and I began to shape so well at it that Mr. Banyard took Thomas off the job for a week for use elsewhere.

I soon discovered that the handling of bricks can be rough on one's fingers until the skin thickens and hardens. I watched Beeson's deft trowel at work, and the easy precision with which he could slap the mortar about. He could lay his thousand bricks a day, and had once laid thirteen hundred in a straight piece of walling. When we were breast high, Fred Thomas returned, and taught me to set up the scaffolding. I had to lash the putlogs securely to the poles, and arrange things so that none of the planks tilted or rocked. Then came the hod business, and the climbing of ladders. I found Beeson working so rapidly that supplying him with bricks and mortar kept me busy.

I was coming down a ladder with my hod in true professional style one morning when I heard old Banyard's voice.

"Getting on with the job, Jack."

I had become Jack to him. He had his ash stick under one arm, and his hands under his coat-tails. It was a fresh March morning, and the wind had whipped up the colour in his fierce old face.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's see your hands."

I put the hod down and showed him my hands. The palms had hardened up, and the skin on the inside of the thumbs and along the first fingers had become rough and ridged. I had to use a nailbrush vigorously to scrub the ingrained dirt out, and even then the skin remained discoloured.

He gave me a curt nod.

“Good business, Jack. No collar and cuffs about that.”

The hard work was making a man of me. I put on a stone and a half in weight, for my muscles had filled out. I was very much stronger than I had been a year ago, and I found my old coats too tight across the shoulders. I was liking the life because it was actual and real and seemed to give me a background to my reading. It quickened my interest in the art of building and helped me to understand the basic principles of the business. I remember Mr. William Gregson feeling the muscles of my arms one Sunday afternoon, and saying in his dry way: “My dear, John is becoming a little Hercules.”

Also, this life of labouring with my hands seemed to tranquillize my inner moods. I was not bothered so much by sex. My head seemed clearer, save on some of those evenings when I had whacked in rather too hard. I slept like a pile of bricks, and my appetite might have shocked Mrs. Bruce had she not been one of those motherly persons who like to see a lad “Eat hearty.”

After six months or so of labouring Joe Banyard put me in the carpenter’s shop under Jim Pawley. Pawley was the complete craftsman. He had the reputation of being the only carpenter in Sandbourn who could lay out an awkward roof. On the whole I liked the joiner’s job better than bricklaying, for it was more varied, and the clean timber fascinated me. To see it grow into a door or a window-frame or a flight of stairs was rather delightful. I liked the smell of wood and the scent of the sawdust. I soon learnt to handle rule and pencil, and to make my cuts with the saw square and straight. I became quick and precise with mallet and chisel, and learned to pin my mortises up true and tight. Sometimes we were out of doors, setting up new roofs, or stripping and repairing old ones, and I did not mind heights. I liked to be poised up above on a ridge-beam nailing the ends of the rafters to it, while Jim Pawley worked below on the wall-plate. We fitted up cupboards, and repaired floors, and erected sheds and summerhouses. Only once did I cut myself with a chisel. The one thing that bothered me most was to set a jack-plane properly and use it as it should be used. Jim taught me to set and sharpen saws, and put an edge on blunt chisels. I was quite a capable carpenter by the time he had finished with me.

Mr. Banyard now brought me back into the office for most of my time,

though, when there was a press of work, I was allowed to go out with Beeson or Pawley. Old Joe could mix his own paints, and very often he supervised the mixing in the painter's shop, taking me with him. As an amateur I could handle an artist's brush, and I showed Mr. Banyard some of my water-colours. All he said was "Very pretty, Jack," but his language to me about the paper-hanging and painting fraternity was far more juicy.

"Give you more trouble than a wagonload of monkeys. Don't know why, but I've always found most painters sly and slimy. Have to watch 'em. Messing about with the maids in a house, if you aren't careful. What's your idea about it, Jack?"

Very rarely did he ask for advice and I felt flattered.

"Propinquity, sir."

He glared at me.

"What's that? Brup! I reckon a fellow with a brush doesn't get rid of his victuals in good sweat. Apt to be stuffed up and dirty minded. Nothing like hard work for keeping a man clean."

Mr. Ventriss was a draughtsman, and he taught me to lay out plans to scale, and to set out elevations. I flattered myself that I had a nice taste in design, and even in those days I used to amuse myself sketching houses. I liked them individual and distinctive and separate, not in rows and terraces. Old Sandbourn could show one plenty of mellow and beautiful red brick, but the red bricks we stocked were rather like boiled lobsters. Incidentally, old Banyard suggested that I might learn the elements of surveying. There was a young land and estate agent in the town, named Finch, and he agreed to take me out on summer evenings and put me through the elements of the business.

I remember a saying of Joe Banyard's that caused me to reflect upon the future.

"I've known many a man make a fool of himself over levels, Jack. I know one chap who bought ten acres of ground for building, and then found he couldn't get a fall to connect up with the town sewer. Pretty poor sort of fool he looked. Brep, yes."

One day when I had been out with Bob Beeson helping him to build a garden wall, and he had allowed me to lay some bricks on my own, Mr. Banyard met me as I was coming off work. I was in my corduroys and old jacket, with a blue neck-handkerchief in place of a collar, and a canvas bag over my shoulder. Old Joe looked at me in a queer, appraising way, but with a twinkle in his eyes that may have been a salute to youth.

“Come down to No. 27 and have supper, Jack.”

“To-night, sir?”

“Sure. Not after the petticoats, are you?”

I had never known him tease me before quite in this way. I laughed, and said that I was not particularly interested in girls at the moment.

“Keep off ’em until you’ve got your roof on, my lad. Eight o’clock. Drink beer?”

“I could, sir.”

“Mean to say you’ve never touched beer?”

“No.”

He chuckled.

“Wine and women, Jack! Wine’s got to be old, and when a woman’s that age—! Brup. Eight o’clock, sharp. I keep my beer in a barrel, young man, not bottled.”

Roper’s Row was red brick, and No. 27 had a pediment, and two white pilasters running down its front. No. 1 balanced it at the other end of the Row. The small front garden with its spear-headed iron railings contained nothing but euonymous shrubs neatly clipped into balls and pinnacles. The front door was painted white, and had a good fanlight above it. I pulled the brass handle of the bell, and Mr. Banyard’s housekeeper opened the door to me.

“I’m John Lancaster.”

She nodded at me. Her thin lips remained pressed together with an air of severe serenity. Her lace cap and tight black dress reminded me of my mother.

“Mr. Banyard’s expecting you. Upstairs, second floor.”

I hung my Sunday bowler on a hat stand in the narrow hall, and as I climbed the stairs I became aware of the ticking of clocks. The upper part of the house seemed to be alive with the voices of these timepieces. I was met on the first landing by a solemn grandfather with a painted face whose pendulum went tick-tock at me. There were wall-clocks, and bracket clocks, and bird-cage clocks in this strange, high old house, all ticking with various voices, and the medley fascinated me. It would seem that my eccentric employer lived alone with all these busy mechanisms, and I wondered whether he preferred their ticking to the sound of human voices.

I ascended to the second landing, hesitated, and then knocked at the door of the front room.

“That you, Jack?”

“Yes.”

“Come in.”

The room surprised me. I had not realized that the terrace stood so high, for the room’s two windows looked out and over the roofs and chimneys of old Sandbourn to Black Rock and the Fire Hill. I could see the harbour, and the masts of fishing-boats clustered rather like larch trees in winter. White clouds were piled up over the sea, and the smoke of a steamer trailed across the horizon.

The room was furnished in old oak. A Jacobean cupboard black with age stood opposite the windows. I saw a brass telescope on a tripod at one of the windows. I noticed a cabinet of old china, and an oak bureau with a brass clock on it. But if I found the room unexpected, so was Mr. Banyard’s person. He was dressed in what appeared to be a new black tail coat and striped trousers, and his grey tie had a diamond pin in it. Almost he had prepared himself for some formal occasion.

Something seemed to amuse him. His high-coloured face was turned towards the brass clock.

“Punctual, my lad.”

I could not help remarking on the number of clocks he kept, and he chuckled.

“I keep good company, Jack. If I get tired of their chatter, I can stop ’em.”

“Do they all strike, sir?”

“Most of ’em.”

“All together?”

“No, they don’t. I’ve never been able to get ’em to strike in chorus. Clocks seem to differ like humans. Springs and wheels and pendulums, never all the same. Well, let’s go down to supper.”

I got the impression that this was not an ordinary occasion, and it wasn’t. There were wine glasses on the table, and I gathered that Mr. Banyard had inherited the Regency furniture from his father. We began with fried sole, and I found the little maid filling one of my glasses with golden liquid.

“Sherry, Jack, and older than you are.”

“I’ve never taken wine, sir.”

“So much the better, my lad.”

Mr. Banyard’s housekeeper must have considered with sympathy my youth and my capacity. We went on to steak and kidney pie with boiled potatoes and runner beans. Plum tart with custard in custard glasses came next. Mr. Banyard had produced some old Burgundy, at least, that is how he described it, to follow the sherry. I had been feeling a little nervous and embarrassed, but the wine had warmed me. Also, it seemed to me that Mr. Banyard was in a sly and jocund mood, and that he enjoyed seeing me eat.

“No waistcoat buttons to undo, Jack.”

“No, sir.”

Candles in silver sticks had been lit up on the table. I saw Mr. Banyard hold up his glass of red wine to the light. There were nuts to be cracked, and we were alone together.

The suddenness of the question he asked me made me sit and stare at him.

“How would you like to come into the business, Jack?”

I join him in the business of builder and decorator? Was he serious? But what of my career as an architect, a builder of beautiful houses? For a moment I did not know what to say to him.

He must have been watching my face, and reading my thoughts more shrewdly than I knew.

“Well, what’s the objection? Junior partner when you’re twenty-one. Not a bad business.”

“It’s tremendously good of you, sir. I wasn’t expecting—”

“Let’s hear the objection.”

“But, sir—”

“Brep, no beating about the bush with me.”

“It was my idea to be an architect.”

“Build churches?”

“No, not exactly churches.”

“Hotels and theatres and pubs, and all that?”

“No, houses, sir.”

“Gentlemen’s houses, places like Beaulieu?”

“Perhaps.”

He raised his glass, and drank, and the glass seemed to exaggerate that mordant, monstrous lip of his.

“Just a word, Jack. So far as I can see there won’t be houses like Beaulieu or Maskell’s Manor built any more in this country. Dead, my lad, dead as Ringwood Castle. Times are changing. It will be the thousand-pound house that will be wanted, not the gentleman’s mansion. That’s how I see it. I like a lad to have ambition. That’s what I like about you, and the way you have taken your coat off.”

All I could say for the moment was: “Thank you, Mr. Banyard.”

He got up, went to the bureau and took out a box of cigars.

“Have one? Well, perhaps you’d better not. I don’t often smoke the things myself, but I will to-night.”

I watched him cut off the end of the cigar, and light it.

“Well, John?”

“There is not much building in Sandbourn at present, is there, sir?”

He half closed his eyes.

“No, but there might be.”

“Where?”

“I’m not going to tell you that. A lad should use his own eyes. Fact is, Jack, I’m growing old.”

“Not very old, sir.”

“Sixty-five. I haven’t the spunk in me for new adventures. Don’t want to be bothered. But this business has been going for sixty years, and I’ve got a sort of affection for it. And I don’t want to give things away to Slimy & Toad.”

“It’s a better business than theirs, sir.”

“It’s more honest. I want it to stay honest. One doesn’t like to see an old tree rot. Seems to me that you have the stuff in you to back me up. I want a strong youngster who’s got go and ideas. One’s glad of a strong youngster, at my age. Well, that’s the situation. I’ll give you six months to think it over.”

“You are being very generous to me, sir.”

“Rot, my lad, I want what I want.”

“Does Mr. Gregson know?”

“He does.”

“May I talk to him about it?”

“Of course. But I want you to make up your own mind, my lad. No use otherwise.”

“Thank you, Mr. Banyard.”

“No thanks needed, Jack. I’m doing business.”

CHAPTER TEN



I WAS only nineteen at the time, and it was no easy decision for me to make. My hypothetical career as an architect remained alive in theory, and though I had not dreamed myself into being an Inigo Jones or a Christopher Wren, I had contrived to assume that I should become a gentlemanly sort of person, and be justified in wearing the clothes and graces of an artist.

When I asked Mr. Gregson's advice he was both candid and careful in giving it.

"There is a thing called reality, John."

I understood what he meant, and I was not conscious of being priggish when I confessed that Sandbourn did not appear to offer me the opportunities I had dreamed of. It was just a rather sleepy, obscure, seacoast town. Mr. Gregson gave me a dry and paternal smile. He did not suggest that I had included him in Sandbourn's somnolence, or hint that as an obscure member of the legal profession he had found adequate self-expression in the life he had chosen. He was kind and tolerant. He insisted that the choice would be mine, but he did imply that Sandbourn and Mr. Banyard had solid prospects to offer me, and that even Sandbourn might provide opportunities for a youngster with energy and vision.

Actually, I came to no decision. I liked the life I was living, and I let matters drift. I assured myself that I had plenty of time before me, and that I could go on gaining practical experience and preparing myself for the ultimate adventure. And that, in my experience, is how life plays with us. Not often are careers conceived and planned and carried out with purposeful persistence. A man may make two or three vital and pregnant decisions in his life, but more often than not he is confronted with them like a wanderer caught in a storm in some lonely place. The rain and wind of sudden, turbulent circumstances beat upon him, and his choice may be the result of drenched and buffeted impulse. So it was to be with me. I was to be thrust into happenings that broke upon me like a storm, and which were so charged with human emotion that my response was partly emotional. My creative urge was to be passionate and elemental. I loved or I fought because loving or fighting were somehow inevitable. My inspiration was that of a soldier storming a breach. Only when the sweat and

the fury were over did I realize that I had climbed up somewhere whence I could see unexpected and astonishing distances. My brain became clear and cool, but only after some fierce, emotional effort had carried me on its crest. That which I have accomplished in my small way has been due to an inherent pugnacity that seems to have been the result of frustrated passion.

But sundry almost trivial incidents were to influence my ultimate drift towards a partnership with Mr. Joseph Banyard. The curious thing about these incidents was, that instead of driving me into rebellion against my life as it was, they made me more obstinately determined to continue in it. As a vain young dreamer I might have played the Dick Whittington, and scorning Sandbourn, privilege and snobbery, gone off on some dramatic adventure of my own. I did nothing of the kind. I did just what Mr. Joseph Banyard had done in his own hot youth. I was forced into a scuffle with life in what might have been described as a provincial backyard. My chief justification is that my principal enemy was no provincial, nor was my dream-woman an Ethel.

I was working out an estimate in the office one morning when a lady rang the office bell and asked for Mr. Banyard. Old Joe was out on his usual morning tour of inspection, and I asked the lady to come in and speak to Mr. Ventriss. She struck me as being a rather formidable person, one of those women with a small tight mouth, hard brown eyes, and an aggressive yet affected manner.

Mr. Ventriss got off his high stool.

“What can I do for you, madam? I’m afraid Mr. Banyard is out at the moment.”

“There is a most dreadful smell in my house.”

“Indeed, madam.”

“Yes, a most offensive od-or. It appears to come from the housemaid’s pantry.”

“You want us to investigate?”

“Most certainly, and at once please.”

“Have you been in the house long, madam, if I may ask?”

“Only a month. I purchased it through my lawyers. I had certain alterations carried out, and the whole place redecorated.”

“By a local firm, madam?”

“Yes, people named Hickman & Snoad.”

I saw Mr. Ventriss twiddling his watch chain.

“Have you asked Messrs. Hickman & Snoad, madam, to—?”

“No, I have not. May I say that I was not satisfied with the way they treated me.”

“Is that so, madam?”

“I do not wish to have anything more to do with those people. I shall be obliged if you will send a representative to investigate this most offensive od-or.”

I was on the edge of giggling, but Mr. Ventriss remained as solemn as an owl.

“Certainly, madam. What address, please?”

“Mrs. Cullington Smith. No. 9 Victoria Terrace.”

Mr. Ventriss scribbled the details on a piece of office paper.

“Very good, madam. I will inform Mr. Banyard directly he returns. I can assure you—”

“Without delay, please. Thank you. Good morning.”

When she had rustled out of the room Mr. Ventriss blinked at me and sidled back to his stool.

“Trouble for somebody, John Lancaster. A most imposing lady! Now I wonder—”

I broke into giggles.

“What can be the origin of that most offensive od-or!”

But Mr. Ventriss was not blessed with a sense of humour. He was a stuffy and literal little man.

“That remains to be seen, John Lancaster.”

“And smelt! Imagine any smell having the impertinence to express itself in No. 9 Victoria Terrace!”

Mr. Ventriss grunted at me, and a minute or two later old Joe himself came into the office, looking, as I thought, in one of his mischievous, Punchinello moods. When the purpose of Mrs. Cullington Smith’s visit had been explained to him by Mr. Ventriss, he turned suddenly on me.

“Go and look into this, Jack.”

I was aware of Mr. Ventriss’s protesting spectacles catching the light. Was Mr. Banyard proposing to send a mere boy to represent the firm to this formidable lady? That was Mr. Banyard’s intention. He smothered Mr. Ventriss’s protest before it was uttered. “All right, Tom. Young noses may be quicker than old ones. Off with you, Jack.” We kept in the office a little black bag containing a few tools, the “Doctor’s Bag,” as old Banyard called it. I grabbed the bag and my hat and departed upon the adventure. As a matter of fact I was never afraid of responsibility, and I never funked it, as so many young men funk it. Also, old Joe Banyard’s method of education had given me a good deal of self-confidence.

But how would Mrs. Cullington Smith receive me? As it happened I did not have to confront the lady, for I arrived at No. 9 Victoria Terrace before her return. A young and rather pretty housemaid opened the door to me, and when I told her that I had been sent from Messrs. Banyards to investigate an offensive od-or, she simpered at me.

“It’s about time. Come in.”

When I asked her whether she could demonstrate the smell to me, she sniffed.

“I should say so. It’s in my pantry.”

It was. It was no modest, self-effacing odour, and though I had had no great experience of insanitary smells, my nose advised me that this perfume did not proceed from dry-rot or a dead rat. No. 9 was a semi-basement house. I learnt from the housemaid that a large old cupboard next to her pantry had been converted into a maid’s lavatory. The lavatory appeared to be in perfect order; the flush was adequate, and the pan held its water-seal. Moreover, the lavatory had a floor of tiles set in cement.

I returned to the pantry, convinced that the *fons et origo* must be under the pantry floor. I brought out my tools, and proceeded to prise up a floor-board, and no sooner had I opened up the dark chasm below than the odour leapt out at me like a noisome and fierce animal released from a cage. The housemaid, who had remained in the doorway, watching me, put her fingers to her nose.

“Crikey! It’s there all right.”

I took up another board and peered, but the chasm was too dark for me to see anything. I asked for a candle, and the girl brought me one, and lighting it, I lay flat, and with one hand lowered the candle into the space below the floor.

“Good lord!”

The thing seemed incredible. The main drain ran under the house, as it often did in those days, nor was it cased in cement. But that was not the cause of the trouble. Messrs. Hickman & Snoad’s man had laid his pipes from the new lavatory, but had omitted to connect them up with the house-drain, and all the proceeds from the pan had been spilling itself for weeks in the space under the pantry floor.

I got up on my knees.

“Well, I’m damned!”

Had the fellow just forgotten, or had this been the wilful and wanton act of a workman who had nursed a grievance against his employers? At all events no responsible member of the firm had inspected the work, and so discovered this most disgraceful omission.

“Found it?”

“I should say so.”

And then I heard a voice, the voice of Mrs. Cullington Smith calling from above.

“Mary, what on earth are you doing, girl?”

The maid went to the foot of the stairs.

“There’s a young man here, ma’am, from the builders. He’s found it.”

I stood up in time to confront the lady as she appeared in the passage. Offensive od-or? Ye, gods yes. I suppose I was feeling a little pleased with myself, and rather full of my discovery, for I did not weigh my words, but blurted out the truth to Mrs. Cullington Smith.

For a moment she would not believe me.

“Impossible!”

“If I hold the candle, madam, you will be able to see—”

She was a determined person, and getting down on her knees, and holding her handkerchief to her nose, she peered.

“Incredible! Disgraceful! I shall go and see my solicitor immediately.”

It was then that I realized the full and insanitary significance of the case.

“I think I had better fetch Mr. Banyard himself, madam.”

She got to her feet, still holding her handkerchief to her nose.

“By all means, young man. Mary, fetch me the eau-de-Cologne bottle.”

Before bringing Mr. Banyard to stand and gaze into this open grave, I prised up more floorboards, and let in the light. I knew that Mr. Banyard’s feelings towards Messrs. Hickman & Snoad were not of the friendliest, and when he saw what I had to show him a little, sardonic smile spread over his face.

“Nice mess, Jack. And H. & S. are in it.”

“Do you think it was done on purpose?”

“I should say so. No fellow is fool enough to forget a thing like that.”

“Someone with a grievance?”

“Exactly. That comes of not looking at things for yourself, my lad. Well, the lady has a nice case against Hickman & Co.”

She had. We were still in the house when she returned with her lawyer, a Mr. Brighthouse who practised in New Sandbourn. He was made to take note and observe, and instructed to proceed immediately against Messrs. Hickman & Snoad. The lady’s indignation and disgust appeared to have absorbed a high, moral flavour from that smell.

“It is a duty to show up such people. No compromise, Mr. Brighthouse. I shall insist upon this case being taken into court.”

Mr. Brighthouse was something of an Agag, a man who preferred professional peace to raising war and scandal in the town. He tried to placate Mrs. Cullington Smith.

“I admit it is most reprehensible, but I think we ought to give Messrs. Hickman & Snoad an opportunity—”

The lady pounced on him like a hawk on a pigeon.

“Do you act for these people?”

“As a matter of fact, I—”

“Ah, I see. Well, Mr. Brighthouse, I think I had better place my business in other hands. If you are Messrs. Hickman’s lawyer—”

Mr. Brighthouse was mildly indignant.

“Really, madam, I must resent the implication.”

“Indeed! May I say that I prefer to be represented by a gentleman who is on my side.”

“Really, madam!”

But Mr. Brighthouse was sent about his business, and Mr. Gregson was called in to satisfy Mrs. Cullington Smith’s moral indignation.

I need not go further into detail with regard to this case. Messrs. Banyard Bros. cleared up that unsavoury mess and put matters right, and Mrs. Cullington Smith brought her case against Messrs. Hickman & Snoad. She had refused all apologies, explanations, cash and compromise. Old Joe and I were called as witnesses. The workman who had been responsible for not completing this job, had disappeared and could not be traced. What his grievance had been, if grievance he had had, was mere conjecture. Apparently he had discharged himself and vanished; he had not been a Sandbourn man, but a casual and migratory soul. But the onus was on Hickman & Snoad. They had not inspected the work before the floorboards had been replaced, or submitted the drains to any test. The man had been thorough in his cunning. He had sent his labourer off, asserting that he would finish the job himself, and without calling for a carpenter, had nailed down the floorboards.

Hickman & Snoad had to pay. The case was reported in the local paper, and it must have caused them to rage and squirm. In those *laissez faire* days of Local Sanitary Boards, when official interference was vague and casual, many dishonest things were done. The Local Surveyor was often an accommodating person who was permitted to advise private clients and to accept fees. I have good evidence that he could be bribed into amiable blindness. In these more modern times when we suffer from a surfeit of official interference I am moved to reflect upon the days when County Councils and Urban District Councils were not. We did much honest work without official interference, and our houses stand. To-day one cannot erect a tool shed in a garden without the permission of the local bureaucrats, and yet many of the houses that the official word passes will not stand as our houses stood.

But the significance of this particular incident as it affected me may be summed up in the things said to me by the two men.

Old Banyard had a moral to draw.

“No British workingman will play that dirty trick on you, Jack, if you have been fair and just to him. Choose your men, and treat ’em justly.”

I have found this saying of old Banyard’s profoundly true. The good conscience of the worker has often caused me to marvel. The whole social

scheme is founded upon such simple integrity. That may be a platitude, but it is a platitude that is often ignored by the clever commercialists. Men like Bob Beeson and Jim Pawley are more valuable to a community than profits.

Let me digress and jot down two or three notes.

The American Wheat Invasion of 1879.

The Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1885.

The Local Government Act of 1888.

The Local Government Act of 1894.

Did I foresee that the coming of American wheat would exert a peculiar influence on my career?

Most certainly I did not.

Nor did I suspect that old Joe Banyard and I were to function in very different worlds, and that the pattern of my picture would be other than his. We men are poor prophets. Even the expert is a person who inserts his head into a sack, and having cut two peepholes for his eyes, sees just as much as those two slits allow him to see. Our imagination has always lagged behind our material exploitation of nature. Nothing has been more ridiculous than our practice of converting our highways into conduits for cables, drains and piping. No one foresaw that those highways would be revolutionized by the petrol engine. Imagine a community rending up a railway track and disorganizing the traffic whenever a water pipe had to be laid or a new electric cable buried. The reaction is with us. We did not foresee and we did not plan. Now we are vexed with a surfeit of planning.

I met young Snoad in High Street about a fortnight after the conclusion of Mrs. Cullington Smith's case. My old enemy was squat and sallow, but he retained much of his lout's truculence. We eyed each other like a couple of hostile dogs who may elect to snarl and pass each other by, but maybe the cock of my head was too challenging to Robert Snoad. He hailed me, just after I had passed him.

"Here, just a moment, young Lancaster."

I swung round with my hands in my trouser pockets. Young Lancaster indeed!

"Hallo."

“Why so cocky? I suppose you thought the dirty trick you played on us rather clever?”

I stood and smiled at him.

“That’s hardly accurate, is it? We couldn’t help being called in.”

My use of the “we” must have provoked him. Was I presuming to imply that I was of sufficient importance in the firm of Banyard Brothers to put on airs in the presence of a fellow who was a junior partner in the rival firm.

“Look here, young Lancaster, I’m not taking sauce from old Joe’s office-boy.”

I was able to go on smiling.

“Is that so? I may as well tell you, Snoad, that I’m becoming a member of the firm.”

“You?”

“Yes. We are signing a partnership agreement next month.”

“What do you know about the business?”

I had him there.

“I can spot a defective drain.”

He snarled at me.

“Oh, I see. Banyard & Lancaster, what! Well, let me tell you, young Lancaster, that we shall get our own back some day. If you want cut-price competition, we’ll give it you.”

“Thanks so much.”

“You can thank me when we have pushed you into the bankruptcy court.”

I said a thing to him which I have always found particularly effective in dealing with competitive people who have lost their tempers.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Silly! You’ll look silly before we have finished with you.”

My smiling face must have exasperated him.

“Thanks so much, Snoad. Now, I have been warned.”

That I had elevated a potential partnership into an immediate reality was mere strategy. The essential significance of my clash with Snoad lay in the

impulse it generated. I was on my way to the barber's to have my hair cut, and while I sat in the barber's chair, the indecision of mere dreaming seemed to fall away as the man snipped at my hair. I went back to Roper's Row, and finding old Joe in the yard, making a personal inspection of some slates that had been delivered to us, I announced my decision.

"Does your offer still hold, sir?"

"About the partnership, Jack?"

"Yes."

He pushed out his lower lip at me.

"Ever known me go back on a contract, my lad?"

"No, sir."

"Coming in?"

"Yes."

"Good business."

Within a week our contract had been drawn up by Mr. Gregson, and we had signed it, but not before Old Joe had insisted upon my inspecting his private ledger. The figures proved to me that the firm was making a profit of about nine hundred pounds a year, and under our contract I was to receive a fourth of the profits for the first five years, when my share would rise to a half. Should Joe Banyard decide to retire from the business I was given the option of buying him out, the purchase price to be fixed by an impartial valuer. When I raised the point of my introducing some capital of my own into the business, he took me by the arm, and gave me a playful shake.

"No need for that, my lad. You can't touch your capital yet. Just as well. May be useful to you later on. Besides, I'm not exactly stone cold. I'm worth twenty thousand, not counting buildings and plant and goodwill."

"I seem to be getting everything, sir, out of this agreement."

"I'm getting something out of it too, Jack. I'm not buying a pig in a poke."

I think I realized for the first time that Old Joe was fond of me, and that this was no mere business transaction. I might have been his son, save that the relationship was more satisfying, in that neither of us could make conventional claims upon the other.

"I'll try not to let you down, sir."

"You won't. Do you think I should have taken you in, Jack, unless I

thought you had the right stuff in you? Not bloody likely.”

I was touched and impressed by his faith in me. I remember saying to myself as I walked back to my lodgings on the evening of the day when we had signed the partnership deed: “You won’t get swollen about this. You won’t put on airs. You will go on being just what you were before you became a member of the firm.” I remember deciding that it would be a petty and paltry confession of loutish vanity were I to put on airs with Old Joe. Moreover, I realized that not only did I respect him, but that I had an affection for the man, and that his blunt integrity was a rock upon which our partnership would be surely founded.

I, a youngster of twenty, would possess an income of some three hundred pounds a year. It seemed great wealth to me in those days, but I must have had something of my mother in me, for I was not moved to break out into physical display. I decided to remain with Mrs. Bruce in Lavender Lane. I did allow myself to buy more books, and to become a patron of Messrs. Makins & Blight, Sandbourn’s principal tailors. In the future I would choose my own cloth, and have my suits made to measure. That, in itself, was a social symbol.

A May morning.

It will always remain very vivid to me, that morning in May. I was sitting at a table in the office window working out a plan to scale. The yard was steeped in sunlight under a very blue sky, and even the objects in the yard seemed more brightly coloured, yellow brick and red, the fawn-coloured sand, blue-grey slates. The very cobblestones had a pearly patina. A blackbird was singing in the big old sycamore tree behind the stables. I can remember one of the painters crossing the yard with a twelve-rung ladder on his shoulder.

Someone came to the office door, and threw it open with the briskness of a person who did not go through life asking “By your leave.”

“Mr. Banyard in?”

I pushed my chair back and stood up. As junior partner it was my privilege to interview clients when my chief happened to be out. Old Ventriss remained on his stool. He had grown attached to that stool.

“Mr. Banyard’s out.”

I found myself confronting a middle-aged man in riding kit. He had a hard, weather-worn face, bulbous and rather bad tempered blue eyes, and an abrupt, reddish moustache. I did not know him by sight, but I judged him to be a

person of some importance.

“Out, is he? Well, send out and find him.”

“What name shall I give, sir?”

Old Ventriss’s voice interposed.

“Yes, Mr. Jackson. Why not go yourself, Mr. Lancaster?”

I took the hint. I did not know Mr. Jackson from Adam, but evidently he was a person to be propitiated.

I took down my hat.

“If you will sit down and wait, sir. I think I can find Mr. Banyard in ten minutes.”

He had a riding-crop and gloves in his hand. He threw them on my table, and sat down with his hat on. It was a brown bowler hat.

“All right. Don’t waste my time. I’m busy.”

I found Joe Banyard inspecting a house in Mount Street which we were redecorating inside and out. My partner was up a ladder, peering under a rainwater gutter to satisfy himself that a new painter whom we had taken on had dealt well and truly with the ends of the rafters and the back of the gutter. It was one of those awkward places to which a lazy paintbrush might give a perfunctory smear.

“Someone to see you, sir.”

I made a point of addressing Old Joe as “sir” before the men.

“Who?”

“A Mr. Jackson.”

“Jackson!”

“Gentleman with a red face, and wearing riding-breeches and leggings. He seems in a hurry.”

“Jackson! Why, that’s the Bullstrode agent. What’s he want?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Mr. Banyard came down the ladder with the deliberation of a man reflecting upon some surprising piece of news.

“Jackson. Hum! I have never done a job for the Bullstrodes. I vote Radical and they’re hot Tories. Well, let’s see what Mr. Jackson wants.”

“He is the agent for Beaulieu?”

“Yes, all their property. They own about two parishes, my lad. Yes, and some of their farmers must be squealing over their rents. The damned Yankees sousing us with their wheat. Plenty of good corn land t’other side of the ridge. I wonder what Jackson wants?”

“Work doing, perhaps?”

“They have always kept their own estate hands, even ran their own timber yard. Well, we’ll see.”

Mr. Banyard went into the office with his hands cocked under the tails of his coat. I remained outside in the yard, and a minute later old Ventriss joined me. Obviously, the conference was to be confidential and private. I could hear the voices of Mr. Jackson and Old Joe, and Mr. Jackson appeared to be doing most of the talking, and my partner’s share in it consisted of curt monosyllables and grunts. Mr. Ventriss and I stood in the wagon shed like supers who had no place upon the stage.

The interview did not last more than ten minutes. Mr. Jackson appeared in the office doorway, wearing his hat, and slapping a brown leather legging with his crop. Old Joe was also wearing his hat, as though to prove to Mr. Jackson that he was his equal in the social scale. And Old Joe’s hat had a Cromwellian and uncompromising tilt to it.

“I want this attending to at once.”

“We’ll be up to-morrow.”

“Why not to-day?”

“Can’t be done,” said my partner; “too busy.”

Mr. Jackson blew out his moustache, and stared with his very blue eyes at Old Joe’s hat.

“If you are too busy to give us proper attention, I may try Hickman & Snoad.”

“Please yourself, Mr. Jackson,” said Old Joe. “But if you want me, I’ll be up to-morrow.”

Mr. Jackson slapped his leg.

“Very well, ten o’clock, sharp.”

My partner grunted at him.

When Mr. Jackson had gone, and Tom Ventriss had returned to his perch,

Mr. Banyard joined me in the wagon-shed. His face was the face of Old Mischief.

“Never truckle to a chap like Jackson, my lad. Always be a bit harder than a hard man. Well, you had better come along with me to-morrow.”

“What is the position, sir?”

He pushed his hat on to the back of his head, and displayed his grey curls.

“Trouble with the roof. Been up a hundred and fifty years. Worm, probably. Want us to inspect and report. And if there are repairs to be done, they want us to do it as cheaply as possible.”

“Cheaply? But I thought the Bullstrodes were as rich as—”

“Were, Jack, but I gather that most of their money comes from the land, and some of their big tenants are in Queer Street. Besides, old Perivale, old Bullstrode, I mean, has been a pretty hard landlord. Big rents will help to break a man when corn drops to twopence halfpenny a quarter.”

“Why doesn’t he lower the rents?”

“Maybe he has had to. By Jesus, the Bullstrodes asking for something to be cheap! There’s a kind of humour in that, Jack.”

I understood him.

“Rather proud people.”

“Proud! If a Bullstrode had caught Jehovah in the Garden of Eden he would have had him up for trespassing. You had better come up with me to-morrow, Jack.”

“I’d like to.”

“We go in by the back door.”

“The back door?”

“Yes, my lad, we’re only tradesmen.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



OUR firm owned a dogcart with a black body and yellow wheels, which Mr. Banyard used when business carried him out of the town. It was drawn by a rather fat and lazy chestnut mare named Polly to whom Mr. Banyard fed with unusual prodigality lumps of white sugar. It used to be a joke of his, that never in his life having spoiled a woman, he was justified in spoiling Polly. Mr. Banyard took the reins, and I climbed up beside him. Jim Pawley, who was going with us, occupied the back seat.

I remember asking Old Joe as we trundled up the Bourne valley whether Ridge Farm which lay on our left was Bullstrode property. He told me that it was not, and thereby hung a story, but he did not tell it me, for, at that moment we came to a steepish hill, and Old Joe turned us out to walk. Polly was not as young as she had been, and Joe Banyard was merciful to beasts.

I was not a little excited about this visit to Beaulieu, as for me it was a personal adventure. I had never seen the house of my enemies, those three boisterous and potent young men who had stripped me of my trousers. The gates at the south lodge were open, and as we drove through the Beaulieu woods and parkland I had glimpses of the house as the drive swung along the valley in great curves. I gathered that the planting had been so arranged that the windows of Beaulieu House could stare down these woodland vistas to the sea. Old Joe had his whip out, and now and again he would point with it. There was not much that his sharp old eyes did not see.

“Bit of old England, Jack. Some of this timber would cut up well. See that old oak over there?”

“The one by itself?”

“Yes. Look at the dead wood in it. I reckon that ten years ago there wasn’t a tree in Beaulieu with dead wood left in it.”

“An estate like this—”

“Costs money, Jack, if you keep it up as it should be kept. Well, there’s the house.”

It was an old red house, built in the reign of the first of the Georges. It had a great stone portico with a pediment above, and two wings that projected

slightly from the main façade. A balustraded cornice capped the walls, and from the centre of the roof a graceful white lantern rose to catch the sunlight. The place had an indescribable beauty and rightness, for its proportions were perfect, and every white-sashed window was like a note in some exquisite rhythm. The brickwork had worn to a soft brown redness, and the freestone in the quoins toned to a pearly grey. So absorbed was I in contemplating the house that I failed to notice that the park road doubled itself between two clumps of old Scotch fir, and that we had taken the road that branched to the left. I realized a little later that the road to the right was Beaulieu's Sacred Way, and denied to a vehicle such as ours.

Mr. Banyard drove on into the stable yard. It was a spacious court surrounded by red brick out-buildings, and as Polly stood still between the shafts a cupola clock above one of the red roofs began to strike the hour. I saw Mr. Jackson in a doorway, talking to a groom. He came across and spoke to Old Joe who was still holding the reins.

“Well, you're here on time.”

“Ten o'clock sharp, Mr. Jackson. I'll be glad of a man to look after my mare.”

Jackson shouted to the groom.

“Peters, look after Mr. Banyard's mare.”

The stable court opened by a square-headed doorway into a second court around which were grouped what we used to describe as the domestic offices. It was paved with flagstones, and in the centre of it stood a vast old pump with a fine lead cistern. Mr. Jackson led the way. We entered by the back door, and passing along a broad, stone-paved passage, came to a door in a panelled partition. When Mr. Jackson opened it, I saw an uncarpeted staircase going up and up rather like a stairway in a castle tower.

Beaulieu's back-stairs!

I was to see nothing of the interior of the house save these stairs, and the attic landing and gallery, out of which opened a number of plain doors painted white. At the far end of the gallery a flight of steps like those leading to a workshop, sloped to a trapdoor in the ceiling. This was the entrance to the roof.

“Damn it, I have forgotten lights.”

“We haven't,” said Old Joe drily, for Jim Pawley had a bunch of candles in the tool bag he was carrying.

Jim and I lit candles and acted as linkboys to Old Joe and Mr. Jackson. The

roof was a hipped roof, partly concealed behind the parapet, and not boarded in, so that we could see faint chinks of light from under the tiles. Planks laid on the joists formed a gangway. Mr. Jackson told us that the trouble was in the east wing, and we made our way in single file along the gangway of planks. Mr. Banyard was following me, and I heard him emit one of his characteristic explosive noises.

“Brup, give me the candle, Jack.”

I passed it to him and I saw him raise the candle and poke a finger against one of the rafters. It was all brittle and powdery, and as Old Joe’s thumb and finger crumbled it, I could see cheesy yellow patches, and marks that looked like the burrows and trackways of some wood-eating worm.

“Pass me a gimlet, Jim.”

Pawley passed him the tool, and I saw Old Joe prod one of the massive purlins with it, and the steel shaft seemed to penetrate like a skewer into butter.

“See that, Mr. Jackson?”

“Worm?”

“Eaten to bits, sir. Floor joists too. Look at ’em. If the four of us aren’t careful we’ll bring the ceiling down and go with it. I wonder the old roof’s stood up.”

“We had better be careful.”

“I think Jim and I will do the job alone. You and Mr. Lancaster had better wait below.”

But Mr. Jackson appeared to be a suspicious person, or perhaps he wished to be able to report with full knowledge and authority to Sir Perivale.

“I’ll come with you, Mr. Banyard. Send the other two down.”

Pawley passed his candle to Mr. Jackson, and we made our way back to where the trapdoor threw up a shaft of dim light. We descended the steps, and I remember catching a curious little smile on Jim Pawley’s pink face.

“What’s the joke, Jim?”

“Nice job of work for us, Mr. Lancaster.”

“You mean, the whole roof will have to be stripped?”

“If it’s all like that. And a nice bill there’ll be for Sir Perivale Bullstrode, Bart. Run into hundreds.”

But, as it happened, the whole roof was not in that rotten and precarious state. We could hear Old Joe and Mr. Jackson moving about above, and the muffled murmur of their voices. They must have been up there nearly an hour, probing rafters and joists, and when Mr. Banyard appeared at the top of the steps I saw that his hat was dusted with cobwebs and that he had a smudge of dirt on the tip of his nose.

“It might have been worse, Mr. Jackson.”

Mr. Jackson had gone up hatless, and his face was dirtier than Old Joe’s.

“Well, we’ve seen the worst, anyway. Thank the lord, it’s only the east wing. Funny it should have not spread further.”

Old Joe blew out the flame at the top of the stump of his candle. His fingers were all grease.

“Worms are worms, sir, and like women, full of whimsies. But if you give ’em a chance they’ll be all over that roof.”

“Just so,” said Mr. Jackson, blowing out his candle. “You had better measure up and get an estimate out. I’ll see Sir Perivale about it.”

I forget what our estimate amounted to, but it must have been a considerable sum, including as it did stripping the roof of the east wing and the ceilings of the attics in that wing, re-erecting the roof and rehangng the old tiles, replacing floor joists and putting in new lath and plaster. Messrs. Banyard & Lancaster’s figure may have upset Sir Perivale Bullstrode, for Mr. Jackson came riding into our yard one morning. I happened to be checking the number of sacks in a consignment of cement which one of our carts had cleared from Sandbourn station. He shouted at me.

“Hallo, you there, Mr. Banyard in?”

I did not like being shouted at, and I turned my back on Mr. Jackson, and pretended not to hear him. And again Mr. Jackson shouted at me.

“Hallo, are you deaf, young man?”

Old Joe, who was in the office, had heard him, and he appeared in the doorway, with his hat cocked, and his thumbs stuck in armholes of his waistcoat.

“No need to shout, sir. Hi, Bill, take Mr. Jackson’s horse. Come inside, sir.”

That interview lasted exactly three minutes. Mr. Jackson was in a caustic temper, perhaps because Sir Perivale had been storming at him over that

worm-eaten roof and the sum it was going to cost him, but Old Joe could play the caustic game with any man. I gather that he refused flatly to reduce his estimate. If Mr. Jackson wanted a bodgering job done he could go elsewhere for it. It was the right attitude to adopt with a man who, after being bullied by a gouty old Jehovah, passed on the scolding to sullen or servile subordinates.

“Take it or leave it, Mr. Jackson. I am charging you a fair price for good work. That’s my last word.”

It sufficed. I have a suspicion that Messrs. Hickman & Snoad were asked to tender, and that they must have misjudged their opportunity and put in a fat figure, for, in the end our estimate was accepted, and we were assigned the work under a time clause and the assurance that while the roof was off, the lower rooms of the east wing should be protected from the weather. Also, it was stipulated that none of our men should appear anywhere on the terrace in front of the house, and that all shouting and gossiping should be forbidden.

I think it was these stipulations that provoked me to ask Mr. Banyard to let me do a rather unusual thing. I said that I had not seen a roof of this type laid out in timber, and that the experience might be of use to me. Could I go back into working clothes and act as Jim Pawley’s understudy? We were to have two carpenters on the job.

Old Joe looked at me, with his lower lip thrust out.

“Want to, Jack?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I see no harm in it, and you can keep an eye on the men. Old Bullstrode’s a bit of a Tartar.”

The service yard was assigned to us for working quarters, and I remember Mr. Jackson coming to lecture us on that first morning. We were not to speak to the maids, or wander out of the yard, or allow our shavings and sawdust to blow about the place. Also, we were not to show our heads over the parapet on the other side of the house, which was to be considered utterly and rigorously private.

Said Jim Pawley to me when Jackson had gone: “We might be a lot of convicts, or not quite ’uman. I suppose God made old Bullstrode out of extra-special clay.”

I heard afterwards from Old Joe that he had been warned by Mr. Jackson that on no account must any letter or communication be addressed to Sir

Perivale Bullstrode in person. Sir Perivale objected to receiving letters through the post from tradesmen. Incredible though this may sound, it is true.

This Olympian attitude provoked me to mischief. We had to erect our ladders in the service-court, and mount to the roof on the blind side of the house. There was a broad, leaded gutter between the parapet and the tiles, and on that very first morning I crept round to the front of the house and popped my head over the parapet.

The view was superb. I could see all that rolling parkland, the grassy slopes, the thornbrakes and the woods. Two broad vistas diverged in the shape of a V, and in the distance the sea was visible. Away on my left I noticed the little white temple on its hill, and beyond it the great domes of the beech woods. Below me the pillars of the portico planted their feet on the edge of a stone-paved terrace. Then, came a gravelled space for carriages to turn, next a broad ribbon of mown turf, with formal beds as in a parterre. Two more terraces with a central stairway carried the garden down to a pool and fountain. Banks of cypresses and shrubs flowed like dark scrolls between the garden and the park, and at the end of the lower terrace I could see the tiled roof of a garden house topped by a gilded wind vane in the shape of an Elizabethan ship in full sail.

I craned my head over the parapet so that I could survey the upper terrace immediately in front of the house. Someone was sitting there in a kind of wheeled chair. I saw a big, baldish head, massive shoulders, a pair of knees with two hands lying clenched on them. Old Sir Perivale himself, sunning himself and surveying his landscape! I could not see his face, but I imagined it to be square and formidable and ominous, rather like the face of Beverley, his firstborn.

And then, Beverley himself stepped out of a window and walked towards his father's chair. The crowns of their heads were very much alike, save that Beverley's had more hair on it.

"I've just seen Jackson."

Old Perivale remained quite motionless, like the graven image of some god.

"Banyard got his men started?"

"Yes."

"Has he given the fellows my orders? I won't have any whistling or talking up there."

“Jackson has. But I’ll soon stop that sort of thing if the louts aren’t mute.”

I saw Beverley turn as though to look up at the house, and I withdrew my head and made my way back behind the parapet to the east wing. Louts indeed! And we were to be considered mute! The contempt in which these gentlemen held us shocked me, for a man’s self-regard is the secret but sure flame that lights up life’s obscurities, and fills him with the illusion that he matters. To these country gentlemen we were mere oafs, creatures of a lower order, and I was not feeling obscure or humble. People of this more modern world to whom I have spoken of this serene arrogance have questioned my accuracy, and gently accused me of exaggerating my prejudices. They are moved to suspect that I, the sensitive young upstart and climber misread the features of the Bullstrode world, that this arrogance was just a pose, its polished complacency the mere patina of a social period. It was nothing of the kind, but profoundly and ominously actual. The pride of possession seemed to produce in people like the Bullstrodes an elephantiasis of the ego. They still felt themselves lords of the land, even when the old order was beginning to crumble, and a fierce realism was asking each one of us not “What do you own,” but “What manner of man are you? What can you do?”

Our first concern was to strip the old tiles from the roof of the east wing, and since all the sound tiles were to be used again we had to lower them into the service-court and stack them away in a safe corner. We had four additional labourers on this job, and we used baskets and ropes for lowering the tiles, and Pawley and I helped in the work, though it was not our province. We were less enslaved in those days by Trades Union rules and regulations, and a carpenter might get hold of a bricklayer’s trowel without causing a proletarian crisis. Our labourers were somewhat rough in hands and tongue, and in trying to damp down their vocal energies Jim Pawley’s humour was of considerable service.

“Quiet, you chaps. Mustn’t wake the baby.”

One hulking fellow who consumed much beer was not easily transformed into a mild mute.

“Can’t do the bloody job without making a bit of bloody noise.”

“The old gentleman’s an invalid, Bill.”

“Blown his belly out too much. That’s what’s the matter with ’im.”

On more than one occasion Mr. Jackson came up one of the ladders and told us that we were making too much noise. I remember Jim Pawley smiling at him like a cherub and asking a pertinent question.

“Sorry, sir. But what do we do when we start hammering? Cover the hammers with cotton wool?”

Mr. Jackson had no answer to that question. He countered it by stating that he had overheard an unnecessary amount of picturesque language, and that flamboyant adjectives must cease.

I will plead guilty to an act of deliberate and pragmatical mischief. We had dealt with the tiles, and were clearing away the rotten rafters, when, in prising away a length of worm-eaten wood I allowed the rafter to swing over and strike the parapet in front of the house. About two feet of it broke off, as I had expected it to do, and fell on the terrace below. I had taken the precaution of assuring myself that Sir Perivale was not sitting in his wheeled chair at our end of the terrace.

Jim Pawley’s pink and shocked face confronted me.

“That’s torn it, Mr. Jack.”

I smiled at him reassuringly.

“All right, Jim. I’ll go down and apologize.”

I had planned this excuse. I was curious to see Sir Perivale Bullstrode’s face, and to get what our contemporary world describes as a “Close up” of him. I was in my shirt sleeves, and I shinned down a ladder, opened a door in the service court which gave on to a raised walk leading to the terrace, and walked round the corner of the house to that sacred space. I saw that my piece of rotten timber had spluttered itself into fragments on the stones. Old Bullstrode’s hands were resting on the wheels of the chair, and he had turned it so that he could confront this act of sacrilege.

It was the formidable squareness of him that impressed me. His head looked square, so did his lower jaw and shoulders. Even his very large eyes appeared sunk in sockets that were square. He had a long-lipped, cruel mouth that seemed to lie crumpled between that square boss of a chin and a nose thickened and reddened with age. The tufts of grey hair on his temples and his badger-brush eyebrows added to his fierceness. He was dressed in black, and into one eye was screwed an eye-glass, with a strand of black silk pendant from it. On his knees lay a large book bound in old red leather.

This may seem a very crude description of a very formidable old gentleman, for, as I approached him I seemed to feel the pressure of a potent personality. I was just a raw and cheeky piece of youth confronting a gentleman who might have been an Elizabethan worthy, capable of coping with that most truculent Queen, or of meeting her Council and wise-acres

across the council table. His large, mordant eyes were like two unwinking lamps. The stillness of him was extraordinary.

I had no hat or cap on, and instinctively I put a finger to my forehead.

“Beg your pardon, sir, for that accident.”

He was supremely courteous to me with a courtesy that could be crushing, though the expression of his face never changed.

“I accept your apology, young man. Accidents will happen.”

“The wood is so rotten, sir, and a piece of rafter broke away.”

“I see. Who are you? One of the carpenters?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am glad my head was not in the neighbourhood.”

“So am I, sir. It shan’t happen again.”

He dismissed me with a slight movement of his great square head, and I saluted him again, and walked back along the terrace to where the piece of wood was lying. I was telling myself that my subterfuge had been rather crude and paltry, when a figure appeared at one of the long lower windows, and stooping, came forth to intercept me. It was Beverley.

“What are you doing here?”

His likeness to the old man was remarkable, but it seemed to me that he lacked something of his father’s formidable poise, and that grim, unflinching courtesy. He had spoken to me with flushed insolence, and I answered back.

“Apologizing for that piece of wood.”

I realized that he had recognized me.

“Oh, I think it is our old acquaintance Sans Culottes. Who dropped that piece of wood?”

“I did.”

“Please take proper precautions to insure that it shall not happen again. By the way, I did not know that our local college produced craftsmen.”

I managed to smile at him.

“Obviously, yes. If you will excuse me, Mr. Bullstrode, I will clear up this debris. I realize that it is out of place here.”

He eyed me with heavy, puzzled hauteur. Was I being cheeky, as I had

been on the occasion when I had lost my trousers? I was.

“Ah, I see. A cultivated craftsman. Perhaps you read Ruskin, Mr.—”

“Lancaster. As a matter of fact I tried to read the Stones of Venice and found them rather ponderous.”

“Is that so?”

“If you will excuse me, I will remove the offence.”

I left him, massively staring, but somehow less formidable than his father.

Beverley was the only member of the trio who was in residence at the time. Fitzroy was, I believe, in London, reading for the Bar, and Gavin’s regiment had sailed for India. I did not come in contact again with Beverley until a week or so later. One of Mr. Banyard’s light wagons brought the men up to work each morning, and took them back at the end of the day. I rode up with the rest, picking up the wagon where the London and the Bourne road forked, but when the work was done I felt that I wanted to swing my legs, for much of our work on the new roof was rather crabbed and confined. We had to cover the east wing with tarpaulins before we left, keeping them taut with baulks of timber hanging roped over the parapet. It did not occur to me that anyone in authority would question my walking through the park. I had to come and go, and the manner of it did not seem to matter. Moreover, Beaulieu Park was particularly lovely in this month of May, with the old thorn trees in blossom, and the young foliage of the trees infinitely and diversely green. I was making a study of trees, and Beaulieu was a veritable arboretum. Sir Perivale in his youth had planted many unusual specimens, and some of the varieties were unknown to me.

There was a particular tree that puzzled me. It stood by itself about a hundred yards from the road, a conifer of sorts, rather like a cypress, and one evening I left the road and walked across the grass to get a closer view of the tree. As a matter of fact it was a Red Cedar, and I discovered it later in a textbook on arboriculture which I had bought. Trees interested me not only as trees, but because I was beginning to understand that the planning and building of houses should be more than a mere experiment in bricks and mortar. Stuccoville was teaching me that, and Beaulieu itself was a living example.

I walked round the tree, broke off a tiny plumelet and put it in my dinner basket, and turned back towards the road. It was then that I saw Beverley on his horse. I had not heard the sound of hoofs, for he was walking his horse on the grass beside the road.

He shouted at me.

“Hallo, what are you up to there?”

I was walking towards him, and my impulse was to shout back at him, but I restrained it. He had reined in his horse and was waiting for me.

“Oh, it’s you, Lancaster.”

I knew that I was just Lancaster to him, an obscure young man with a dinner basket.

“What were you doing there?”

“Looking at a tree.”

“I thought you men went to and fro in a wagon.”

“I prefer to walk.”

“So I see.”

“Is there any objection to a man walking to his work, or back from it?”

I could see that I made him angry. I did not call him sir, or show any servility, and yet a man of his calibre and position should not have been ruffled by my naturalness. In his florid anger with life he was different from his father, and I think I can understand now why Beverley Bullstrode was so ready to flare. Old Perivale had been sure of his world; Beverley was not. Manners and men were changing, and Beverley, the last of the Romans, was to see cads and barbarians like myself breaking in upon the serene and complacent splendour of his empire. I suppose that to him it must have seemed an outrage, and that like the strong, proud beast that he was he wanted to smite and to trample.

“I see no objection to that, my man, provided you keep to the road.”

So, that was his ruling! I might tramp in my working boots along the road, but the Beaulieu turf was sacred.

I gave him a bright, quick smile.

“No interest in trees permitted. By the way, do you happen to know the name of that tree?”

If he knew it, which I doubt, he did not tell me. He stared at me as though I was some circus beast performing tricks.

“We will consider botany superfluous, Lancaster. Stick to your last, my man, and the road.”

I nodded at him quizzically.

“Well, I must look up that tree in a book. Thank you, and good night.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



It seems strange to me now that I, who was a kind of commercial John the Baptist spreading the gospel of bricks and mortar, should repent of the work of a lifetime, and wish that it could be undone. I regret the open country that I destroyed, the fields I ravaged. I was a kind of little Mongol chief furiously bespoiling the land, and calling the plundering of its beauty development, though I can say that the motive which moves most men did not affect me. Probably, no one believes me when I say that I was not inspired by greed.

It was the fierce, frustrated manhood in me that drove me to make a kind of battle of this business. I had been balked, and in the force of my years I wanted to exercise power, to impress myself upon things and men, to create, accomplish. I was consumed by a furious restlessness. I would be as big and bigger than the one man who had frustrated me; I would build my strong tower against his, and overthrow him. I would fling houses here, and fling them there, possess whole hillsides, plant my trophies upon the skyline.

How we humbug ourselves! But it was not commercial greed that moved me, as it moves most of those who are bespoiling the England of to-day. I may have dreamed of being a little Colossus, but I never desired the crown of Cræsus. Money came to me, and it was power. I have never loved money for itself.

Humbug! No. Though, in these calm old years I have reached the conviction that a man does not become a social philosopher until the fierce fires have been drawn from his furnace. Only when desire has ceased in him, and he has accomplished that which he set out to accomplish, does he become the gentle, magnanimous patriarch, presenting his property to his neighbours. Social selflessness may be a sign of senility. Almost, I have become a socialist, which may suggest that I am senile, that the fierce male fighting spirit in me is dead, and that I no longer desire to dominate and create. I often wonder whether this same tolerant tameness in a nation or a state is a sign of senility. Is England in her dotage, plausibly persuaded by old men like myself, that the laurel leaf is the only thing that matters, and that if we all have twopence halfpenny in our pockets, Paradise will possess the earth. In the days of my strength I was concerned with the blood and bowels of humanity, and not with

the nice, spunkless theories of old men. They preach surrender, but a young man's urge is to fight and to take. I suppose that is why Communism appeals to the young, and however creative it may pretend to be, it is essentially violent, force as a religion. Is England old and senile? Will some fierce young nation compel us to accept discipline, not at the sword point, but beneath a rain of bombs?

Our idealists can be such humbugs, especially so on platforms, when their public has to be caressed with catchcries and false phrases.

Man is not yet an angelic creature.

Even the working man's ideal is not to be just like his neighbour.

Let this digression count as the mumblings of an old pantaloon.

There was to be yet another clash between me and the Bullstrode clan, but before I describe it, I will make my apologies to other country gentlemen who were gentler than the Bullstrodes. They were not all like the little tyrants of the Proletariat Press, but gracious and sensitive people, lovers of country things and of spacious, tranquil living. They felt responsible for those who worked for them. They were not commercialists. Their sons went to the War and died. They had so suffered the submergence of their old, gracious, pleasant world, and I can remember one such gentleman saying to me: "Whatever happens, one must remain benign."

How many of us remain benign?

The fine weather held, and Jim Pawley, I and the third carpenter used the service-court as our open air workshop. Having set up the skeleton of the new roof it was easier for us to angle off our rafters and struts down below on our sawing stools, and to send the prepared timber up the ladders to be nailed in place. We had our new floor joists in, stout stuff, ten by two, the joists twelve inches apart, strutted together, and supported in the centre by big oak beams bedded on the main walls and on the interior walls of the attic rooms. But as I say, much of our work was carried out below, and in spite of Mr. Jackson's admonitions we had visitors.

The maids began it, not we men. Our third carpenter, Santer, was a good-looking chap with a ruff of fair hair and a little blond moustache. I imagine that he rather fancied himself as a lady's man, and was ready to exchange jocund glances and bandinage. One girl in particular, a little, dark thing named Kitty, who, I gather, was a chambermaid, was always poking her head out of a back window, or appearing at the back door to empty a dustpan into the big

rubbish bin that was emptied by one of the gardeners twice a week.

Sex was somewhat dormant in me at the moment, perhaps because I was working hard both with my hands and my head, and I was not particularly interested in Kitty. She was a mischievous and vain young thing, if darkly pretty, but my vanity too must have been dormant, or sublimated into other creative urges, for I did not realize that I, and not Dick Santer, was the man she was making eyes at.

Her method of singling me out was characteristic. She appeared one morning on the back steps in her mauve and white print frock, and holding a clothes basket full of waste paper. I was at work close to the steps, shaping the end of a rafter with my saw.

“Empty this for me, Jack, will you?”

Jack! She had got my name glibly. I glanced up at her and smiled.

“What’s all that?”

“Some of Mr. Beverley’s rubbish. Old papers and magazines do weigh heavy, don’t they?”

“Did you carry that downstairs?”

“Yes.”

I took the basket from her, shouldered it to the bin, and raising the lid, emptied the contents of the basket into it. Santer was smiling at me, but there was a little sneer in his smile. He could not treat me quite like an equal, and was all the more jealous of me on that account. I carried the basket back to Kitty who stood demurely on the steps with the pretty complacency of a woman assigning favours.

“Thank you, Jack.”

She took the basket by the handle, turned, and with a finger on her chin, looked back at me slantwise.

“It’s my afternoon off.”

“Is it?”

“You’re walking back to-day?”

So, the minx knew that I walked.

“Yes.”

She fluttered her lashes at me, and whisked her petticoats in through the

doorway.

We did not break off work till six o'clock, and when the wagon we had christened the Beaulieu Bus carried off my mates, I washed my face and hands at the pump, and put my hair in order. I supposed that I might meet Kitty somewhere in the Park, and I had picked up my dinner basket and was walking out of the yard when I heard myself called.

“Jack.”

My lady was leaning out of a lower window, wearing her Sunday frock and a little straw bonnet. She had a cup and saucer in one hand, and a plate in the other.

“I begged this off cook for you.”

A cup of tea and a slice of cake. Was I to be a secret consumer of Bullstrode food? But I thought it would be graceless to Kitty to refuse the cake and tea; also, she was looking very attractive in that little bonnet with its cherry coloured ribbon.

“What if Mr. Jackson should walk in?”

“He won't. He's gone to London. And Mr. Beverley's out riding.”

I took the cup and plate from her, and sitting down on a sawing-stool, used our bench as a table. Kitty remained at the window, her elbows on the sill, and her chin cupped in her two hands. She both looked at me and did not look, and I understood that the next verse was mine, if I chose to sing it.

“I thought you were going out?”

“Oh, well, I just didn't. I had a headache.”

“I'm sorry. Is it still there?”

“Not very bad now. I might go a little way.”

“Why not go a little way with me?”

She pretended to seriously consider the suggestion, and to be a little shocked by it.

“I don't think I could do that.”

“Not really?”

“No. I'm frightened of men.”

“No need to be frightened of me.”

She fluttered her dark lashes at me.

“I wonder! Perhaps I might go a little way.”

“Why not. I’d like you to.”

“All right. I will. Supposing you wait for me down by the old fish pond.”

“Where is that?”

“You take the lane to the west lodge. No, not the park road.”

“Better for us.”

She made a love-mouth at me.

“Much better. The pond’s only just beyond the old Vachery house. You can’t miss it.”

May was becoming June, and all the green growth of the year was knee high, and the hedges feathery with chervil. The lane branched off from the park road at the end of the fruit-garden wall, and dived at once into thickets of ilex and old laurel where the soil looked black and the grass grew thin and rank in patches where a little sunlight filtered through. This tunnel of leaves brought me to a wilder part of the park. White ox-eyed daisies and red sorrel grew amid the tall grasses, and thickets of thorn had spread down to the narrow track. In places brambles and dog-rose made the lane almost impassable, save for a horseman, or a tumbler that would not vex itself over their clawing fingers.

I saw the pond shining in a hollow. There were water-lilies here and yellow flags, and masses of sedge and loose-strife, though this lovely purple weed was not yet in flower. Young fern was springing up everywhere, and it was plain to me that this part of the park was becoming a wilderness, and that the hand of man did not lie heavy on it. I sat down on a sunny bank and waited for Kitty. She was not long in coming, and her eyes were elvish under her straw bonnet.

She did not approve of the place I had chosen.

“Let’s go on further.”

I got up, and when I slipped a hand under her arm, she did not repulse me.

“I know a better place.”

“You don’t want to walk far?”

“No, I’ve got a little headache still. Isn’t it lovely here.”

“Perfect.”

It was she who chose our love-nest, a little grassy space back from the lane,

and screened from it by high grass and brambles. I felt the ground. It was quite dry, and we sat down, a little apart to begin with, for to me there was mystery in the newness of her. Since my Ethel days I had become somewhat shy of women, and the woman of my dream world was strange and stately and splendid.

I was far more shy than this girl, and my shyness seemed to provoke her into tempting me. Her pretty, baby face was elusive in its innocence. She pulled a grass stem and sucked it, and then took to tickling my chin with the feathery end. She had snuggled close to me, and kept glancing up into my face with shy sauciness.

“What are you thinking about?”

“You, I suppose.”

“Anything nice?”

“Well, you’re very pretty.”

She took off her bonnet, and smoothed her hair.

“So Mr. Beverley thinks.”

Beverley! What had he to do with it?

“How do you mean?”

“He tried to kiss me yesterday.”

“Mr. Beverley?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t let him.”

Did the little wanton know, for that was what she was, that this confession of hers would inflame me? For, inflame me it did. I was hating Beverley, and I knew what his kisses would mean to a girl like this. Well, if that was his purpose, I would be before him. I felt myself trembling in the long grass.

“He had no right to do that.”

She answered with a queer, provoking little laugh.

“I didn’t let him. But you’re not like Mr. Beverley.”

“Oh! Why not?”

“Too shy.”

“Think so?”

“Yes.”

I put an arm round her and she struggled, but I gather that her resistance was more wilful provocation. Her face was not the face of a woman who was unwilling. She wrestled with me hand to hand, and before I realized what had happened we were in the deep grass together and still struggling. She was keeping her face away from me, but her body was pressed against mine.

“You are strong, Jack.”

“Am I hurting you?”

“Don’t be silly. You can’t kiss me.”

“I’m going to.”

“Try.”

Where that struggle would have ended, God knows! Possibly in some silly and sordid involvement that might have shackled me for the rest of my life. I was conscious of her sudden surrender, but it was more than surrender. I had my lips to hers, and her arms were about my head, and they were pressing my mouth to hers. We were both so deep in the passionate pit of sex that we must have been blind and deaf to everything else in the world. I was kissing her almost savagely when I heard that voice.

“Excuse this interruption.”

It was Beverley. I was up in a flash and sitting half turned towards the lane. I saw the head of his horse and the square bulk of him, and his great red face staring at us over the brambles. I remember feeling furious and foolish and mute. Had I been less sensitive I might have swaggered a little over stealing what he had tried to get and had failed.

But had he failed? I remember growing suddenly cold and disillusioned. Were we both—? But I saw his thick lips moving.

“I must apologize for interrupting this interesting episode. Have you anything to say, my man?”

I was aware of Kitty putting on her hat, and fussing with her frock. It seemed to me that she had suddenly become small, and pathetic and servile.

“No.”

“Well, get out of this, get out. One moment. You, there, Kitty, go back to the house at once.”

I was feeling too utterly foolish to intervene. I saw the girl get on her feet, give a nervous tweak to her bonnet, push past the brambles and take to the lane. She did not look at either of us, or utter a word.

Beverley remained on his horse, and I standing in that grassy space like a lout who has been caught stealing apples. There was silence between us until poor Kitty had disappeared. Then, Beverley got off his horse and left the beast loose. He had a riding-crop in his hand.

“It might be my duty to thrash you, young fellow.”

I flared at once.

“Try it?”

“No, I don’t dirty my hands with cads. Get out of this, quickly. And understand, you will not show your face up there again.”

“What has that to do with—?”

“Everything. We don’t want our maids debauched by fellows of your order. Get out. If you show your face up here again, I shall see your employer.”

Sometimes, I have been sorry that I did not go for him, and try my luck at licking him, though he must have been two stone heavier than I was, but I was feeling that I had made a dreadful fool of myself. It did not occur to me to accuse him of wanting what I had had, and failed in getting. Also, I realized that a little rogue like Kitty might have been lying, or fooling both of us.

I said: “There’s no need to make trouble for the girl, Mr. Bullstrode. I shall be just as glad to keep away, as you will be to—”

He was pointing with his crop to the lane.

“Don’t argue. That’s your way out.”

I was forgetting my basket, and he reminded me of it.

“Better take that, hadn’t you?”

I picked up my basket, and went past him into the lane, and in the turmoil of my various emotions I turned towards the house.

“No. The other way. You will have another mile or two to walk, my man. Right about turn.”

I obeyed him. I wanted to get away from that flaring, scornful face, for I dared to suppose that if Kitty had not lied, Mr. Beverley was feeling furious with himself as well as with me. I was raging more against myself than against him. He got on his horse and followed me at a little distance until the gates of the West Lodge came into view, and the steady, resolute rhythm of his horse’s hoofs seemed to drum me out of the park.

He pulled up and waited to see me go out through the gates, and I did not look back. I felt that it was one of the humiliations that I had deserved.

Perhaps I should have felt grateful to my enemy for saving me from that sex tangle. I was not. Moreover, how was I to know that the wretched incident would be used against me later in my life, as used I believe it was, and that Beverly Bullstrode would be able to describe me as a young cad who played about with housemaids.

I went straight back to my lodgings, changed, and choked down some supper. I knew that I had to see old Banyard and tell him that I did not want to continue as a carpenter up at Beaulieu. What should I tell him? I made myself go and ring the bell of No. 27 Roper's Row. Old Joe was in, smoking his pipe, and reading the daily paper, with his feet on a chair. The lamp was lit, but the windows of that upper room were open, and through them I could see the lights of Old Sandbourn, and the dark and polished sheen of the sea.

"Sit down, Jack."

My face must have betrayed something, for he took his feet off the chair, and sat up.

"What's wrong, my lad?"

I blurted out the truth to him.

"I have made a damned fool of myself."

"Have you? Well, we all do that, this side of the grave. Want to tell me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I stood by one of the windows, looking out.

"Because it's right that I should. If you want me to scrap the partnership ___"

"As bad as that! What the devil have you been doing?"

"I have made a damned fool of myself about a girl."

"Got caught?"

"No, not quite that."

I glanced at him and was surprised to see his shrewd old eyes twinkling. I had expected him to be shocked and angry, and almost he seemed to be suppressing secret chuckles.

“Go ahead. Tell me.”

I told him the whole story, and the telling of it seemed to make it appear even more crude and silly. I, a junior partner in the firm of Banyard & Lancaster, had let myself be fooled by a girl. Also, I had been caught in the midst of that most undignified scuffle, threatened with a thrashing and ordered off the Bullstrode earth. Old Joe was sucking hard at his pipe, and blowing puffs of smoke, and I wondered whether his sharp tongue would lash me for the scandal I had created.

“Is that all, Jack?”

“It’s quite enough, sir.”

“O, well, my lad, let me tell you you were lucky. I wasn’t so lucky when it happened to me.”

I stared at him.

“To you, sir?”

“I wasn’t exactly an angel in my youth, Jack. Hot blood. But in my case no Mr. Bullstrode blundered in at the right or wrong moment. Young ass! Brep, yes, I was properly caught. Bad business for a youngster. That’s why I never married, my lad.”

I have never felt so grateful to any one for such fierce honesty, and I said so.

“Tut-tut, we can’t help these things sometimes, Jack. The trouble is that we don’t realize that five minutes of that sort of thing may mess up half a life. Fact is, it isn’t worth while. No, damn it, it’s just bad business. Getting mixed up with the wrong woman. A young man’s job is to try and hold himself in until he finds the right one.”

“Then, you don’t want me to—?”

“I’m not preaching, Jack. Every man has to do the preaching to his own secret soul. Brep, forget all about it, till the next wench comes along.”

“There won’t be another, sir.”

“Tut-tut, my dear. I know. Can’t help these things. But try to find the right one. And if she’s gentle, you won’t feel like that. No, my dear. Marry a woman with gentle eyes, and a quiet voice. That’s the only sort that matters, when you have to live your whole life with her.”

How utterly right he was. In these more promiscuous days when contraceptive knowledge has made the sex adventure a mere romp, and our

liberated youth can play as it pleases, I am moved to wonder whether Freud and his disciples have not cast bitter bread upon the waters. Should one strive after chastity with prayer and fasting, or should one be free to pull the fruit where one finds it? Can one dogmatize or play the priestly prig? The sweet anguish of sex will always wound us. In my dotage I have read the works of D. H. Lawrence. I understand that he is regarded as the emancipator of youth, and that he has torn the last rag of hypocrisy from the white body of life. I wonder. Isn't it rather a question of how we love, and what we love? I know that I was ready to give everything to the one woman when she came into my life, and to take nothing. She made me transcend my little, lustful self. She filled me with a strange, awed tenderness. It seemed beyond belief that I could ever touch her.

I wonder if D. H. Lawrence ever loved like that?

Midsummer madness, and then marriage, and the tame familiarity that breeds boredom!

The many miserable marriages!

But why?

I only know that if it was a question of death between us, and my dying could have given her life, I should not have hesitated for one heart beat. I would gladly have given my life that she might live.

That is the truth. Make of it what you will.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*M*AN, being a pragmatistical creature, is apt to date his periods by erecting landmarks of his own, and more often than not these landmarks are records of physical happenings built up in consciousness. A man is more likely to date certain incidents by the motor-car he was driving at the time, or the woman with whom he had an affair, or what his golf handicap was in that lustrum. Moods are more evanescent than one's memory of a house or a street. History itself is so much more pragmatistical than a record of man's mere moods and emotions.

But this particular period of my life was to be brilliant with emotional light, like some landscape lit up by a blaze of oblique sunlight. Incidents stand out like some slim church spire flashing against a dark cloud on the horizon. I remember it as a clash of colours, a time when all the trappings of life had for me some secret emotional significance.

I was working hard, and living a rather separative existence, without realizing at the time what this aloofness meant for me.

Old Banyard was leaving me more and more of the actual work and its responsibilities.

Somehow I had become dissatisfied with my lodgings in Lavender Lane. I wanted more space, a corner that was personal, a garden, a front door of my own. Regents Parade and Royal Terrace had no very happy memories for me, nor was I attracted by the medieval heartiness and close contacts of the old town. I wanted something separate and small, a kind of country cottage, but such little places were not easily had. Nor, in those days, was ground available for building.

Running east of Pink Farm a private road linked Stuccoville with the Rudlake Road. Here was a deep and delightful valley with woods of beech, and hillsides that in the spring were ablaze with gorse. Two or three largish houses of the old grey period, and semi-Italian in their design, were concealed in this valley. A funny old cottage pricked its ears among the trees half way up the hill, one of those consciously picturesque places with high gables and massive bargeboards, tall twisted chimneys and lattice windows, which suggest Fanny Burney or Miss Kemble, or Meredith and Diana of the

Crossways. It was known as Frognal Cottage, and idling up the valley one evening, I found a board advertising it as to be let. I went in and explored the garden. A huge beech tree was sifting the evening sunlight out of the sky. It was a place of little lawns and wild shrubberies and circuitous paths, with a small orchard on the hillside above. Frognal had a wildness that met my mood of the moment. For years it had been the home of an eccentric and solitary old maid who had buried five dogs and three cats in the garden, and each dead pet possessed a headstone.

“To dear Pansy, a faithful and gentle Friend.”

I called on Finch the house-agent next morning, obtained the particulars and the keys, and went exploring. The little house fascinated me. Dark and dim and musty it might be, but it had windows that opened upon a foam of leaves, and a spacious sitting-room with a window at either end, and with nothing but fields and woods for its vistas. The rent was forty-five pounds a year. I decided to take Frognal, and try to find some steady, middle-aged woman to look after me. I did find her, or rather Jim Pawley found her for me, an aunt of his, a Miss Sarah Pawley who needed a home. I had saved money, and was able to furnish the long sitting-room, two bedrooms and the kitchen. My furniture was of the simplest, though it did include one or two pieces of Sussex oak, a gate-legged table and an old bread-cupboard.

I believe Old Joe was a little troubled over my leasing of Frognal. He hinted at it being a lonely place for a young bachelor, and an eligible young bachelor, though when I asked him to suggest a possible mate, he shot his lower lip out and grunted.

“Not much to choose from in our local posy. What about one of the Huxtable girls?”

“Would you have chosen a Miss Huxtable?”

“No, I shouldn’t, Jack. Sheepsheads. What are you going to do with yourself at Frognal?”

“Read and garden, and think.”

“Think!”

It was a sententious gesture on my part, but I was thinking a good deal about life as it concerned me and those who worked with me.

“Too much thinking gives one a sore head, Jack.”

“If you notice the bladder becoming swollen, sir, prick it.”

He chuckled.

“I’ll keep a hat-pin handy.”

What was I thinking about? Principally, I am afraid, about my personal significance in Sandbourn. Socially, I was neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring. Life would have been simpler had I been good red herring. I had no friends, perhaps because no one in Sandbourn whom I could know talked the language I was talking to myself. The acquaintanceships I could cultivate were to be looked for in the houses of the shopkeepers, and after some tentative exploring of such society I found myself dreadfully bored by it. Gentility, ormolu, bric-à-brac. Crude heartiness, or what was far worse, mincing refinement, tinkling tunes on pianos, affected gossip. I was not a conscious snob. I understood the limitations of these people and their lives. It seemed that they were always trying to forget the shop round the corner, and pinching their noses against the odours of bacon, or paint, or flannel. They did not rebel. They conformed, and cultivated a nice, sickly Victorianism that to me was stale and fusty and false. I suppose I was in my rebellious phase. Hence Frognaal.

This little, tree-smothered retreat was the symbol of my conscious isolation. That which Sandbourn would give me in the way of social fruit I did not desire. The food which I dreamed of and craved for was not mine for the asking. I did not want to belong to the shopkeeping world. I was under the illusion that gentlefolk were superior people, not only in their manners, but in their minds. To me they seemed mysterious and attractive creatures who would understand what I thought about books, and music and life in general, and to whom I would be able to talk freely. I did not realize that every class has its prejudices, and masks, and clichés, and that the so-called gentle world can be disastrously dull and conventional, and so absorbed in guarding good form, that a young man with a temperament and ideas may be as embarrassing as a burglar surprising such a world in its nightshirt.

Moreover, about this time Sir Perivale Bullstrode departed this life, and we became involved in a commercial scuffle with Messrs. Hickman & Snoad.

What association could there be between the death of a baronet, and the activities of a bitterly competitive firm of builders?

Again, I must suggest symbolism.

But my old enemy was now Sir Beverley Bullstrode, Bart., of Beaulieu, in the County of Sussex.

I happened to meet Bob Snoad in the basement of No. 9 Royal Terrace. We

had been asked to estimate and tender for the redecoration of No. 9, and for the insertion of a fixed bath, for at that time baths were unknown fixtures in Royal Terrace. Gentlemen sat in a shallow round pan and sponged themselves, and ladies laved their sweet selves once a week in a hot hip-bath. Every can of water had to be carried upstairs and carried down again. Robert Snoad was in a breezy and bumptious mood, and I realized that Messrs. Hickman & Snoad were in competition with us over the obtaining of this job.

Our clash occurred on the basement stairs that were lit by an area window. I noticed that Snoad was wearing a black tie, and he noticed that I noticed it.

“Hallo, Lanks! On the job?”

“Looks like it.”

“How do you like my tie?”

“Been undertaking?”

“Well, one does like to show a little respect. We had to put the great old man away. Let me tell you that there were twenty carriages, and all the tenants in procession. Vault in Pettling churchyard. We put up a show good enough for St. Paul’s.”

We did not bury people, and I understood that Messrs. Hickman & Snoad had been responsible for the Bullstrode funeral, and that Bob was feeling bumptious about it. Human vanities have strange origins.

“O, yes, I had heard there had been a death.”

Bob smiled at me.

“Change and decay, Lanks, but Sir Beverley is a new broom. Man of ideas. I rather think we shall be doing big things up at Beaulieu.”

Having crowed like chanticleer, he passed up the stairs, leaving me to my rule and note-book, and I could suppose that Sir Beverley Bullstrode would not be likely to employ a firm of whom I might be a humble member. But Robert Snoad’s swaggering annoyed me. I happened to know that Hickman & Snoad were employing second-rate men, and paying them less than we paid ours, for Trade Union activities had not yet penetrated to Sandbourn. Also, from what Jim Pawley and our painters told me, Hickman & Snoad’s materials were of indifferent quality.

This craze for cheapness!

They beat us over No. 9 Royal Terrace. Our estimate was turned down, and I saw Hickman & Snoad’s board hanging over the railings. Moreover, I found

that we were losing jobs to them all over the town, and that they were undercutting us very seriously. Knowing what I did about the quality of the work, and the way they sweated their men, the cynicism of the thing angered me.

I took the matter up with Old Joe. Were we to be beaten by Hickman & Snoad, and their cult of the cheap and the nasty?

Mr. Banyard was laconic.

“I’m not going shoddy, Jack, to beat Slimy & Toad.”

“I agree, sir. But we have got to stop this.”

“Well, what’s your idea, my lad?”

“Keep up the quality of our work, and cut our prices until we have licked them.”

I saw his grim old mouth close up for a moment like a trap.

“Know what that means, Jack?”

“Profits down.”

“Exactly. But I have had to do this sort of thing before, and so has my father before me. What’s more, I have deeper pockets than H. & S. But what about you?”

“I don’t mind going short. I want to fight, sir.”

He pushed out his lower lip at me.

“Good lad. Now, I’ll tell you something. I give Slimy & Toad three years.”

“Three years?”

“Yes, to be found out. People aren’t fools. I have had to fight Shoddy & Co. before. It takes a little time for shoddy work to show, but show it does, my lad. You watch their paint. I know a thing or two about this business.”

“So, we’ll fight them?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll cut all estimates to the bone.”

“Wait a bit, Jack. Not always. There are people who know that a cut price isn’t always the best policy. Like buying shoddy or good cloth. Put up cheap prices to cheap people, but not to the wise.”

“I understand you, sir.”

“Don’t you worry, my lad. We’ll lick them.”

An incident in this obscure commercial scuffle still piques me. It was produced by an old customer of ours named Swaine who owned the principal fish-shop in the town. He was rather like a fish himself, scaly and slimy and cold. We had always decorated the Swaine premises, but when Old Joe saw the Hickman & Snoad board displayed on the Swaine façade, he lost his temper.

He went for Mr. Swaine, and with chuckles he described the clash to me.

“Pleaded hard times, my lad. Said we had shoved it into him too stiffly.”

“What did you say, sir?”

“That he gets the afternoon sun on his shop, Jack. Bad for fish and paint. I told him so. That’s all. Mustn’t be caught for slander.”

“Was that all?”

“Brup, not quite. I said that he needn’t expect us to bother about him in the future. He could stay put.”

I laughed.

“Till the face of his shop begins to peel.”

Old Joe chuckled.

And that is just what happened. Mr. Swaine’s house above and behind the shop had a plastered face that was every three years or so painted yellow, with the windows a horrid, ochrish red. That was the Swaine fancy. And half way through the second summer the face of the house was peeling like a patient after scarlet fever.

Mr. Swaine came back to us.

So did others.

A September evening, a peaceful evening in the midst of our petty war with Hickman & Snoad. It was a Saturday, and I had spent the afternoon working in the Froggnal garden, cutting grass and trimming hedges. Sarah Pawley had given me tea at half-past four, and I was finding this austere, silent but kindly woman as restful as this cottage with its queer old bay windows and scatterings of sunlight and of shadow. After tea I sat down at the second-hand piano I had bought myself, and was trying to teach myself to play. I found that I had an ear and hands, but my passionate fumbling in an attempt to produce a waltz of Chopin’s was infinitely tantalizing. The music should have been

singing and exultant, and my rendering of it was like a stammering voice.

So many frustrations! I sat on the music stool for a while and smoked a pipe, and then reminded myself that I had more work to finish in the garden. The path between the funny old tile and timber porch and the white gate in the laurel hedge needed weeding, and I was proposing to scarify it with a hoe, and leave the weeds to wilt and die on Sunday. But in this shadowy, moist place weeds did not die too willingly.

I went out and began work with my hoe, but the September evening had such beauty, tissue of gold hanging from the trees and spreading over the meadows, that I kept pausing in my work to stand and stare. Did this soft sunlight suggest other metal? A month or two ago I had come of age in the meaning of my mother's will, and I had three thousand pounds to my credit. I had suggested to Old Joe that I should put the money into the business and let it help in the spifflicating of Hickman & Snoad, and my senior partner had grunted at me.

"Wait awhile, my lad. You may get an idea. Money can wait for its opportunity."

An idea! How could any inspiration come to a junior partner in an obscure firm of local builders? Frustrations, scuffles with people like Hickman & Snoad! I was dreaming of myself as a singular and dramatic person and I was neither. Possibly, my only social distinction, and that a negative and reprehensible one, was that I did not go to church. I dare say the conventional world regarded me as a somewhat farouche and eccentric young man who was not to be encouraged, a prig who dabbled in art, and who did not conform. I was not happy with myself, and so I was capable of making conventional people feel uncomfortable. I was conscious of my deplorable ignorance. I had had a second-class education, but I did not know how I ought to dress myself, or brush my hair, or how to be socially at ease. I did not possess evening clothes, and had I been asked out to dine, I should have been desperately unsure of my manners. I was in the phase when a young man does not know what to do with his hands in public, or what to talk about, and probably I should have talked aggressively about the wrong thing and got myself regarded as a prig. I was consciously inferior, and restless and on edge. Hence, Frogna!l, and my self-conscious isolation, and my readiness to take offence from a world that was taking no notice of me at all.

Yes, that was my grievance. I wanted to be somebody, and I was nobody, and my young self-love was sulking like Achilles. Frogna!l was a leafy tent into which I had withdrawn myself to dream of and dramatize things that did not happen. I was eluding life, not taking it by the throat.

I resumed my hoeing of weeds, but in an irritable and desultory way, and then, in that silent valley, I heard a particular sound that associated itself with unpleasant memories. Someone on horseback riding up the lane! I paused to listen, leaning on my hoe. The horse was coming at a walk up the lane, and the steady, rhythmic beat of its hoofs drew nearer. There was one particular person with whom I associated such a sound, Beverley Bullstrode.

And Beverley it was. The brown bulk of him came gliding beyond and above the top of the laurel hedge. He had taken off his hat, and the sunlight polished his round, high forehead. I saw his red face turned towards me like the face of some human sun which could make me more conscious of my obscure, shadowy, frustrated self. He pulled up by the white gate, and surveyed my world.

His voice seemed to come to me suddenly like that of a man conscious of mastery addressing a servant.

“So, Lancaster, you have turned gardener.”

I nodded at him.

“Obviously.”

“Like it better than joinery?”

“Perhaps.”

“By the way, who is living here now?”

He had assumed that I was the gardener, or some odd job man putting in overtime on a Saturday afternoon.

“I do.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“How interesting!”

And that was all we said to each other, for he nudged his horse with his heels and rode on, though I think he was a little puzzled by my tenancy. I was too obscure a person to be included in his conscious scheme of things, and I imagine that he had never heard that I was a member of the firm of Joseph Banyard & Son. If the information had reached him, it would have seemed trivial and insignificant. Also, it seemed to me that his grand manner had grown more gracious since he had stepped into Sir Perivale’s shoes. He could recognize an underling and address him by name with an air of tolerant and

jocund condescension.

I hated him for that.

I hated him for appearing in my valley, like God descending upon some inferior little Adam. Was this a mere incident, or would his passings be regular and frequent? I was to discover that Beverley used the lane as a quiet and easy way of riding down into Sandbourn. Also, these people who lived in the Italianate mansions bowered in tufted trees were friends of his, and somewhat of his world. A retired General rented “Beech House,” and “Valley Court” was the home of an Indian nabob, Sir Miles Sheffington. I, Mr. Lancaster of Banyard & Lancaster, was a mere social squatter, and perhaps impertinently so.

I was not pleased.

The imminence of this other and debonair world provoked me.

One’s uneasy self-love drives one to absurd posturings. I can smile now at my experiments in self-education. I wanted to feel myself a man of the world, and to prove that I could keep my balance on the social tight-rope.

I made it my affair to dine once a week at the Victoria Hotel. The Victoria was Sandbourn’s “Ritz,” and I can remember as a youngster watching the ladies and gentlemen in evening dress sitting at the tables by the big windows. They had seemed mysterious and potent people, and I had felt that they must belong to a different and more splendid world. In those days I thought of them as ladies and gentlemen, not as women and men.

My first invasion of the Victoria was not very soothing to my self-love. I walked into the big dining-room and stood, awkwardly waiting, for nobody took any notice of me. Waiters were hurrying to and fro; all the tables seemed occupied. I remember feeling hot and angry and self-conscious. Almost, I faced about and fled. Then, Adolf, the head waiter, came shuffling up to me, with a wine-list in his hand. He looked a most formidable and imposing person, a sallow immensity in black tails, but as a matter of fact he was kinder than he looked.

“Dinner, sir?”

“Yes, please.”

“For one?”

I felt that I ought to address him as sir. He found me a place, the worst

table in the room next to the service door where the waiters brushed past one's chair, and the swinging door smote one with gusts of air.

"Anything to drink, sir?"

I was puzzled. What was one expected to drink in the Victoria Hotel? Champagne?

"Can I have some beer?"

"Certainly, sir; draught or bottled?"

"Draught, please."

Oysters were in season, and I let myself in for oysters. Four bivalves arrived in their shells. How did one deal with oysters? I sat and fiddled with my serviette, and glanced anxiously at the other tables. All these wretched people appeared to have progressed beyond the oyster age. I became aware of a waiter standing and observing me. Damn the fellow! Did he suspect that I had never tackled oysters before? In desperation I picked up a shell, and tried to slide the oyster into my mouth. It would not slide. I replaced the confounded thing on my plate, and glared at the quite innocent waiter.

"Here, take these things away. I don't think I fancy them."

"They have only just been opened, sir."

"Have they? Well, take them away."

He took them away, and I sat crumbling bread, feeling furious with myself, and the whole Victorian world.

But I persisted in my attack on the Victoria Hotel, and in due course I discovered how my self-consciousness and waiters should be controlled. I tipped lavishly. I smiled upon Adolf, and announced that, as a regular client, I wanted a table by the window. I was given that table. I learnt to study the wine-list, and after critical and mature deliberation to order with an air of casualness a half-bottle of claret. It was not very good claret, and it did not fill me with sensuous joy, but I ordered it and drank it, and imagined myself to be somebody.

It is a strange fear, this dread of one's fellow humans. An uneasy, quarrelsome vanity walks abroad with chin cocked and sword ready, waiting to be insulted. But when the silly small-clothes of one's self-love have been laid aside, and serenity and kindness come to one after the hot sun of success has warmed the earth, one can laugh gently at a young man's swagger.

My dinners at the Victoria Hotel brought me to know Mr. Peters, the manager of the hotel. He was one of the town's characters, a tall, pale, very dignified person who met the world with a certain air of polite aloofness, as though prepared for a complaint. If the world complained, he smiled like a tolerant philosopher; if it praised he smiled even more philosophically.

I liked Mr. Peters. He was courteous to me in a way that soothed a young man's soul. Our liking must have been mutual, and it helped me to put my seal upon our quarrel with Messrs. Hickman & Snoad.

The Victoria Hotel was to be redecorated during the winter. Hitherto, a London firm had done the decorating, for it was difficult work, requiring tact and discretion when the hotel was still half full of visitors. A floor or half a corridor had to be dealt with at a time, and it was essential that the workmen should not advertise their presence too aggressively.

It was Mr. Peters himself who told me that he had persuaded the directorate to apply for local tenders. I knew what that would mean. The prize would be competed for, with Hickman & Snoad as our chief rivals, and a prize it would be, a symbol and a panache, for the firm which hung its boards up on the face of the Victoria Hotel might assume itself to be the town's chosen child.

I went straight back to Roper's Row and told Mr. Banyard what I had heard. Should we tender? Of course. And cut prices? Old Joe sat sucking his pipe, and eyeing me shrewdly.

"What's your idea, Jack?"

"My idea, sir, is that we should do first-class work, and put in an honest price for the work."

"Let Slimy & Co. undercut you?"

"Yes. I don't think Mr. Peters is the sort of person to appreciate—"

"Shoddy?"

"Just so."

He twinkled at me.

"Tradition, what! Putting Paul Sloven to paint the dome of St. Paul's. But do you realize what you will be tackling, Jack?"

"It will mean our taking on more men, for the time being, and the right kind of men."

"Brup, fellows who don't whistle, and howl 'Champagne Charlie' all over the place."

“Real craftsmen, sir.”

“Good lad. You leave that to me. And I’ll leave you the estimating, Jack.”

“All of it, sir?”

“Yep. Every banister and cornice and bedroom door.”

“But we haven’t got the contract yet.”

“No, my lad. But you make sure you get it.”

The invitation to tender came in to us. I spent several days in measuring up and figuring things out. I had a personal interview with Mr. Peters, for I wanted him to realize that I understood the social subtleties of the work, should it be assigned to us. I remember him smiling at me in a kind of paternal and friendly way.

“How did you visualize that, Lancaster?”

“One sees the whole job, sir, from your point of view.”

“Mine? Rather unusual! I spend my life in pandering to other people’s points of view.”

He was not quizzing me, and I laughed.

“Managing them, sir, as well as the hotel.”

He nodded his head.

“Perhaps.”

We put in our estimate. I had spent nights and nights over it, working late at the office. The final figure frightened me. It seemed too impossibly large. I passed on the sheets and sheets of specifications to Old Joe, and asked him to check them. He did so.

“Well, what’s wrong, Jack?”

“You can’t find anything wrong?”

“Tried to, and I can’t.”

“But it seems a devil of a figure, four figures.”

“It is as you and God made it. You can’t redecorate a whole hotel on tuppence.”

“I feel it will give Mr. Peters and the directors fits.”

“Wait and see, my lad.”

Meanwhile, I was careful not to go near the Victoria Hotel or to give Mr. Peters the feeling that I was soliciting his favours. I knew that there was to be a meeting of the directors on the Thursday, and that a particular estimate would be selected and the work assigned. I can smile now over the suspense and the excitement of those seven days. I knew that if Hickman & Snoad beat us they would receive an advertisement that would go far to help them in winning their trade-war with us.

The Thursday passed, and I was early at the office on Friday to meet the postman. There was no letter for us from the Victoria Hotel. Friday passed, and on the Saturday the post brought us nothing. I began to suspect that we had lost the contract.

Old Joe said nothing.

I was at work in the office on the Saturday morning when a page boy from the hotel arrived with a letter. It was addressed to me.

“Dear Mr. Lancaster,

I shall be glad if you can spare the time to come round and see me.

Yours truly,

H. C. Peters.”

Spare the time! I seized my hat, and hurried off to the Victoria Hotel, but before reaching it I reminded myself that phlegm was necessary, and that I must be prepared to take victory or defeat with a smile. A porter told me that Mr. Peters was in his office. I found him alone there, sitting at his big desk on which ledgers, bills and correspondence were neatly regimented. He smiled at me, and I wondered whether he was being kind to me while telling me that we had lost the job.

“Sit down, Lancaster.”

I sat down.

He picked up a sheet of paper, glanced at it, and then at me.

“I think I can tell you in confidence, Lancaster, that one tender we received was considerably less than yours.”

So we had lost the job!

I said: "I'm sorry, sir. I wonder if you would mind telling me what the other people beat us by? I know that I have no right to ask for this information."

He looked at me steadily.

"About two hundred pounds."

"Thank you, sir. I am sure I—"

There were little crinkles of kind, sly humour about his eyes.

"But we have not accepted the cheaper estimate."

"No?"

"My directors agreed with me that we preferred quality to cheapness. We want first-class work, Lancaster. It is up to you."

"You are accepting our estimates, sir?"

"Yes, an official letter is in the post."

I think I must have blushed, and showed signs of undue elation, for he suddenly became dry and formal.

"Just a matter of business, Lancaster."

I stood up. I understood that he did not want to be thanked.

"I will see that it is good business, sir."

Whom should I meet on the Parade but Snoad Junior, looking sulky and savage. I knew by his face that their firm must have been informed that their tender had been turned down. I nodded at him cheerfully. As a matter of fact I did not want to crow over a man who was so obviously sick, but he hauled up and spoke to me.

"Hallo, Lanks, just a word."

"Yes."

"Got the Victoria?"

"As a matter of fact, we have."

"By god, you must have contracted to put in muck."

The ass! I could not help enlightening him.

"Ours wasn't the lowest figure, by a long way. We don't sell shoddy."

He went white, or rather more yellow.

“Do you mean to infer—?”

“I’m not inferring anything.”

“O, aren’t you? And what’s Peters getting out of it?”

He was more than an ass, but rather an uncouth lout who could not take a beating without losing his temper and squalling.

I said: “Look here, Snoad, you had better not talk like that, or you’ll find yourself in Queer Street. Some people are straighter than you think.”

I saw him flinch.

“Go on. Do you think I was serious?”

“You had better be careful how you throw that sort of accusation about. I think I ought to tell Mr. Peters.”

“Rot, I was pulling your leg.”

“Rather a clumsy sort of pull, wasn’t it? Don’t be silly.”

And I left him.

When I got back and told Old Joe the news and of my clash with Snoad, he lay back in his chair, tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat, and chuckled.

“What did I tell you, Jack? Cheapness isn’t always the best policy. Plenty of good white lead in your paint. Our firm will last.”

So, our board went up in front of the Victoria Hotel, and all Sandbourn could see that the firm of Banyard & Lancaster was redecorating the town’s premier hotel.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*L*IKE many other young men whose fierce urge is to climb above the crowd, I was a rebel.

Revolt is the privilege of youth, and it may be no more than the tantrums of a child whose self-love resents the indifference of its elders.

I was in revolt against orthodox religion, society, privilege, wealth, commercialism, the strangling of sex. In fact, I was against anything that was conventional, and threatened to keep me in my place.

Undoubtedly, my rebel spirit was inspired by a dissatisfied self-love, a sense of social frustration.

I wanted to do things that would appear splendid and singular, so that the world should pause and ask: "Who is this wonderful young man?" It did not ask any such question.

Since society took no notice of me, I was moved, like many other young men, to try and revenge myself on society by becoming a reformer. I had to patronize somebody. Because the Bullstrode world would have none of me, I became a democrat. I would join myself to the world of the workers, and cultivate the common people.

How much sincerity was there in this reforming passion?

I do not think that I was completely a humbug, or that my idealism was wholly the reaction of my self-love against social frustration. I may have been of no importance, and resenting my unimportance, but certain realities made me feel uncomfortable.

I did not like the cottages in which craftsmen like Pawley and Beeson had to live. They were little stuccoed boxes compressed into rows, their front doors opening on the pavement, their back doors on minute back-yards. Some of these back-yards might be miracles of neatness, others slatternly rubbish-heaps. Many of these cottages were disgracefully over-crowded. Some of them were served by communal out-door lavatories that had to be used by three or four families. There was no space, no privacy, no beauty. It seemed to me a disgrace that men who worked and made things should have no little plot of

ground in this England of ours, when others had so much.

I came to realize that many of the poor are ugly and bad, because poverty is like that. One might as well expect to grow a beautiful and stately tree on a rubbish dump. Neither beauty of body nor soul can be bred amid squalor and noise and ugliness.

Yet, many of these workers had a beauty of their own. I was to discover that they could be wonderfully kind to each other when someone was sick or in trouble. They might squabble and tear a tantrum to tatters in back-yards, but let a neighbour fall ill, and humanity triumphed. Also, I was to find in a man like Jim Pawley a patience and a sweet sanity that shamed me.

Then, their wages. As wages went we paid our men well, but what a pittance it was. Mr. Ventriss was in charge of the payroll, but sometimes I did the weekly paying, and I used to feel apologetic about it. Men like Beeson and Pawley were fine craftsmen who gave us of their best, and the sums we handed out to them each week seemed to me contemptible. Should I have been satisfied with such pay? I knew that I should have felt bitter and envious, and a rebel.

I used to wonder at the patience of these men, and at the conscience they put into their work. Were they as patient as they seemed? Did we employers of labour know what our workmen thought and said between themselves? I doubt whether we did. This wage business set a gulf between us, and all my life I have been trying to grope my way across that gulf. How rarely will a working man say what he thinks to the man who employs him. Always, there must be that secret fear of offending the little god who pays, and fear is bad for the soul.

There can be no complete good faith between people so long as there is fear.

Then came a tragedy that shocked me.

My good Sarah had hinted to me that her sister-in-law was in bad health. It was hard on Jim, and hard on Rose, poor dear. When I asked what the matter was, Sarah told me that Rose Pawley was weak in the chest, and that she had a horrid cough that remained with her all the winter.

I tackled Jim about it.

“What about your wife, Jim?”

I happened to know that Jim was devoted to his wife, and when I

questioned him he made light of the matter. He was one of the sanguine, happy souls who will not believe that a shadow can be more than a shadow, but he had extraordinarily honest eyes, and I thought I saw secret fear in those eyes.

“Had the doctor, Jim?”

“Off and on, sir. Rose will be all right when the good weather comes.”

It was winter, and happening to go into the carpenter’s shop one morning I found Jim alone with a plane in his hands and a piece of two-by-three on the bench. His head was down, and his back turned, but it seemed to me that there was something funny about the man’s head and shoulders.

“How’s Rose, Jim?”

He did not answer me, and suddenly I realized that Jim Pawley was blubbing over his work. The thing shocked me. A man in tears is about the most moving thing I know.

“Sorry, Jim. Something wrong? Don’t talk if you don’t want to.”

He kept on rubbing that plane up and down, as though the habit of work helped him.

“Yes, Mr. Jack. Doctor was in yesterday.”

“Rose?”

“Yes. He says she’s got consumption.”

I did not know what to say for the moment. This other man’s tragedy held me mute.

“What’s the doctor think?”

“Says she ought to go to hospital. If not, plenty of good food, sir, and fresh air, and sun. He said if Rose were sent away, to a warm place—”

I understood him, and what was sticking in poor Jim’s throat. I had heard of consumptive people going to Switzerland, or some sunny island where the climate was more kind, but how could a working man send his wife to such places? What moved me most was his utter lack of bitterness.

“Something’s got to be done, Jim.”

“What, sir?”

“I’ll talk to Mr. Banyard about it. If we could get Rose away.”

“That’s part of the trouble, sir.”

“How?”

“She—she doesn’t want to go away.”

“Not leave home?”

“No.”

It touched me that a woman should cling to a little, ugly box of a place, and think of it as home.

“What do you feel about it, Jim?”

“I’d rather she stayed. I could look after her. We’ve got a sort of horror of hospitals. Places you die in.”

“May I speak to Mr. Banyard?”

“It’s very kind of you, Mr. Jack.”

“Rot, Jim, it’s only common sense.”

Speak to Old Joe I did, and I found him as ready to help as I was. He might be a hard man in business, but he was merciful out of it. We had the doctor in, but he was not very hopeful or helpful about the case. The prognosis was bad, and the disease more advanced than he had suspected. All that he could suggest was a more hygienic environment, an airy room, plenty of milk and good food, and rest. He was a somewhat dogmatic and short-tempered person, and I suspected that he wanted Rose to go into hospital, and was piqued by her obstinacy. In hospital she would be off his hands. That was what I felt about it, and I did not like this doctor.

Old Joe was terse about it.

“So, that’s all you can tell us, doctor.”

“It is. The fact is, Mr. Banyard, we can’t cure, or don’t want to cure, insanitary conditions.”

Old Joe cocked his head up at that.

“You mean, it’s the places they live in?”

“I do.”

“I’ll think that over, doctor.”

We did not own those particular cottages. They belonged to a local baker who had put his savings into bricks and mortar, and was a prominent and strenuous upholder of one of the local chapels. I can remember Old Joe saying to me afterwards: “That’s given me to think, Jack. If these doctors are right

about cottages killing people, well, it seems to me, something ought to be done about it.”

“By us?”

“Sure. Funny how one goes on accepting things, till something smacks you on the jaw. I must think about this.”

“Why shouldn’t we build cottages for our own men?”

“That’s what I’m getting at.”

Meanwhile, the only thing to do was to try and find a better cottage for the Pawleys, and persuade Rose to move into it, but not till we began to search for such a cottage did I realize that such places did not exist. Working Sandbourn was packed like peas in a pod. If a soul was at all separative, it had no chance of exercising an exclusive and sensitive aloofness. As a working man said to me when I was tackling this problem: “If you feel a bit short and rough-tempered in the morning, and maybe you want to belch things out, you’ve got the whole bloody world on top of you. The old woman, and the kids, and maybe a lodger. You see, sir, in our world, a chap can’t ever be alone. Slap up against things. And if you’re feeling sour and snotty, everybody knows it.” But our quest of a cottage was complicated by poor Rose’s desire to stay where she was. She seemed to cling to that poor rabbit-hutch, and in the end we left her there. She was quite incapable of looking after her two children and the home, and all I could do was to take the two kids into Frognaal and let Sarah do for them. They were shy, quiet little creatures, both girls. As for Jim he became nurse, cook, and father confessor to poor Rose. He lost his fresh colour that winter, and all his merry quips, and became haggard and silent. I used to wonder whether Jim might not catch the disease from his wife.

The good Sarah used to take the two small girls down every other day to see their mother, and on one or two occasions I deputized for Sarah. I was walking down the lane with them one winter afternoon, each of them holding one of my hands, for I was becoming quite big brotherish to Jim Pawley’s small daughters, when we met Beverley Bullstrode on his horse. He was riding up the middle of the lane, and we were walking on the crown of the road, for it was a wet winter and the sides of the lane were muddy. I somehow realized that it was going to be a question of who was willing to give way, and I kept hold of the children’s hands and held to the centre of the lane. If anything was to be muddied, let it be the hoofs of Bullstrode’s horse.

He was coming at a walk, and as we neared each other I felt his ominous

blue eyes staring at us. He held straight on, and something in me knew that he expected us to get out of his way. I stopped, holding the youngsters' hands firmly in mine.

He came straight at us, staring me in the face, and my hatred of him blazed.

“Do you mind leaving us the middle of the road?”

He pulled up. Almost, he looked amused, and I was reminded of Gavin's sleepy insolence.

“Why, certainly, Lancaster. So, you have become a family man.”

I did not enlighten him. I felt rough, and I was rough.

“The kids' shoes are more important than the hoofs of your damned horse.”

He looked down at me with a kind of turgid and smiling superciliousness.

“Paternal pride, Lancaster. Most certainly you shall have the road.”

He drew his horse aside, and feeling in his pocket, produced some pennies and tossed them to us.

“Buy them some sweets, Lancaster.”

And he rode on and past us, his horse's hoofs squelching in the mud.

I kept hold of the children's hands. I knew they wanted those pennies, and I remember the tug of their small arms as I walked them on.

“Can't we have the pennies, Mr. Jack?”

I said: “No, we don't want his pennies. I'll give you sixpence each when we reach the shops.”

They looked up at me wonderingly. They must have thought me a funny sort of man to leave the coppers lying there.

Said Emily to me: “Who was the kind gentleman, Mr. Jack?”

I laughed.

“A very great gentleman, Emily. Sir Beverley Bullstrode.”

“Why don't you like him, Mr. Jack?”

So, I had betrayed myself even to these children! The question was a poser.

“I think I can tell you why, Emily. Because he has a horse, and I haven't one.”

The child smiled at me solemnly.

“Then, why don’t you buy a horse, Mr. Jack?”

Truly, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—! Emily had summed up my case.

I remember the day when Jim did not come to work. It was a bitter January morning, and I turned my coat collar up, and walked along to Tyler’s Terrace. When I knocked at the door, Jim opened it. His face had a ravaged look. He was in his shirt sleeves, and I saw stains of blood on one sleeve.

“Trouble, Jim?”

So overwrought was he that he fumbled his words.

“Ble-bleeding, Mr. Jack. Came on suddenly. My God, it frightened me. But her, frightened to death, poor dear. J-just had to sit on the bed and hold her.”

“Doctor been?”

“Yes. It’s stopped now. But, oh, Mr. Jack—”

He drew me in, and then stood leaning with one arm against the wall, and his head resting on it.

“She broke up, blubbed. I couldn’t stop her blubbing. Seemed to tear my guts out. She knows now. Can’t do anything. All I could say was ‘My girl, I’ve never loved anybody like you and never shall.’ And that started her blubbing again. O, my God, sir, I wish it was me and not her.”

I have never forgotten poor Jim Pawley’s anguish. It was like a stream joining the current of my emotional life and giving it a certain set. I can remember looking back at Tyler’s Terrace and feeling accused by the flat, snub faces of those wretched little cottages with their wall-eyed windows and flimsy doors. And yet, I can suppose that the man who built that row of cottages may have thought that he was being a good friend to the working man, for they were more enlightened cottages than many of the old hole and corner hovels in Sandbourn’s back-yards and alleyways. How often I have heard it said that it does not pay to build houses for the poor, which means that one may have to be content with two per cent instead of seven, but to measure one’s humanity with the stick of usury is not nationally constructive.

If that is claptrap, let it pass.

Poor Rose died in March. Old Joe and I went to the funeral. It had a simple

yet dreary dignity. Even Jim Pawley's bowler hat and black tie and Sunday clothes were somehow right. Mr. Banyard and I drove back together to Roper's Row in a hired fly. He sat with his hat on the back of his head, and his large hands in their black gloves compressed between his knees.

"More light, Jack, more air. I'll do something about it before I die."

Jim Pawley came back to work next day with eyelids that looked red. I had sent Sarah to do for him and the kids, and had managed to get a woman to come in and cook and clean for me at Froggnal.

I felt that I wanted to say something to Jim.

"Do you want to stay on in Tyler's Terrace, Jim?"

"Nowhere else to go, sir."

"Well, I may as well tell you we think of building cottages, if we can get the ground."

"You've been very kind, Mr. Jack. I'm sort of fond of the old place, in spite of everything."

"It might be better for the kids, Jim."

"Yes, sir, that's true."

It was the absence of bitterness in the man that impressed me. I can remember him saying: "These things just happen, Mr. Jack. Life seems to be like that."

I know that if I had been in his place I should have been bitter.

The spring!

Looking back on it now it would almost seem that the emotional unrest that this obscure tragedy had roused in me might have been like the spring itself, a strange harbinger of bitter sweetness. Birds singing, primroses peering from the green banks, the gorse in flower, and something singing in my heart.

How little did I foresee what was before me!

"The face that launched a thousand ships!"

The towers of my little Ilium were to burn.

A May morning.

Old Joe had gone over to Rudlake to inspect some work we were carrying out at the Priory. We had been obliged to take on new men for the redecorating of the Victoria Hotel, and our business was so active that not only were we keeping on the new painters, but we had engaged two additional carpenters and another bricklayer. Old Joe had been lucky in obtaining these particular men. An old firm of builders and decorators had gone bankrupt at Wixhill; Joe had engaged some of the old hands, and they had migrated to Sandbourn. They were good, steady men, and fine craftsmen.

But this May morning! Old Ventriss was sitting crumpled up on his stool, his flat bald head catching the light, and it occurred to me that he was more and more coming to resemble some fungus growing out of a piece of wood. I was busy checking some invoices when the office door opened, and an elderly gentleman walked in.

“Mr. Banyard?”

He was grey of head, fresh of face, very tall and straight. He was wearing a straw hat, and a dark grey suit, and he carried a little cane in his right hand. I stood up, for the visitor was plainly a person who commanded courtesy. He looked like an old soldier.

“Mr. Banyard is out, sir. I’m Mr. Lancaster.”

He smiled at me, nodded, and called to someone who was waiting outside.

“Come in, my dear.”

A pretty little lady with a high colour and very bright brown eyes came into the office. I found a chair for her, and gave the gentleman my chair.

“What can we do for you, sir?”

He took off his hat, placed it on my table, and sat with his cane across his knees.

“My name is Cherrill, Captain Cherrill. We have taken No. 7 Sandrock Terrace. There is some papering and painting needed in one or two of the bedrooms.”

“Three, dear,” said his wife.

“Three bedrooms, Mr. Lancaster.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But not all at once,” chirped the lady; “they will have to be done one at a time.”

“We can easily arrange that, madam.”

“Perhaps Mr. Lancaster will come up, my dear, and look at the rooms? We don’t want the work to be too expensive.”

I got the impression that Captain and Mrs. Cherrill were not well off, and I suggested that the cost of redecorating the rooms would depend upon the quality of the wallpaper to be used. Would the lady like to look through our pattern books? Most certainly she would. I got one of the books down from the office shelf and opened it on the table, and offered to move Mrs. Cherrill’s chair for her. I liked these two old people and their quiet voices. They were gentlefolk.

Mrs. Cherrill turned over the patterns. I had explained that the more expensive samples were in the beginning of the book, and I saw her pass to the cheaper pages. Meanwhile, I remembered that we had a roll of rather attractive and inexpensive paper in the store-room, and I went to fetch it. This particular paper was not in the pattern book. It was a rather charming design, if a little conventional, pink roses and green tendrils and loops of pale blue ribbon on a French grey ground.

When I returned to the office Captain Cherrill was holding up the book and displaying a particular paper to his wife. She was standing with her head slightly tilted, like a bright-eyed bird.

“Not quite, James. It might do for our room.”

I unfurled my roll of paper and held it against the light.

“How do you like this, madam?”

I saw that she was pleased.

“Charming. Just the thing for Sanchia’s room. Don’t you think so, dear?”

Sanchia! I had not heard the name before. It sounded strange, and rather mysterious, and Italian. Was Sanchia their daughter?

“Yes, very charming,” said the Captain. “Is it very expensive, Mr. Lancaster?”

“No, sir,” and I told him the price per roll.

“That doesn’t convey very much to me.”

“No, sir, but for an ordinary bedroom the cost would be quite reasonable. When we have measured up I can quote you a figure.”

They put their old heads together, and I gathered somehow that they were

ready to spend more money on the bedroom of Miss Sanchia than they were on their own room. They chose two other papers provisionally, a very plain and simple one for the spare room.

Could I come up and see the rooms?

“Of course, sir. Would this afternoon suit you? I will come myself.”

“About three o’clock.”

“Would you like me to bring a pattern of Miss Cherrill’s paper?”

“Please do. My daughter would like to see it.”

I knew Sandrock Terrace. It stood behind and above Royal Terrace, and was sheltered from the sea by an old shrubbery that was reserved for the use of the terrace’s tenants. The houses were early Victorian, grey and sedate, each with a front garden, enclosed by a balustraded wall. It was a place of lilacs and laburnums and red may, very flowery and sweet smelling in the spring of the year. Its upper windows looked out over the old hollies and ilexes and laurustinus of the shrubbery to the blue sea. A sheltered place, like the lives of those who lived there.

The sound of a piano being played.

As I walked along the path towards No. 7 I realized that this was not the playing of some Sandbourn schoolgirl or young gentlewoman sitting down to pound through the appointed hour. Someone was playing Chopin’s Sixth Waltz. The sound seemed to pour out like waves of light, luminous and exultant, and stirring in me an equal and strange exultation. I came to the gate of No. 7, and stood there listening. Who was the pianist, the old lady with the bright eyes, or the daughter with the mysterious name? I heard a church clock strike three, and remembering my business I pushed open the iron gate of No. 7 and walked up to the front door.

I rang the bell, and suddenly the music ceased.

Someone was coming to the door.

It opened, and I did not see the person I had expected to see, a maid in cap and apron.

I had the roll of paper under my left arm, and for a moment I stood staring before lifting my hat.

“Are you Mr. Lancaster?”

“Yes.”

“Please come in. My father and mother will be back in a moment. It’s our maid’s afternoon out.”

Even now my first impressions of her are both vivid and confused. She had a pale, flowerlike face with very deep blue eyes. She looked fragile and delicate. Her dark brown hair seemed to have tinges of gold in it. Her throat was slim and sensitive. I think she was wearing a plain blouse, white and powdered over with little blue flowers, and a black skirt, but all these details are somehow lost in my poignant picture of her. I seemed to feel that I had never set eyes on anyone like her before, and that she was as her music, of infinite and mysterious meaning.

She must have thought me very gauche and awkward, standing there on the doorstep like a fool of a boy.

“Please come in.”

She could not have been more than twenty, but her young dignity was like her voice, deliberate and clear, and of a beautiful, sweet texture. I followed her in, and she took me into the front room, where her piano stood across one of the corners of the window. She was not in the least embarrassed, I most absurdly so. I remember laying the roll of paper on a table in the centre of the room.

Her face had a kind of flowerlike frankness. She looked a fragile, delicate thing, but never in my life have I felt so frightened.

“Is that my wallpaper?”

“Yes, Miss Cherrill.”

“May I see it?”

“Of course.”

I picked up the roll, and spread it, but my fingers were so fumbling that the free edge slipped from them, and the roll refurled itself. I opened it again, and feeling savage with myself, held the paper down upon the table. My hands pressed so hard on it that some ornament in the centre set up a jingling.

She stood at my side, gazing at the pattern. She was silent, and I wondered whether she was thinking my taste in wallpapers crude and mawkish.

“Do you like it, Miss Cherrill?”

“Yes, even though it is a little young.”

Young! What did she mean by that? I began to suspect that there were subtleties in her that were beyond my comprehension.

I made myself laugh, but my laughter sounded silly.

“It is not quite Chopin.”

She looked at me slantwise.

“Do you play Chopin?”

“I’ve tried to. But I’m just a self-taught fumbler, Miss Cherrill. You see, I ___”

Sudden confusion possessed me. I rolled up the paper, and stood holding it like some self-conscious gawk of a student clutching a diploma. I was aware of her moving slowly to the window and looking out into the garden. Even her movements were unlike those of any other creature I had known; her walk a kind of soft, gliding stateliness. I remember noticing that a white lilac was in flower. Did I imagine it, or was the scent of it drifting in?

Voices.

She said: “They are coming. I am sorry you have been kept waiting.”

Even those few, simple words, and the way she spoke them, were to remain with me for the rest of my life.

“It doesn’t matter, Miss Cherrill.”

Not matter! I knew that I—But her father and mother were in the hall, and she was going to meet them, and somehow I dared not look at her as she passed.

“Mr. Lancaster is here.”

“Is he, my dear? I’m afraid we are a little late.”

Then the two old people were in the room, and Captain Cherrill was apologizing to me in his old-fashioned and courteous way.

“I am sorry, Mr. Lancaster—”

“O, it’s nothing, sir.”

I remember that we all of us looked again at Miss Sanchia’s wallpaper, and that she said it charmed her, perhaps because she wanted to please those two kind old people. I was feeling more and more inarticulate and shy. Something had happened to me, something so profound and tremendous that I wanted to be alone. I made some excuse about going up to measure the rooms, and

Captain Cherrill nodded.

“We mustn’t waste Mr. Lancaster’s time, my dear.”

It was the old lady who took me upstairs and showed me the three bedrooms. I suppose I must have measured the walls of Sanchia’s room, but somehow the mystery of that room scared me. All I remember is that there was white lilac in a vase on a chest of drawers.

I have the note-book in which I scribbled down my figures, and scribbled they were. My hands must have been shaky.

Captain Cherrill met me in the hall as I came down the stairs. The drawing-room door was shut.

“Have you got what you want, Mr. Lancaster?”

“Yes, sir. I will send you an estimate.”

Must I confess that the estimate I sent in was less than the work would cost?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I HAD some plans to complete, and I took them back with me to Frognal that evening, but I found that I was in no mood for work.

An evening in May with the birds singing, and the sunlight slanting through the young foliage of my beech tree, and something singing in my heart! Strange, sweet anguish, and exultation, and a kind of passionate awe. Do the young men of to-day fall in love as I fell in love with Sanchia Cherrill? I wonder! Such romantic mysticism seems out of fashion. I was consumed by an exultant restlessness. I walked down the lane, and through the purlieus of Stuccoville, until I came to the winding road that would take me to Sandrock Terrace. Dusk was beginning to fall, and the world smelt sweet.

She was playing her piano, but this time it was Schubert. I stood with my back to the garden wall, and felt that life had become wonderful, and tender and exquisite. My love, in the beginning, was boy's love. It seemed to be sufficient for me to be able to say to myself: "I may see her to-morrow." There was nothing greedy or possessive in my love. She seemed to me so wonderful, so impossibly fair and radiant that my self lost itself in adoration. I felt that I should be satisfied if I could see her now and again, and if I could speak a few words to her. I can smile when I hear our superior people describing this state as sex insanity; if it is madness, what a beautiful madness.

I remained there until the music ceased. I heard the closing of a window. A clock in the tower struck ten. The bush of white lilac overhung the wall, and I reached up, and was breaking off one flower spike when a figure loomed down on me. It seemed to have come sailing along on soundless feet.

"Hallo, what's the game?"

"O, nothing, officer."

"Stealing flowers, what!"

"No, not exactly."

He did not recognize me in the darkness, but I imagine he must have understood my case. I was just some sheepish swain waiting for a maid to steal out and whisper over a gate.

“Well, you’d better get along before I come back this way.”

“Yes, I’m going. No luck to-night.”

I believe he grinned at me with official tolerance, and he went one way, I the other.

Let me reconstruct the pattern as the various pieces of it fell into place.

I posted our estimate to Captain Cherrill, and I received a courteous little note from him accepting the figure, and remarking on its reasonableness. And could the work be put in hand at once? All our painters were engaged at the moment on two jobs in the town, but with romantic ruthlessness I decided to transfer two of them to Sandrock Terrace and they were to be our best and most steady men.

I walked up to Sandrock Terrace to see Captain and Mrs. Cherrill and to arrange with them for the rooms to be prepared for our workmen. I was within three yards of No. 7’s gateway when Miss Cherrill emerged from it, a book under her arm. I am horribly sure that I blushed. I pulled off my hat and wished her good morning.

I remember the smile she gave me, and its completely frank and impersonal brightness.

“Is Captain Cherrill in?”

“Yes, Mr. Lancaster.”

“I have just come up to make arrangements.”

She had paused for a mere second or two, and somehow these few casual words desolated me. She passed on with her book, and I put my hat back on my head and walked up the path, realizing with acute self scorn that I was to her just an anonymous young man, a member of a firm of local builders. It was not a question of whether she liked me or not. I did not belong to her world, and in the nature of things I was not man to her, but a kind of commercial lay figure. What more could I expect?

Was I angered by her frank indifference? Yes, but my anger was not against her, but against myself. I rang the bell, and stood on the doorstep calling myself a preposterous fool. I seemed to fall into a pit of passionate self-humiliation. When the door opened I did not hear it.

“What do you want, please?”

I turned to confront a little, stolid maid.

“I am from Banyards, the builders, to see Captain Cherrill.”

She told me to step into the hall, and closing the door and leaving me there, she went up the stairs.

I heard her say: "A young man from Banyards, sir."

She, too, left me no illusions. I was just the young man from Banyards.

I remember thinking to myself that evening as I shoved my lawn mower savagely over the Frogna! grass, that if I had stuck to my idea of becoming an architect, I might have made myself eligible for the Cherrill world, but, on the other hand, I might never have set eyes on Sanchia Cherrill.

I was in a tempestuous mood. My feeling of inferiority had roused in me an insurgent restlessness. I found myself dreaming, as the machine rattled over the grass, of the splendid and singular things that a man might do to exhibit himself as a hero before the eyes of a particular woman. Had I been Ivanhoe, and Sandbourn the England of Richard Cœur de Lion? Yes, and I should have chosen Beverley Bullstrode for the villain of the great romance. Spears and two galloping horses, and Sanchia sitting in some flowered gallery watching us.

A voice broke in upon my dreams, the voice of Sarah Pawley.

"Your supper's ready, Mr. Jack."

Supper!

"All right, I'll be in directly."

"I've got steak and onions for you, Mr. Jack."

Steak and onions!

I decided that it was my business to inspect the work our men were doing at No. 7 Sandrock Terrace. I put on my hat, told old Ventriss that I should be out for an hour, and started on my way. I had got as far as the end of the terrace when my courage failed me. I faltered, turned back, and retreated to the bottom of the hill. I was conscious of behaving like a futile and temperamental fool. I became suddenly exasperated with my silly sensitiveness, and facing about, re!climbed the hill. I found myself on the doorstep of No. 7, and ringing the bell. The same stolid little maid answered it.

"I have come to see how the work is getting on."

She let me in, and with my hat in my hand I climbed the stairs, and opened

the door of a room from which came the sounds of paste brushes at work. Their flip-flopping was suddenly penetrated by the shrill whistling of a popular contemporary tune.

I threw the door open and surprised the offender.

“Stop that whistling, Smith.”

The fellow stood and stared at me, his brush poised in mid-air. He must have wondered at my savage tone, for I did not often snap at the men.

“All right, Mr. Lancaster. I didn’t mean no harm.”

“This isn’t a pub or the paint shop. Don’t forget it.”

He returned rather sulkily to his work, and after looking round, I closed the door and began to descend the stairs. The room they were working in was Sanchia Cherrill’s room, and I was not going to have it desecrated by desultory whistlings by a man named Smith.

The sitting-room door opened unexpectedly as I was passing it.

“O, Mr. Lancaster.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was Captain Cherrill who was speaking to me.

“Come in a moment, Mr. Lancaster.”

I walked in and found myself face to face with the one creature I had begun to fear most in all the world. She was standing by her piano, one hand resting on the keyboard, her face somehow aloof and strange.

“My daughter tells me her piano needs tuning. We thought you might know of someone—”

I looked at Captain Cherrill. It seemed to me that I dared not look at her.

“Gassons who keep the music shop in High Street are the best people, sir. I had my piano from them.”

I was aware of Captain Cherrill’s face expressing polite surprise.

“You too are a pianist, Mr. Lancaster?”

“No, sir, hardly that. I think you will find Gassons reliable. By the way, sir, I hope our men have not been disturbing you?”

“O, no, Mr. Lancaster. Very decent fellows.”

“I caught one whistling just now, and I stopped him. Just thoughtlessness.”

I backed towards the door, and as I reached it I could not help glancing at the figure by the piano. Our eyes met. She smiled at me.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster.”

I went out feeling like an intoxicated boy.

On my next two visits of inspection I did not meet any members of the Cherrill family. Either they were not at home, or not at home to a young man visiting the house in the course of business. I was both acutely disappointed and acutely relieved. I found that I had to will myself into entering this mysterious house, and that while I was in it all my senses were tense and alert. I might have been a thief sneaking up the stairs, listening for any sound, both dreading and desiring to be surprised.

Our men had finished papering and painting Miss Sanchia’s room, and were helping the stolid little maid to move the furniture back into it from the spare room where it had been stored. I remember Smith looking at me a little anxiously, as though he thought I might object to their acting as movers of furniture.

“Just giving the girl a hand, sir.”

“Quite right, Smith. Help in any way you can.”

“We’re going to do the lady and gentleman’s room next, sir. Shall we do the moving?”

“Of course.”

I stood for a moment in Sanchia Cherrill’s room. Was she pleased with the new paper? It looked to me very flowery and charming, and our men had done their work well. The window was wide open to help to rid the room of the smell of the new paint, and I went to it, and leaning out, saw Miss Cherrill entering the garden gate. She glanced up at the window and saw me.

I drew back, hurried out of the room and down the stairs. I had an absurd feeling that I ought to explain my being at her window, and apologize for it. She must have lingered in the garden, for when I came out of the house I found her standing on the little lawn, and facing the sea.

It occurred to me that she had turned aside deliberately so that we should not meet in the hall or at the door. My silly, sensitive self rushed to the assumption that she was avoiding me as one avoids meeting someone to whom one may have to say polite nothings. I made straight for the gate, raising my

hat as I passed.

“O, Mr. Lancaster—”

I swung round, and I must have seemed to her an awkward, self-conscious young ass.

“I am so pleased with the room.”

“Thank you, Miss Cherrill. I had just been up to see how it looked. I’m afraid the fresh paint is smelling a good deal.”

Was she gently and secretly amused by my gawkishness? I had taken off my hat, and was holding it with both hands.

“O, never mind. And thank you for telling us about Gassons. Their tuner has tuned my piano.”

“I hope the result was—?”

“Quite. He made some adjustments. Pianos do not like being moved.”

I simply could not find anything intelligent to say. I put on my hat, took it off again, and backing down the path, caught a heel against the tiled edging, and nearly overbalanced.

“Thank you, Miss Cherrill. Good morning.”

I wanted to kick myself when I got outside the gate.

I remember Mr. Banyard giving me an appraising and quizzical look in the office one Saturday morning. It had become my business to pay the men, and I used to go to the bank when it opened at ten o’clock and draw the necessary cash. Old Joe did not approve of our keeping more than a pound or two in the office safe, for it was an ancient strong-box, and I don’t suppose it would have baffled an expert cracksman.

I was supposed to be checking up some figures, but I am afraid I had floated off into a day-dream, and was staring out of the window at a great white cloud which was sailing across the strip of blue sky.

“No Sunday dinners this week, Jack.”

“What, sir?”

“I said, no Sunday dinners for our chaps this week.”

Incredible though it may sound I had forgotten that it was Saturday morning, and that I should have been at the bank drawing the men’s pay. I

pushed my chair back, laughed, and went to collect the cheque which always lay ready on Mr. Ventriss's desk. Old Banyard always signed this particular cheque.

"I'll soon put that right, sir."

I walked to the door and out into the yard, and Old Joe followed me.

"No hats either, Jack."

I had forgotten my hat, and in those days public convention insisted upon hats. I went back and fetched it. Old Joe was waiting for me in the yard, with his hands cocked under his coat-tails.

"You're in love, my lad; that's what's the matter with you."

I believe I blushed.

"In the spring of the year, sir, a young man's thoughts—"

But he was staring me hard and straight in the face.

"That's so. But is it serious, my lad? No business of mine, of course, and yet, it is."

I understood him, but not completely so.

"Yes and no, I won't let it make an ass of me. One ought to attend to business."

He was still staring hard into my eyes.

"I'm not worrying about business. And I'm not your father, my lad, but marriage is about the bloodiest box of tricks a man can play with. I wouldn't care a twopenny damn about most fellow's romances, but—"

Now, I understood him.

"I think you have been the best friend I have ever had, sir."

"Bosh, my boy. I'm not being sentimental."

"I know, sir. But if something has happened to me, it won't do me any harm. It can't."

I saw his old eyes gleam out suddenly.

"Don't tear your heart out, Jack, about any woman."

"I won't, sir."

"It isn't worth it."

I was giving my Saturday afternoons to gardening, and becoming something of an enthusiast, for though the pelargonium, white marguerite and lobelia tradition still prevailed, Miss Jekyll and Robinson of Gravetye were in rebellion, and setting the flowers free. I suppose I ought to have been playing cricket, but I am sorry to say that cricket bored me, and lawn tennis was a game played unseriously by the superior few. Moreover, mere games did not tempt my creative urge. I wanted to be able to see the things which my head and hands had created.

At Frognal I had obtained permission to lop branches and cut back straggling shrubs, and the picture I had set myself to paint was that of a cottage garden, a seeming disorder of spontaneous floweriness, the most difficult of all gardens to plan. I had my roses, standards and bush and climbers, clematis, honeysuckle, lilies—Madonna, martagon and Tiger, delphiniums, sunflowers, hollyhocks, pinks, sweet william, canterbury bells, stocks and snapdragons, resida, lavender. I kept my little lawn and an old cherry tree, a white heart, in the middle of this flowery mass, and in this dim green secret place my garden had become a little glowing tangle of scent and colour.

I was in my shirt sleeves, cutting the grass that afternoon when I heard voices in the lane. The light mowing-machine of those days was a noisy and chattering contraption, and I stopped pushing the mower and stood listening. It was not mere idle curiosity, but the voices seemed familiar.

I heard a girl's voice say: "There is a cottage here. Let's ask."

The Cherrills! I had my hands on the handle of the mower, and I was facing towards the gate. I saw a figure in a flowery frock, and holding a rose-coloured sunshade over a picture hat, appear at the gate.

"Excuse me, can you tell us the way—?"

And then she recognized me. I saw a smile come into her eyes.

"Why, it's Mr. Lancaster."

Her father joined her at the gate. He looked very tall and debonair in a grey tailed coat and trousers; he was wearing a grey bowler hat, and carrying gloves and a Malacca cane.

"Why, so it is, Mr. Lancaster."

Was I annoyed at being caught working in my shirt sleeves? I don't think I was conscious of any such snobbery, because I was so helplessly paralysed by my awareness of her beauty. Lovely she was, and even more strangely so in

that flowery frock. I must have stood and stared like a ploughboy at her.

Captain Cherrill helped me to remember that I was a rational being.

“We are looking for High Field, Mr. Lancaster, General Beauchamp’s place.”

I understood. Probably they were returning a state call upon the people at High Field.

“It is right at the top of the lane, sir, nearly on the Ridge.”

Miss Cherrill was looking over my gate.

“What a sweet place!”

I felt myself blushing.

“Yes, it is rather.”

Captain Cherrill came and stood beside her.

“By Jove, Lancaster, exquisite. What roses! You live here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you your own gardener?”

“Yes, in my spare time.”

I happened to glance at Sanchia Cherrill’s face, and its expression fascinated me. She was looking at my garden as a woman looks at a small child or a puppy at play, with a little smile of infinite tenderness, laughter and sadness mingled. And somehow she seemed different to me, even more mysterious while becoming simply woman, and so profoundly did her beauty move me that I was suddenly inspired to ask them in.

“Would you care to look at the garden, sir? But, perhaps you haven’t time.”

I glanced at Captain Cherrill as I spoke.

“Why, yes, Lancaster. We are in no hurry.”

I gave the mower a push, and moved towards the gate, but Miss Cherrill had opened it with one white-gloved hand. I saw her furl that pink sunshade as though such artifices were superfluous in a garden.

“Did you do all this yourself?”

Her eyes looked frankly into my face, and somehow my fear of her grew different. But why should I fear? I had the feeling that her nature was as lovely

as her face.

“Yes. I wanted a cottage garden, not rows of geraniums and lobelia.”

“A cottage garden?”

“Yes.”

So, she understood that. But being what my whole soul believed her to be, I knew that she must understand.

Captain Cherrill was inspecting my roses.

“Why, you are an artist, Lancaster. Is this Frau Karl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prune them yourself?”

“Yes.”

“By Jove, I think there is nothing like a perfect rose.”

“I agree, sir,” and I am afraid I was looking at his daughter.

For she was standing on my little lawn, half under the shade of the old cherry, and a flicker of sunlight and of shadow played upon her flowery frock. She seemed to have forgotten my presence, but I was quite content to be forgotten so long as I could stand and look at her without feeling like a voiceless oaf. I could suppose that she was finding this little flower patch of mine beautiful, which indeed it was, and then the thought came to me that if we both loved beauty, we were no longer strangers, but children of another and classless world.

“What’s this rose, Lancaster?”

I turned to the old man.

“William Allan.”

“Of course, how stupid of me. I see you have the good old pink cabbage. Nothing like it.”

I had a knife in my pocket, and I cut a William Allan Richardson bud for the captain, and a white rose for the daughter. Would she think me impertinent if I offered it to her? I dared the adventure.

“Would you care for this, Miss Cherrill?”

She looked at me, and then at the rose, and held out her hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster.”

It was old Cherrill who remarked upon my cottage. He said that it was a charming little place, pricking its ears amid the trees, and that it reminded him of a house he had lived in as a boy. But was it not rather dark with that big beech over-shadowing it? I said that I rather liked a dim, religious light, and he countered me by saying that old dogs liked the sun.

“Would you care to see inside, sir?”

He pulled out his watch.

“Why, yes, I should, Lancaster. Plenty of time. I don’t know why, but I always find houses interesting.”

I led the way into the little hall, picking up my coat from a seat as I passed. I remembered that I had put fresh flowers into the vases of my little parlour, and I was glad. It seemed strange to me that Sanchia Cherrill should be in my house. It was as though mystery and romance had entered it. Old Cherrill had taken off his hat. His daughter had crossed the threshold of my room.

She stood a moment in silence, looking about her, and then she saw my piano. The keyboard was open, and a piece of music lying on the rack. I saw her smile and walk to the piano, and look at the music. It was Chopin’s Sixth Waltz.

Her eyes came round to mine.

“You, too, Mr. Lancaster.”

I felt confused and voiceless. The coincidence was more poignant than she knew.

“I do my best. I’m afraid I’m merely a strummer.”

What was it that moved her to lay her parasol and my rose on a chair, and sit down on my stool, and try my piano? She played a few bars of the piece, her head thrown back, her eyes looking into the distance. I was like a man to whom the gods have given some miraculous gift. I could say that her hands had touched my piano.

She withdrew them, let them lie in her lap for a moment, and then rose from the stool.

I said: “I’m afraid it is not a very good piano.”

She smiled at me, and then glanced at the name of the makers, but she did not say what she thought of the instrument. Instead, she raised her eyes to a bowl of roses that stood on the lid.

“You like a room to smell of flowers?”

“Yes.”

“So do I. One misses them in winter.”

Three minutes later they were gone, following the leafy tunnel of the lane towards the Beauchamp mansion, and I was sitting at the piano tentatively touching the notes upon which her fingers had rested.

How wonderful!

And she had taken my rose with her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



DOES love make snobs of us?

I know that there were elements in my life that I should like to have concealed from Sanchia Cherrill. I did not want her to know that my father had kept a draper's shop, and my mother a lodging-house on the Sandbourn front. In a pure democracy would such social disharmonies cease to be? Granted equality of income and equality of opportunity, would our little prides and prejudices disappear, or would the Expert with his Civic Crown despise John Smith whose humble social service was devoted to the hygienic collection of the community's rubbish? Man, as yet, is no angel. He remains a creature of the flesh, whipped by primordial, cellular urges. I am afraid I am still possessed by a profound distrust of the coldly impartial people whose social philosophy may shape so well on paper. Crowds are not always controllable by the men in armchairs.

I had not forgotten poor Rose Pawley, or the shoddiness of Tyler's Terrace.

I had been up to Sandbourn cemetery on the south slope of Stonestile Hill to look at my mother's grave and to see that the cross I had had put up was square and true. There was a parcel of land about a furlong up Stonestile Hill which had been cultivated by a market-gardener, and on my way back I happened to notice that a board was announcing:

"This plot of Land for Sale."

It was one of Finch's boards, and I went in and explored. The ground did not amount to much more than an acre. It sloped gently to the south, and would lend itself admirably to the laying out of a little cottage estate. I happened to know that Stonestile Hill was sewered and water-mained as far as the cemetery, and that the local Gas Co. had a pipe laid to within a hundred yards of this site.

I was coming out of the gate, after talking to a man who was planting celery in a trench, when I met the last person I had expected to meet, Miss Cherrill. I can only suppose she had been exploring Stonestile Hill and the wooded country below Maskell's Manor.

I took off my hat to her. We were going the same way, and I wondered whether I dared presume to walk with her down Stonestile Hill into the town. If I was embarrassed, she was not. She possessed an air of exquisite naturalness which should be the flower of gentle breeding.

She paused, and I saw her glance at Finch's board.

"Are you interested in vegetables as well as roses, Mr. Lancaster?"

Her light touch gave me my opening.

"No. As a matter of fact I am interested in a building site."

"A house for someone?"

"No, cottages."

She stood a moment, and then walked slowly on, and I dared to walk with her. Should I be repulsed? Should I ask her—?

"Cottages?"

"Yes, for some of our workmen. You see, Miss Cherrill, some cottages are not fit to live in."

She looked at me with her clear, frank eyes, and I saw that she was interested. And if I could interest her, I had the right to walk at her side.

"You mean bad cottages?"

"Yes. One of our men lost his wife last winter."

"How?"

"Consumption."

"How tragic!"

"It was. Such a good chap. He and his wife were devoted to each other."

"And it shocked you?"

"Yes. One has to be shocked sometimes, you know."

She walked on in silence for some seconds.

"So, you want better cottages for your men?"

"I do."

"Isn't it rather unusual, Mr. Lancaster, for employers to think of such things?"

It was then that the vital inspiration came to me. Why should I hide behind

snobbery? Why should I not tell her just what my origins had been? Would she not think better of me if I had the courage to be honest.

“I think that may depend, sometimes, on one’s heritage.”

“Always?”

“Not always. Some of the employers who have come from the working classes are the hardest of masters.”

“And you?”

“My father kept a draper’s shop, and committed suicide. My mother ran a lodging-house on the parade. She sent me to that school down there, St. John’s College. You can just see its bald red face. When my mother died, I joined Mr. Joseph Banyard.”

I felt myself walking on glass, and broken glass at that. How would she take this confession of mine? Moreover, was I not being something of a prig in thrusting it upon her? She was walking beside me in silence, as though my rather crude confession had embarrassed her, and she did not know what to say to me.

But I was wrong. She said a thing to me that I was never to forget, and for which I always blessed her.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster, for telling me this. I think it very brave of you.”

So, she understood that to me it had been an act of courage. And was she wise as to the world’s prides and prejudices, and to the snobbery that caged up a man like I was? She was.

I heard her say: “Please don’t misunderstand me?”

“How, Miss Cherrill?”

“That it was necessary. I mean, that one’s ideals don’t matter more than our little social vulgarities.”

What a phrase from a girl of her class and years! It astonished me.

“Thank you, Miss Cherrill. But they do matter, as the world is at present.”

“I know.”

“One may love all sorts of things, books and music and a beautiful landscape, but if one happens to be a tradesman, one is not supposed to be sensitive, or to have ideals. But, forgive me, I’m ranting, which is loutish.”

She gave me a sudden smile.

“I don’t think so.”

We had come to the point where the three roads merged in the centre of Stuccoville, and I raised my hat to her.

“I have to turn down here. Thank you for what you said to me, Miss Cherrill.”

Again she smiled.

“I hope you will build your cottages, Mr. Lancaster.”

“I’ll try to.”

What tragic dreams and illusions her kindness roused in me! It was not that I became an inflated and purblind fool, believing that because my dream-woman had smiled upon me, I could dare to think of assaulting and carrying social barricades. Perhaps I did dream a little, because my love for her was a young man’s love, and because her spirit seemed as lovely as her face. I do know that she inspired me towards a kind of recklessness. I was no longer content to potter about in Sandbourn, painting other people’s houses. I wanted to build houses, hundreds of houses, pour my creative urge over the landscape, for that seemed to be my destiny.

But I took up with Old Joe the question of the Stonestile Hill site, and the building of cottages. I suggested putting my own capital into the venture. He listened to me with his lower lip pushed out, and his eyes bright under their bushy eyebrows.

“Wait a bit, my lad. Sure of the ground?”

“Come and see it.”

He had his dogcart out and we drove up Stonestile Hill, and getting a man to hold the horse, went in and surveyed the ground. Old Joe did not say much to begin with. He prowled about, and sniffed, and cogitated.

“What about sewerage and water?”

I told him that these services would be at our disposal. I suspect that he knew it as well as I did, but he was playing his game.

“Well, we’ll do it, Jack. You go and see Finch about the title and price.”

“We can use my capital.”

“Fudge! I’m not exactly a pauper. It’s my job if it is anybody’s. You keep your nest egg. You may find another use for it.”

He pushed his hat back and spat.

“When I was a lad, I wanted to get busy and spread myself. I did, in a way. Feeling like that, Jack?”

“You mean, building, developing?”

“Yes.”

“I do.”

He grinned at me.

“I rather thought so. I rather hoped you had that sort of stuff in you. Keep your eyes skinned for your chance.”

“Land?”

“Exactly. The lords of creation have been sitting on the land. No vulgar change, my dear. Privilege and property. But unless I’m wrong this world is changing. The Tories will have to come into the market with their land. And let me tell you one thing, Jack.”

“What, sir?”

“No one can be quite so crooked as a gentleman when he deigns to do business.”

“Crooked?”

“Yep. Like this. They’re such superior people that keeping their word with a tradesman sometimes doesn’t matter. They think themselves privileged to forget a promise, or to break it. What would be dishonest in us is with them the right of the great man to do just what he damned well pleases. They regard business as dirty, and if it happens to be so, they just look over the top of your head, and let their agents do you.”

“I can’t think that’s true, Joe. Not in every case.”

“Not in every case. There are gentlemen and gentlemen. But you wait and see, my lad.”

I called next morning on Finch of Snellgrove & Finch. I liked Finch. He was much of my age and feeling about life as I did, for Sandbourn was blockaded by a few people like the Bullstrodes and the Mallards of Maskell’s Manor who owned all the hinterland and would not sell a square yard of it. Rudlake was the most extraordinary example of such feudalism. Practically the

whole village was the property of the Earls of Blueborough, and they could say who should live in the village and who should not.

Finch gave me the details of the Stonestile Hill site, and when we had discussed them and I had told him I would come to a decision with Old Joe, we began to talk of social things. County Councils had just been instituted, and Finch, who was all for change and progress, as youth is, piqued me by saying that it was high time the community took more charge of its own affairs.

“People like us are crowded out, Lancaster. Not enough scope for a fellow with push and go.”

“Feeling like that?”

“I am. And you?”

An idea came to me.

“If I had the chance, Finch, I’d like to build and build big. Do what the people who built Stuccoville did, but differently and better.”

He laughed.

“That would suit our book. But the land? I have had a dozen people in here after land. Wanting something new for themselves. Our damned autocrats won’t part with an acre. They regard the suggestion as an impertinence.”

“Yes, land, Finch. By the way, if you should ever hear of anything coming into the market, you might let us know.”

“I will.”

“The great thing is to be in early.”

“That’s it, Lancaster. As a matter of fact I am not so sure that some of these nobles are not feeling the pinch. Farming going to pot. Well, if I get as much as a rumour, I’ll pass it on.”

“Thanks. Old Joe and I have some capital to play with.”

“Old Joe must be a warm man.”

We brought our piece of land on Stonestile Hill. It was just over an acre, and I drew out a plan, the lay-out to take the form of a widely splayed V, with twelve semi-detached cottages so grouped that each would get its share of sunlight and of view. In those days we were not limited as to the number of cottages that could be erected per acre, but each of our twelve would have a little garden, back and front, and air and light. I roughed out a sketch of two of

the cottages for Old Joe, trying to keep in my mind the picture of an English country house in miniature. I did not want to build yellow brick boxes, flat faced and wall-eyed, but little homes with an expression of their own, sitting down on the soil as though they had grown there. To be cheap it is not necessary to be ugly. The cottages were to be built of a soft brown brick that could be turned out by a local brickfield, and roofed with red tiles that would weather in a few years to a pleasant colour. Each cottage was to have a parlour, and a kitchen-living-room, and three bedrooms. In those days we did not budget in workmen's homes for baths.

Old Joe liked my sketch, and though he grunted over it approvingly, he was a stickler for detail.

“Make a pretty pair, Jack. What about the cost?”

One could “cube” at sixpence or so a foot then, for labour was cheap.

“One ought to be able to put up a pair for three-fifty.”

I could see that he was doing sums in his head.

“Three and six a week; seven bob the two; a bit over sixteen pounds a year. Five per cent would be seventeen-ten. Then there is a road, my lad, and your yearly put-by for repairs.”

“Supposing you got three and a half or four per cent, Joe?”

I was calling him Joe, or Uncle Joe, now. He looked at me quizzically.

“Well, I don't know. After all, Jack, if one has good men one shouldn't scrape the bone with them. Chaps like Beeson and Pawley have been with us for years.”

“Contented men, good work, sir. Forgive me being Sunday-schoolish.”

“Not bad philosophy, Jack. I'll build those cottages. And I'm going to have a little game with the men.”

His game proved to be an unusual effort for those *laisser-faire* times. He called a meeting of our regular hands in the office on Saturday evening. He gave them beer and tobacco, and a characteristic address. He told them that we proposed to build cottages for our regular staff, and that these cottages would transcend Tyler's Terrace.

“Now, listen, my lads, the quicker those cottages are built, the less they will cost. So, you see, you can save me in wages.”

The worker can be a suspicious soul, and his suspicion has had abundant justification. I saw one or two of the fellows glance at each other meaningly,

but chiefly I was interested in Jim Pawley's pink face with its extraordinarily honest blue eyes. He looked a little puzzled, like a boy at school groping for the right answer to the teacher's question.

I knew Old Joe was being mischievous, and I was enjoying the joke.

"Well, doesn't any chap see the point?"

There were uneasy fidgetings, and then I saw Jim's blue eyes blink.

"We might get it back in less rent."

Old Joe chuckled at him.

"Good lad, go up top. I'm not telling you to sweat yourselves so I can take extra profits. We'll keep figures; and any man can see them when the cottages are up. Don't look down your nose, Smith. I mean what I say."

Smith found a sudden, unsure grin.

"It don't sound like business, somehow, Mr. Banyard."

"O, it doesn't, doesn't it? Well, I'm an old man, and some people call me a miser. But I'm not going to rag more rent out of you chaps than three and a half per cent. Do you know what that means, Smith?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, sir."

"Three and six a week for a good cottage and a bit of garden, and free sunlight. Damn it, man, I'm not talking charity. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Smith grinned at him.

"Well, it seems a new sort of idea to me."

"Fudge, it's just common sense, man, but, by Jingo, it does take years to grow it. Fill up your glasses. Beer's good, but brains are better. That's why Mr. Lancaster here isn't going to lose us business."

I was feeling rather a fine fellow about those cottages. I wanted to tell Miss Sanchia Cherrill about them, and perhaps to pose before her as a social reformer. I wished my armour to shine, though it may have been poor, tin-plate, theatrical stuff.

We were redecorating another house in Sandrock Terrace, and I am afraid my estimate for the work was not as sentimental as the one I posted to Captain Cherrill. I walked up every other day to see how our men were getting on, but I was not fortunate in wooing a coincidence. I varied the time of my visits, until I am sure our painters suspected me of trying to catch them enjoying a smoke

and an easy, but I could not meet one of the Cherrill family.

Unobservant idiot! In passing No. 7, I noticed that the blinds were down, and drew the obvious conclusion. The Cherrills were away on a holiday and No. 7 was shut up.

One afternoon I had a vision of another order vouchsafed to me. I had climbed to the top floor of No. 23 and walked into a back bedroom to inspect work that had been completed. Having satisfied myself that there were no creases in the wallpaper and that the paint was as it should be, I stood at the window and became absorbed in the view. I found that I was looking at the uplands of Pink Farm with its chessboard of fields and hedges, a very gentle landscape swelling under the blue sky. I saw the pale stubbles where wheat had been reaped, and the thin green upland pastures, and cattle grazing. The farmer who farmed Pink Farm was a gentleman farmer who held the freehold of those hundred odd acres, and I had heard rumours that times were bad with him.

Standing at that upper window the inspiration seemed to float in to me.

What a building site was this for a new and more modern Sandbourn! What if I were the owner of Pink Farm, with the capital and the courage to develop it? I had some capital, but should I possess the courage and the capacity to carry through such an adventure in brick and mortar? The speculative builder! But might not the quality of one's speculation transcend the mere unæsthetic considerations of profit and loss? One might build for beauty.

Would my public appreciate beauty, and be willing to pay for it?

Also I should be wiping out the arcadian landscape, and spoiling the view from the Cherrill back windows.

I must confess to the occasion that brought my castles of sentiment crashing like the walls of Jericho, and which transformed me into a bitter realist. September came. Being curious to know whether the Cherrills were back at No. 7, I was moved at the end of the day's work to make a detour on my way back to Frogal, and to pass along Sandrock Terrace.

It was serene September weather, sunny and still, and I had reached a point where the road looped itself round the shaggy boskiness of the old shrubbery when I made a discovery that halted my errant curiosity. I saw a groom holding two saddle-horses outside the gate of No. 7. I was about thirty yards from the man with the horses, and it was pure assumption on my part that he and horses were associated with the Cherrill gate, but assume it I did. I drew back, and standing close to the railings, found that I could observe the gate of

No. 7 through the branches of a straggling laurel.

I remember feeling rather ashamed of lurking there like a sneak-thief watching somebody's gate. Was this the kind of homage I was proposing to render to Sanchia Cherrill? I was on the edge of whipping myself back or on when I heard voices, and saw the groom turn his horses towards the gate of No. 7. I knew it so well by the big lilac that overhung the wall.

A man came out of the gate, and with hat raised, turned to speak to someone in the garden.

Sir Beverley Bullstrode!

I heard him say in that throaty and Olympian voice of his: "Well, Saturday, at the Beauchamps. I'm afraid I am not an expert at that bumble-puppy game."

He stood there, with his hat off, a man who was exercising charm. His pose was that of a fellow who was smitten, and deigning to show it.

I can remember my hatred of him blazing up.

But, she had come to the gate. I could see her standing there.

"What dear horses! I wish I could ride."

"Ever tried?"

"No."

"I must teach you. I'll swear you have the figure and the hands of a horsewoman."

He loitered on the path, glowing at her. Teach her to ride! Damn him, why didn't he get on his horse and go? I believe my hands were gripping the railings.

"Well, till Saturday. Will you tolerate me as a partner?"

"Perhaps."

She was still at the gate, and I saw him put on his hat, and mount his horse. He looked well on a horse, damn him! And did she think so? But suddenly I realized that he might be coming my way, and that I did not want to be caught loitering behind these shrubs, and certainly not by Beverley Bullstrode. I fled, and storming down the hill, escaped by way of a flight of steps that led to Regal Terrace and the sea front.

More steps took me to the beach. I sat down under the sea-wall, and let my poor, blind jealousy rage. It was a calm sea, but all peace had passed from my soul.

Bullstrode! He, of all men! Was this superfine hulk of a man always to come riding into my life and make me feel furious and impotent and inferior? I felt my heart going as though I had been running hard up hill. I was not sane at the moment. Such emotion does not leave one sane.

I wanted to kill him.

I could understand how it had happened. He had met her at the Beauchamps or at one of those other houses up my valley. He too had thought her—. But she was his world, not mine. Beaulieu could deign to meet Sandrock Terrace, and to spread the light of its male arrogance where mine would have shone impertinently. Did he love her? How could any one help loving her?

Presently, my lover's rage seemed to flicker out, and give place to bitter self scorn. I scourged myself with that scorn. Once again I was the lout despoiled of his trousers, and sneaking home by devious ways in the darkness to the door of my mother's lodging-house. I fell into a sort of cold black pit of self shame and humiliation. No longer did I lust to kill my enemy, but to turn my rage against myself. I was nothing, and less than nothing, a tradesman who had allowed himself to become a poor, mooning, romantic fool.

I remember striking the shingle with a clenched fist, and the stones drew blood from my knuckles.

“Get up, you idiot! How they would laugh at you if they knew.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



*B*UT, I am becoming emotional, and indulging in self-pity. A gentleman may seduce his parlour-maid without suffering undue social shame, but it is conventionally indecent for a young gentlewoman to look with eyes of love upon grooms and draper's assistants. Such adventures may be dreamed of, but they are not consummated, save by the Castlemaines of this world. Moreover, my cynicism rings like a bad florin.

I suppose I cannot have been quite sane during this season, nor does nature plan for sanity at such times. I was haunted by a fragment of gossip that had seemed without special significance until Beverley Bullstrode had come riding into Sanchia Cherrill's life. Sandbourn had it that the Bullstrodes had always thrashed their women, and that it was part of the family tradition and the privilege of beasts of honour. I could credit the Georgian Bullstrodes with such virile violence, but surely old Sir Perivale and his son had outgrown the barbaric excrescences of the male? And yet, my hatred of Beverley made anything seem possible, though I could not bring myself to believe that Sanchia Cherrill would see him otherwise than I did.

Naive egoism!

On that Saturday afternoon I worked in my garden. If the Cherrills were going to High Field I supposed that they would take the lane and pass the gate of Frogнал. The grass needed cutting and I brought out the mower, but any one troubling to listen to the machine's clatter would have wondered why the rhythm was so desultory. I was stopping continually to listen for the sound of voices in the lane.

One of the mansions in my valley possessed a turret clock, and I heard it strike two notes. Half-past three. It was September, and the days were shortening, and surely if Miss Cherrill was to play lawn-tennis she should have been at High Field by now? Some impulse made me go to the laurel hedge, and look over it and down the lane, and as I looked I saw a white figure appear where a beech tree threw its shadow across the lane. She was alone.

And suddenly I was afraid. A big, straggling laurel grew at the end of the hedge, and I turned and hid myself in its hollow shade. The thing was like a bower built of green branches, or a vast umbrella with its face turned towards

the western sun. I heard her footsteps in the lane, and I felt like a frightened boy, skulking there. The footsteps ceased. I realized that she had stopped at my gate.

I found that I could see her standing there outside my gate, for the hedge ran in a curve, and a squinthe in the foliage served me. She was all in white, and wearing a straw hat, and I suppose those clothes would have looked grotesque to a modern girl, but not on her. She carried a tennis racket in her hand. Had she some message for me? Should I show myself? But somehow her white shape seemed so far away and foreign to my little world that I had not the courage to confront her.

She stood there for several seconds looking at my garden, while I remained hidden like some poor Adam. I saw her turn away and walk on, and only then did I become aware of a dreadful hopelessness, of a shy fool's frustration. Why hadn't I seized my chance and spoken to her? I found myself rushing to the gate, but even before I reached it my yea had become a nay. I stood there, trembling, shocked by my own self scorn.

I went back to my mower. Had she seen the machine, and even if she had what significance could it have had for her? I drove the thing furiously up and down the lawn, but my wretched jealousy, and my sense of frustration would not let me be. Actually, I put on my jacket, and walked up to High Field as though I wanted to wound myself by listening and looking. But the hedges and trees of High Field baffled me. Voices I could hear, men's voices, but I could see nothing of the players. The tennis lawn was screened by a yew hedge and banks of rhododendron.

I recognized the Bullstrode voice.

"Forty love, I think."

Someone laughed. Beverley was being facetious.

"Can that happen at forty?"

"Your service, partner."

"I'm so sorry I'm serving so badly."

"Nothing matters, on certain occasions!"

Forty love! Love! The hot and polished bulk of a Bullstrode in full cry! God, how I hated that man! I went back to my garden, and with a kind of savage frenzy, finished mowing my grass as though I wanted to tire out the thing that was wounding me.

About six o'clock I put my tools away and went in to tea. Sarah Pawley was back with me, and on Saturdays there was always a special, home-made plum cake on the table. I liked my cakes rich and heavy and well stuffed with raisins, for I still had the stomach of a boy, but on this particular Saturday the cake did not tempt me. I sat and raged against myself and against my silly sensitiveness, and then I remembered that Sanchia Cherrill would have to pass my gate on her way home. If I was something more than a shy and pusillanimous fool I could dare to speak to her. Dare! Why this absurd dread of a girl in a white frock?

I lit a pipe, and going out into the garden, walked up and down the grass where the sound of my footsteps would not smother the sound of other footsteps. Sunset, and dew falling, and an autumn freshness in the air. This serene yet poignant evening will forever be very vivid to me, and my waiting in the slanting sunlight for the sound of my lady's footsteps. The Tennysonian touch! The black bat night flitting against a curtain of gold! I did not hear the sound of her feet, but the grinding of wheels and the beat of a horse's hoofs, and suddenly I understood.

Bullstrode was driving her home.

I knew that I did not want to be seen by them, or to see them together, and I turned back quickly to the cottage. I did not go in, but flattened myself against a corner where the smother of honeysuckle billowed out from the wall. I stood quite still. I told myself that I would not look, but look I did.

The dogcart and its two figures came into view above the top of the laurel hedge. Sanchia Cherrill's face was turned towards my garden. She must have said something to him about me, for I saw Bullstrode lean forward and look. I can see his big red face, with its arrogant fleshy fullness, teeth agleam, eyes ironical.

He said something to her. I could not distinguish the words, but the tone of his voice was contemptuous and final. I have often wondered what he said to her, and whether he put a great foot upon my reputation and squelched it as that of a dissolute young cad.

Dissolute!

The two figures passed away into the green twilight, and the sound of wheels and the beat of the horse's hoofs died away down the valley.

At supper the voice of Sarah Pawley reproached me.

"You didn't eat of my cake, Mr. Jack."

“No, Sarah. I’m sorry. It wasn’t the fault of the cake.”

“Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Just a bit liverish, Sarah.”

“I’d take a Beecham, Mr. Jack.”

My god, I think I would have taken a whole box of the things if the dose could have cured me of my love-disease!

For, instead of making me gentle, and filling my soul with transcendental loveliness, it was making me savage, and the hatred I felt for this other man was like a pirate’s bloody bandage round my head.

I met Sanchia Cherrill coming out of Nelson’s Library three or four days after I had seen her in the Bullstrode dogcart. I was going in for a book, she emerging with one and our confrontation was like a sudden clash of cold discords. For, as I raised my hat, I saw her eyes rest on my face for a mere instant with a kind of austere, serene unfriendliness.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Lancaster.”

She looked beyond and past me, but the aloofness of her young dignity, her cold and impersonal courtesy, stung me into daring to speak to her. I stood back, and tried to smile, but it must have been rather a grotesque and wilful creasing of my countenance.

“We are building our cottages, Miss Cherrill.”

She did not look at me as she passed.

“I am glad.”

Glad! I stood for a moment, watching her walk away up the High Street. Was this just snobbery? Was snobbery credible in such a creature? I turned into the shop, and began a desultory fumbling with the books on the library shelves, but I was not very conscious of what I did. I was seeing Bullstrode’s face, looming and red and massive, and hearing his gentleman’s voice saying some scathing and devastating thing about me.

“O, yes, that fellow Lancaster. A bad egg. We had to kick him out of Beaulieu for trying to seduce one of the maids.”

Almost, I could hear him saying that to her like a man referring contemptuously to the indiscretions of some obscure, backyard cur, and then going on to speak of sublunary things, books, or the sunset, or Swiss

mountains, or the charm of Italian landscapes. He had digressed for a moment from his high and gentlemanly path to give a dog a flick with his whip, and then passed on serenely to more adequate and stately matters.

Had he said some such thing to her?

I believed in my heart that he had.

But their romance fascinated me, for a romance it was to be.

On my way home from Roper's Row, I would diverge and prowl like some sulky and savage young beast along Sandrock Terrace. The Bullstrode horses or his dogcart seemed eternally outside the Cherrill house, with a groom in attendance, and I realized that Beaulieu was advertising to the world its homage. Once or twice I heard her piano being played, Chopin and Schubert. She was playing it to him, and I could picture the Bullstrode superman lounging on a sofa, and listening to her music, and gloating over a loveliness that he lusted to possess.

How I hated the man. I could dream of our meeting with cold steel, and of my plunging a foot of it into his big belly. The young savage in me felt bloody and murderous.

I could understand what he saw in her, but what could she see in him?

There were moments when I tried to be cool and impartial, and to envisage my enemy as the world saw him. Assuredly, public opinion, and the eyes of many women would discover in Sir Beverley Bullstrode a fine, upstanding, stately person. He was a man of the world. No doubt he could be gracious, and appear the great gentleman, when the stage was set to please him. He had prestige, glamour, an effulgence, the stateliness of Beaulieu and its splendid trees. A world that was still servile would not see him as I saw him, as the bully on horseback, a rather blatant and fleshly creature, a butcherly beast who had been educated to wear certain clothes and to cultivate particular manners.

Nor was I insensitive to the affectionate persuasions that might be conspiring to influence her choice. The Cherrills were not well off. As members of their class they might be a little dazzled by the glamour of Beaulieu. It would be a notable match for their daughter.

Lady Bullstrode of Beaulieu!

It shocked me to think that Sanchia Cherrill might not be uninfluenced by such splendour. It shocked me still more to think that the woman in her might welcome the lover in Bullstrode.

It was to me a kind of horror.

For, somehow, with an intuition that was as sensitive as a child's, I did divine in this fine stallion qualities that could be gross and cruel and carnal. I always thought of him as hot and perspiring, and smelling of the sweating male. The thought of him possessing that sweet body, of the hot bulk of him smothering her in gloating intimacies, made me mad. It nauseated me.

Moreover, he was using my lane as a lover's highway. I always thought of it as my lane. These little egoisms seem inevitable. He would often pass just after I had come back from work, high on his horse, and suggesting to me the successful lover's arrogance.

I remember him overtaking me one evening as the dusk was falling. His horse came trampling on my heels as though he too expected me to give way and take the hedge. I held to the middle of the lane. My whole body was taut and tingling. I know that I should have welcomed the chance of a battle with him.

He rode round me. I found him looking down at me with that glittering, supercilious grin of his.

"A little deaf, Lancaster, I think?"

I clutched at the implication. My wild hatred blazed into foolish truculence.

"No, neither deaf nor dumb. I walk where I please, Bullstrode."

"So I see. The middle of the road. That's the *bourgeois* ideal, Lancaster."

I looked up into his red face.

"And yours, to take the whole road, I suppose? Well, not from me."

My insolence seemed to amuse him.

"Don't be silly, Lancaster. Some things are so very unimportant."

He gave his horse a touch with his heels, and went trotting on under trees that were turning gold. Unimportant! I stood quite still for a moment, biting one of my fists, for the savage impulse had to be strangled. My urge had been to rush at him, pull him down from his horse, and smash my fists in his face. He might have been bigger than I was, but I felt that I was the stronger, with the strength of a man who worked.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



SO, I HAVE confessed to the murderous spirit in me. Now that I am old, and so many of us are dead, I can reflect upon this midsummer madness, and in the sweet serenity that has come to me in this winter of my life, wonder at my madness, and yet comprehend it.

Will man ever escape from the lust to kill?

Would he be man were he to lose these elemental urges?

I know that without the secret frenzy of my hatred I should not have accomplished the work that I had to do.

I remember reading the paragraph in the local paper.

“A marriage has been arranged between Miss Sanchia Cherrill, only daughter of Captain and Mrs. Cherrill of No. 7 Sandrock Terrace, and Sir Beverley Bullstrode, Bart. of Beaulieu.”

Arranged! How apposite the word seemed to me, for I continued to regard the affair as a conspiracy of circumstances. So much of life is a conspiracy of that order. I saw my love as the sacrificial victim, predestined to suffer, and I am afraid, that in my vanity and in my egoism, I pictured her as a tragic figure, pale and stately in the pride of a secret disillusionment, aloof, silent, pale. I even dreamed myself into the part of the ultimate hero, destined to rescue her from the tragic twilight of a fatal marriage.

How little did I foresee the actual tragedy, or that I should be involved in it.

But my madness continued, a young, Byronic mood. The crass selfishness of it has made me realize how little passionate love is to be trusted. I was unhappy, and to satisfy my vanity, I wanted her to be unhappy, to discover in this marriage mockery and bitterness. I could not efface my furious little self, though I suppose it was my almost insane hatred of the man she was to marry that made me a love-savage. In the words of some fierce old ballad, I would rather have seen her dead than mated to him.

What a paltry passion this seems to me now! Not until compassion touched me, a compassion that could prove on some occasions almost selfless, was I fitted to use that most blasphemed of all words, love.

But I had been wounded, and I cherished the wound. I needed drama, a self-set stage, some strutting-place for my offended self. I would leave Sandbourn. I would go to Australia, America, Honolulu. I would carve out for myself an alien career, to return ultimately and dramatically to this provincial world, rich, potent, singular. My furious impulses were energized by this vanity. I was more than a grown child behaving like a little Berserker in life's nursery.

I threw out dark and tremendous hints to the world. I should not be in Sandbourn long. The stuffiness of this wretched little town choked me. I had some destiny elsewhere, a career, fame, honour. I must have behaved like a rather ridiculous, turgid young clown, and my world must have been a little bored with me.

But I had kept my secret. I had no confidants, and I often wonder what Old Joe thought of my moodiness. I realize now, that for a quick-tempered man, he was most extraordinarily patient with me. It was as though he understood that I was walking on hot metal, and that until I tired of the business, I should not be normal man.

I remember blurting out to him that I thought of going to Australia. I remember the kind, funny way he looked at me.

“I got as far as taking my ticket for the Antipodes, once, Jack.”

“And wasted the money?”

“Not quite so. I entered it up afterwards as insurance against getting in a stew about—”

I expect my head went up with a jerk. About what? A woman? His abrupt biting off of the end of the sentence provoked me to the sudden suspicion that he was wiser as to my mental and emotional state than I knew.

“I suppose a man can have ambition?”

He crinkled up his eyes at me.

“He's poor stuff without it. But bolt it down, my lad, bolt it down. No use running off the rails.”

I was angry with him at the moment, but I was grateful to him when I came back to sanity.

Sanchia Cherrill was married in London. I believe that Sir Beverley and his wife travelled to Italy for their honeymoon, but I am rather vague about these details. It had seemed to be a somewhat precipitate and rhapsodical affair. All that I know is that I had seen the date mentioned somewhere, and that on the very day, an early November day, a Saturday, I wandered up to Pink Farm. I was feeling rather forlorn and miserable, and convinced that all the purpose had dropped out of my life.

I am afraid I trespassed on that Saturday afternoon. In the corner of a grass field adjoining the Rudlake—London road a grass knoll broke the contour of the ground like a round barrow. Years ago a windmill had stood upon the mound, and though the mill had vanished, its green tumulus gave one a splendid view over the countryside. I swarmed over a field-gate and climbed the mound and saw all Sandbourn spread about below me between the fields of Pink Farm and the grizzled sea. The woods were like hillocks of gold on the green slope. I could see Sandrock Terrace, but my thoughts seemed to recoil from that particular brick surface. I was realizing how abruptly the roofs of Sandbourn ended just south of Quarry Lane, and how suddenly the fields of the farm began. Why this arbitrary and abrupt contrast? Why had not Sandbourn spread northwards over this gentle plateau?

Inevitably, yet with a kind of leaping exultation, the vision came to me. What a stage was this for the setting of a new Sandbourn! Air, spaciousness, a splendour of sea and of sky! If a man were to build here, and build for a new generation, not as Stuccoville had been built, but with some vision, with a feeling for gardens, contours, floweriness, trees? What an adventure in bricks and mortar?

All the fierceness of my young frustrations seemed to fasten upon this creative thought. What if I were the man to build this new hill-town by the sea? Need one go to the Antipodes to impress one's personality upon life and one's fellows? I know that I was inflamed by the desire for self-expression, accomplishment, power; all the more savagely so on this unhappy day. I must have stood up there on my hillock for quite an hour, like a young Cortes scanning his Pacific, and the longer I gazed, the more conscious was I of the inevitableness of this landscape as I saw it. Some day all these fields would be covered with houses. And why should they not be my houses? I had no new empire to conquer like the Spaniard, but the scope that my vision in bricks and mortar offered me was spacious and vivid compared with the life I had been leading. I came down from that mound with a very live bee in my bonnet. Its buzzings may have been the trumpeting of an insect vanity, but my dream

was more than a dream.

And then, the strangest thing of all!

On the Sunday afternoon I was sweeping up autumn leaves in my garden when a small boy came to the gate. He had a letter in his hand, and he hailed me.

“Does Mr. Lancaster live here?”

“I’m Mr. Lancaster.”

He opened the gate and gave me the letter.

“Mr. Finch sent me up with it.”

“As amateur postman?”

He smiled at me. He was a pleasant and intelligent child, and I gave his sixpence.

But what had Finch to say, and with some urgency, and on a Sunday? I opened the letter and read.

“Dear Lancaster,

I have heard a rumour that Pink Farm is coming on the market. Thought you might be interested. I’ll worm around, and try and find out how much truth there is in the rumour.

We might both be interested.”

I was with Finch by nine o’clock next morning, after dashing into our office and telling Old Joe that I had a rather important piece of business to attend to. Finch confessed to me that his information with regard to Pink Farm had not reached him through quite legitimate channels. He had a friend in the office of a firm of local solicitors who had passed on the news to him. So, it was more than rumour. Keatley, who owned and farmed Pink Farm was on the financial rocks, and the freehold would have to be sold to satisfy the creditors.

“I thought you might be interested, Lancaster.”

“I should say I am. Will the sale be by private treaty or auction?”

“Auction, I should think.”

“How much land is there?”

“About a hundred and thirty acres.”

“What might it fetch?”

“As agricultural land, perhaps three thousand. That’s only a rough figure. But if it should be put up as land ripe for development—”

“I see. A more fancy figure.”

“Yes, but that will depend upon someone having eyes and a fancy. Who is there in this sleepy old hole?”

“My friends Hickman & Snoad?”

“Between you and me and the gatepost, Lancaster, they haven’t the spare cash.”

“Well, one of these damned landowners who sit on every acre. Bullstrode, for instance?”

“Ah, that’s a possibility. If you do put in for the farm, you might find Bullstrode against you.”

“He’s abroad at present.”

“Yes.”

“Look here, Finch, I’m grateful to you for this. Keep your ears open.”

“I will.”

“I’ll talk to Old Joe about it. I may as well tell you I have had my eyes on Pink Farm.”

“Development?”

“Yes.”

“Good business, Lancaster. We want someone to give Sandbourn a shock. I believe the place has a future if a man with vision and energy would take it in hand.”

I smiled at him.

“The business might be good for both of us, Finch.”

“Exactly. If you’re willing to work with me. You build houses; I sell or let ’em.”

“I shan’t give you a monopoly!”

“No, but if I’m worth while, you can judge me by results!”

I kept this pregnant piece of news to myself for the rest of the day. I had

been tremendously excited by it, but I wanted to think things over before tackling Uncle Joe. I must confess that I was just a little afraid of old Banyard and his mordant tongue. I knew that I could do nothing without the goodwill of my partner, and that my capital would not be sufficient for the launching and maintaining of such an enterprise. I should need more capital, someone to back me, and I could not imagine a bank financing the adventures of a youngster like myself. If Pink Farm was to be purchased, all my capital would be absorbed in the venture, and I should have no security to offer a bank, save perhaps a mortgage on the land. I did not want a mortgage round my neck.

Tom Ventriss had lit the gas in the office, and I was finishing off an estimate for some decorating when Old Joe came in. He had been out inspecting a roof that we were repairing on one of the local inns. It was a cold, raw night, and Old Joe's face was like the face of Jack Frost, and I wondered whether he was in a mood to listen to a young man's wildcat schemes.

"Shall you be in to-night, sir?"

He unwound the grey muffler he was wearing.

"Not much reason for going out. What's the business, Jack?"

"Something I want to discuss with you."

I found Mr. Banyard in that familiar upper room, sitting in his leather armchair beside the table on which stood a brass reading-lamp with a green glass shade. A fire was burning in the high, black grate, and I noticed that the blinds were up and the curtains undrawn. Mr. Banyard's telescope gleamed in a corner like a brass gun. He did what seemed to me a queer thing when I had closed the door. He put out a hand, and turning the wheel of the lamp, extinguished the flame. It popped and spluttered for a moment before going out.

"Sit down, Jack. Looking at the fire may be better than reading a book."

Before sitting down, some impulse took me to one of the windows, and the room was sufficiently dark for me to see the lights of Sandbourn below. They looked like yellow sparks caught in a great black web. And out yonder the harbour light shone like a big, solitary eye.

I came round to the fire and sat down.

"The lights o' London, Jack."

I was aware of him peering at me with a kind of grim, shrewd smile.

"Yes, always a bit strange, Uncle Joe."

“A boy’s book of adventure. Well, what’s the news?”

I blurted it out to him.

“I hear that Pink Farm’s for sale.”

He was silent for quite half a minute, and I listened to the tick-tock of the various clocks, and watched his face with the firelight shining on it. What would he say? Did he understand my meaning, and would he call me an inflated young fool?

“It is, is it? Brup, but I guessed it would be. Want to buy?”

“Yes.”

“Big ideas. Development, hey?”

“That’s my idea.”

He crowed at me.

“Be damned to you for a vain young pup! I never had a Pink Farm to play with.”

“So, you don’t approve?”

“Did I say so? Get along with you, young man, and don’t jump at conclusions. So, the idea is to sink every penny you’ve got in real estate, and then bankrupt the old firm?”

“That’s not my idea at all, sir.”

“Nor mine. There’s a decanter of port on the table, my lad. Have some.”

“If you are going to.”

“I am.”

I got up and poured out the wine, bending down to use the light of the fire, and my hand shook a little as I passed him his glass. He looked up and chuckled at me.

“I didn’t ask to have it on my trousers, my lad. Well, never mind. We’ll go and prowl round to-morrow, and spy out Canaan.”

Mr. Banyard had the dogcart out next morning, and we drove up through Stuccoville, with a lad on the back seat. It was a cold, bright morning, and Old Joe’s nose and cheeks were the colour of red wine, and from the way he flicked the horse with the whip I guessed that he was in a jocund mood. We

drove up as far as my old mill-mound, and leaving the lad to hold the horse, we climbed the field-gate and posted ourselves on the hillock. Old Joe was particularly silent, save for characteristic gruntings, and sniffings, for the cold drive had touched up his nose. He stood and surveyed the landscape, turning slowly on his big, black boots, his hands stuffed into his pockets. I was consumed with excitement, but I left him to scan the country like some old soldier surveying the field of battle. His grey-blue eyes were frost-bright in his ruddy face. At long last he extracted a red silk handkerchief from a pocket and blew his nose.

“What’s that over there?”

He fluttered his red handkerchief like a flag.

“Do you mean that chimney?”

“I do.”

He knew as well as I did what the object was, the chimney of the Sandbourn water-works and pumping station, but his question was a provocation.

“It would make it easy for water mains.”

“Exactly. Do you see how the land lies, Jack?”

“A fall each way.”

“The Rudlake road one side of it, Quarry Lane the other. A sewer up the Rudlake road, and another up the lane. All right for drainage.”

I was getting excited.

“What struck me was, Joe, that we had two frontages, and that we could cut roads of our own to develop the back land, and join up the Rudlake road with Quarry Lane.”

He gave me a shrewd look.

“That’s so. And that corner where the road joins the lane just on the edge of the town.”

“What could we do there?”

He chuckled at me.

“Sit on it, Jack, sit on it. If Sandbourn spreads over here, those sites might be a little gold-mine. Yes, it’s not a bad proposition.”

I felt like dancing on the mound.

“You see the railway, sir?”

“I do.”

“It runs on a slight embankment. Not too near, but near enough to give people in the trains a view of our shop-window.”

He gave me another look.

“The lad has eyes! Let’s go and look at the farm, Jack.”

It may be a truism that the most vivid moments of one’s life are associated with particular places or people. I had seen Pink Farm from a distance, but never intimately and near as Old Joe and I saw it on that crisp November day. The house stood a little apart from the buildings, which were grouped round a central courtyard. Its walls were pink, like its name, and it showed to me a cluster of high chimneys and sharp gables whose massive painted bargeboards were like bushy eyebrows. The windows were rather high and narrow, white casements above, sashes below. Pink Farm was a period house, with all that period’s affectations, but it had a peculiar and immediate charm for me, a mystery, a strangeness that was meant. Though it stood high, it gave me a feeling of shelter, for beyond the tangle of an old orchard, a belt of ilexes and Scotch pines broke the sea winds. Its garden was much like the orchard, tangled and wild, the rough lawn stippled with autumn leaves, and with an immense old yew shaped like a sugar-loaf guarding the white latticed porch.

I remember Old Joe sniffing and saying: “We could pull the old place down.”

Somehow, the idea of slaughtering the house shocked me. If Pink Farm was to be ours we could use the house as an estate office. In fact, in imagination I saw myself living here in the centre of the new world we might be about to create.

“Why pull it down? We could use the buildings and the yard as work-shops and store-rooms.”

Old Joe was fluttering his red handkerchief.

“That’s so. But aren’t we taking rather much for granted?”

Perhaps we were, but I had a feeling in me that Pink Farm was to be mine. Moreover, the place appeared to be deserted. We wandered about as we pleased, and no one asked us our business. I remember seeing a face at what must have been a kitchen window, but it was but a momentary glimpse, and the face vanished like some pale ghost mask. There were curtains at some of the windows, but the windows themselves were shut, nor could I see any

furniture, save the back of a dressing-table mirror in an upper room. We explored the garden and the orchard, and Old Joe's nose had collected a dewdrop. He said to me: "Feels as though someone had died there, Jack. I wouldn't call it a lucky house." I disagreed with him. My feeling was that Pink Farm was a forlorn old place asking for life to come back to it.

We did at last discover a tangible and articulate creature, a man barrowing manure out of a stable that smelled strongly of stale dung. He was dirty and laconic, and undersized, with three days beard on his chin, and a soiled slip of rag wound round one finger.

Old Joe addressed him.

"What's going on up here?"

The fellow stared at us sulkily.

"Nothin', as I knows of."

We saw that the stable held no horses, and that the cow-house doors were padlocked.

"So it seems," said Mr. Banyard. "Where's all your stock?"

"Sold at Rudlake Market last Tuesday."

"Just doing a bit of tidying up?"

The man spat and passed on with his barrow.

"I'm put off come Saturday. The ruddy ol' place can go to blazes for all I care."

We returned by way of the farm track to the Rudlake Road. It was more than a track, and it appeared to have been made up at no very distant date with good road-ballast. Old Joe sounded it with the heel of a big black boot.

"Plenty of good bottom here, Jack, and two hundred yards of it. One of your nice new roads almost waiting for you! Ever worked out the cost of a new road?"

I hadn't, and I said so.

"About the biggest item in the whole damned show, my lad. The thing is to use what God has given you."

"Frontages?"

"That's it. Begin on your frontages before you start throwing roads about. I've heard of men getting themselves and their capital bogged in a new road.

Plenty of time for all that when you've made a solid profit on your frontages, and seen which way the cat is jumping. Softly walkee catchee monkey."

I laughed.

"I'm glad you think there is a monkey, sir."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



PINK FARM fell to us with a facility that might have frightened me had I been feeling less like John Lancaster *contra mundum*. The fortress surrendered at the first parley. Those were days when the commercially minded had not been inspired to gamble in real estate. No strange and anonymous Syndicates pounced upon a countryside and turned it topsy-turvy in the course of a few months. Finch had warned me that so unsure was the unfortunate owner of selling the farm that any firm and reasonable offer might be jumped at and that though his representatives were talking of putting the land up to auction, they would be happy to dispose of it by private treaty.

Apparently, I had no one against me. Sandbourn was still asleep, and blind to the ripe fruit waiting to be plucked. In fact, I know that I was jeered at as a young fool who had bought crab-apples thinking that the tree would prove a Blenheim Orange. At Finch's suggestion I offered two thousand pounds for the freehold of Pink Farm. There was the usual commercial interplay. The vendor's representatives asked three thousand, and we compromised at two thousand, five hundred.

When the news got about, Sandbourn smiled over it, and became facetious at my expense.

I met Robert Snoad in the town and he gave me one of his fat leers.

"Hear you're turning farmer, Lanks."

I smiled at him.

"Yes, going to breed pigs."

Actually, the gossips were so unimaginative that they accepted the rumour and made fun of it. Only, later, when we approached the Utility Companies and the Local Board with regard to our scheme of development, did the quidnuncs twitch their eyebrows.

It was reported to me by Finch that old Hickman had said in the Conservative Club: "I hear that damned young fool is going to build. I give him a couple of years. If Old Joe is going in with him, he must be in his dotage."

I may have laughed over these prophecies, but there was a part of me that was considerably frightened. That my adventure was a young man's gamble might be obvious to my critics, but I was feeling far less sure of myself than I appeared, and rather imagining that I had the whole world against me.

The one person who stood up solidly on his big, square boots was my partner.

“Let 'em snigger, Jack. Ten years hence they may be calling you a great man.”

He was offering to back me to the tune of ten thousand pounds, and not only to put the firm's equipment at my disposal, but to allow me to take on Beeson and Pawley as working foremen. That I was to be exceedingly fortunate in being able to count upon the loyalty and good conscience of these men was to prove one of my chief assets. Both of them showed themselves capable of exerting authority, and of controlling and supervising large operations.

We christened our venture “The Pink Farm Estate.”

I remember when our first board went up at the entrance to the farm road. It was more of a hoarding than a notice board, and the lettering was in blue on a white ground.

THE PINK FARM ESTATE

Houses to be erected here.

For particulars, apply at Pink Farm.

It was to be a hectic winter.

I decided to give up Frogna, and transfer myself and Sarah Pawley to Pink Farm.

I turned one of the lower rooms into an office, and hired a clerk, and put him in charge of it. He was a youngster named Thomas, whom Finch recommended to me, and I was never to regret the coming of Thomas. He was a Welshman, dark, quick, eager, with a peculiar gift for conciliating people, and of treating a client as though that particular client was the one person in the world.

To begin with I encountered no opposition. I suppose Sandbourn was curious and amused, nor would its shopkeepers object to the advent of new houses and new customers. The Sandbourn Water Co. and the Gas Co. expressed themselves as ready to meet me directly I could give them evidence

that the Pink Farm Estate was to produce actual houses. County Councils were in being, but Urban District Councils had not yet come into existence, and the official world was less rampant and autocratic than it was to become in the twentieth century.

On the question of sanitation I had to deal with the Local Sanitary Board, and here I encountered mysterious and oleaginous obstruction. The Local Board was the responsible authority for the laying of new sewers, and new sewers would be needed up the Rudlake Road and Quarry Lane. I made my application, and nothing happened. I applied again, and found myself bogged in official silence. The opposition was intangible and mysterious, and though I appreciated the fact that the authorities might not be willing to spend money on new sewers without some guarantee that they would be needed, I was willing to give that guarantee. But I wanted some definite ruling in the matter, and get it I could not.

Meanwhile, our whole scheme was being held up, and I laid the matter before Old Joe.

“Have you seen Mr. Tyson?”

Mr. Tyson was the Board’s surveyor, a pawky and rather bumptious little man with a walrus moustache and flat blue eyes. He had the reputation of being something of an autocrat, and of keeping the members of the Board as tame rabbits. I had seen Mr. Tyson, but had found him somewhat casual and politely unhelpful. His manner had suggested that I was not yet a serious proposition.

Joe winked at me.

“Ask him to dinner, Jack, and suggest that you would like to employ him in an advisory capacity.”

“Can I?”

“Try it. And mention a fee.”

“What sort of fee?”

“Offer him fifty guineas.”

“It seems a lot of money.”

Said Old Joe: “Have got to give a fellow a cut at the cake. It’s worth it.”

This was my first attempt at tactful bribery. I did not like the business, but I called on Mr. Tyson and asked him to dinner at the Victoria. He accepted my invitation. I gave him an excellent dinner, and half a bottle of champagne, and

some adulation. Over our cigars in a quiet corner I confessed that I was a young man needing guidance, and that if he would act as my expert adviser in the matter of sanitation we would gladly offer him a fee. I suggested fifty guineas.

Mr. Tyson mellowed to me. He assumed an air of great solemnity, and promised to think the matter over provided I treated it as a confidential and personal affair.

I said: "Of course, sir. Your co-operation would be most valuable."

It was. The fog of obstruction seemed suddenly to melt and vanish. I suppose Mr. Tyson talked the Board over, and insisted that the development of Pink Farm might prove of considerable and significant value to the town. I was offering Sandbourn a new and up-to-date estate which would attract new residents. So, we got our sewers.

I must confess that my inspiration was not wholly my own, and like many contributions to progress, the product of combined intelligences working upon convergent lines. I had spent my week's holiday in a Hampshire seacoast town where a builder with ideas had been developing a new estate. I may have caught the inspiration of his planning, but I amplified it and justified it as a psychologist and a philosopher.

I said: "Man is for ever demanding something new."

"Each generation has a tempo of its own."

"Strike a contrast, and you will catch the public eye."

Previous generations had been satisfied with rows of houses, semi-detached villas, stucco, yellow brick, slate. I would give them red and brown in place of grey and yellow, a suggestion of individual detachment instead of regimented gentility. I would build in red brick and brown. I would use tiles. I would revert to the gable as an expressive feature in English domestic architecture. I would give each house an individual garden of its own, not some bare patch of earth, but a little pleasance planted and dressed.

I will not claim that my red houses with their gables and white bargeboards, and touches of Tudor timber, were aesthetically admirable, but they expressed and satisfied a particular generation. They were houses, somehow English in their roof pitch, for I made my carpenters eschew right angles. Later generations might refer to them as "Horrible red villas," and see in them gentility embalmed and buried, but I am ready to contend that they

were less ugly than are the products of the modern white sugar-box craze. That these houses were an improvement upon the yellow brick or stucco slate-lidded tanks cannot be gainsaid. Moreover, I built solidly and well at a time when building bye-laws and official interference were somewhat lax, nor has the official interference of these bureaucratic days ensured sound building or abolished ugliness. The country is eczematous with inflamed tile and brick. Drains and concrete-floats may be inspected, but the facile flimsiness of much of our modern work is somehow condoned by our censors. I will say that our working classes are infinitely better housed than in the old days, but beauty has been sacrificed to utility.

Personally, I must confess that when I reached maturity, no domestic architecture satisfied me save that which was inspired by the builders of the Queen Anne and the early Georgian periods.

I sat up late, working night after night on the plans of my first house, for it was my ambition to be my own architect. This new world should be mine both in conception and construction. I even made a model in cardboard of this first house, and planting it upon a panel of green wood, stood off to gauge its proportions. I had an eye for balance in a building, and this little house seemed to sit well down upon its carpet of mock-turf as though it had grown there. It was not a mere red blob of brick and tile exuding like some fungus growth from mother earth.

As to the estate itself I had been over every square yard of it, and viewed it from every angle. My idea was to preserve the old hedges and all the trees, so that the place should look green and dressed. I had mapped out the future roads, there were to be four of them, linked up by a fifth and transverse way. We were to begin our building on the Rudlake frontage, and just to the east of the Pink Farm gate.

One evening in December I took my model house, and the plans and specifications to show to Old Joe. I planted the model on the table in the light of his green-shaded reading lamp, and watched his face as he scrutinized my house in miniature. He stood there with his hands tucked under his coat-tails, and his lower lip thrust out. He did not seem to be in a hurry to express an opinion, and I was beginning to be anxious as to his verdict.

“Nothing like it in Sandbourn, Jack.”

I explained that this was its justification. We had to give the world something new.

“In the way of cakes, my dear?”

“Does it look like a cake?”

He crinkled up his eyes at me.

“No, my lad. The thing’s damned good. If it’s as good inside as it looks outside—”

I spread my plans, and grabbed a few books from a shelf to hold them flat on the table.

“I have taken a lot of trouble with the kitchen. It’s not a sort of prison cell looking out on a dustbin and three square yards of concrete.”

Old Joe bent over the table, and with the eye of the expert peered long and seriously at my plans.

He grunted.

“Can’t see anything wrong with ’em, Jack.”

I laughed.

“See anything good in them?”

“Yes. It’s all damned practical. That’s where the pretty-pretty people usually make a mess of it.”

“You think it will do?”

“What’s the price work out at?”

“About nine hundred pounds.”

He pushed out his lip.

“Yes, I see there’s no shoddy. Might sell at twelve hundred, or let at seventy. I’d like to see something to sell at a thousand or nine hundred and ninety eight pounds, ten and sixpence! Could you do it?”

“No, not without spoiling the balance.”

He gave me a whimsical look.

“Balance! At the bank? No, I get you. Good craftsmanship. Go ahead, my lad, I’m with you over that.”

Mr. Banyard was to say to me that I went at things that winter like a man leading a cavalry charge, but though this new adventure was followed

furiously, I was far from being scatterbrained over it. I can boast that there was a cool ferocity in my planning. I was trying to forget what the novelists like to call an impossible passion, but I was not forgetting it. The smart of it was there behind all my passionate pragmatism, and the almost rabid restlessness with which I was thrusting things on. I seemed to have the energy of two men. I was up at six and at work on the innumerable technical details of the estate, and I was on the ground at eight to see the men at work. We had laid the foundations of the first house, and I was defying Jack Frost and the old adage that he who builds in winter may repent at leisure, but the luck of the year was to be with me. My bricklayers were not to stand idle while the mortar froze.

I realize now that though I had tried to put Sanchia Cherrill out of my life, she was with me all the time, remote yet mysteriously vivid, like a figure in a picture hanging in some dim corner. I always thought of her as Sanchia Cherrill, never as Lady Bullstrode. Bullstrode himself I sometimes remembered with a sudden blaze of anger, and of hatred. His motto for me had been “Get out of the way, damn you,” and I know that deep down in my secret self I cherished the hope that some day I might humiliate him as he had humiliated me.

But I must have forgotten the passing of time as it was registered by the Beaulieu clock, though up at Pink Farm one could hear the Beaulieu clock striking when the wind was in the north-east. We were proposing to build a series of six houses, for such consecutive work conserved labour, and as the bricklayers made way for the carpenters, tilers, plasterers, plumbers and decorators, the men of the trowel passed on to the building of the next house. We had not taken on new hands as yet, but were using the firm’s staff, though I had spoken to both Pawley and Beeson about the future. I had told them that if our adventure prospered I should want them to act as supervising foremen. Another idea of mine was that our regular hands should receive a bonus on output. This, to Mr. Banyard, was red revolution, but since he was somewhat red in his radicalism, he did not tear up my testament of youth and throw it into the wastepaper basket. All he said was: “It comes back to the old tug-of-war between the piece-workers and the time-workers. One chap may want to go too fast, the other too slow. You will have to rely on your foreman to see there’s neither scurry and scamp, nor dawdle and poor output.” When I told him of my plan to promote Pawley and Beeson to be supervisors he took the project seriously.

“You couldn’t find two better men, Jack, but they are not book learned.”

“Isn’t it conscience and practical knowledge that matter, Joe?”

“Every time, Jack. But if, after I’m gone, your job goes big—”

“Don’t talk like that, sir.”

“I’m an old man, my lad. What I was going to say was that if you are buying bricks by the hundred thousand and everything else in proportion, you’ll need someone with a head and a conscience to safeguard you.”

“I’ve got Thomas. I think he has the stuff in him.”

“That’s for you to judge.”

I never respected Old Joe more than during that first winter. He gave the youngster in me my chance. He did not fuss and interfere, but remained in the background like a wise old dog watching a pup worrying his first rat. He was there to help me if I got bitten. But if all these details are digressive and somewhat dull reading, let me get back to the human loves and hates that drive us on and up.

It happened in March. We had one house nearly up, a second bricked to the first floor joists, a third in the foundation stage. One cannot build without mess, and workmen are apt to be messy creatures. The Pink Farm entrance was not beautiful at the moment, but a seeming chaos of brick stacks, piles of sand and ballast, drain pipes, squdges of clay, dumps of timber covered with tarpaulins, mortar floats, scaffold poles, ladders, stacks of tiles. The place must have looked rather dreary and dishevelled on that March day, and I know that I myself had moments of depression when I wondered whether all this seeming disorder would really shape itself into constructive profit.

It was about eleven o’clock in the morning, and Thomas had called me into the Pink Farm office to sign some cheques. I had been at work with Beeson pegging out the site of the fourth house, and as I returned to the job I saw a familiar figure on horseback in the Pink Farm gateway. It was “My Lord” back from Italy and a sentimental journey, and when I saw him again in the flesh I felt myself bristling like an angry dog.

I heard him calling to one of our men who was carrying some lengths of skirting board on his shoulder.

“Hallo, you there, what’s all this mess mean?”

The man, who happened to be a surly fellow but a first class worker, not liking the tone of the Bullstrode voice, sauced him.

“Ain’t you got eyes in your head?”

I saw Bullstrode push his horse forward so that he was well within the gate. I was staring hard at him, and my stare must have penetrated his

consciousness, for he turned his head and saw me.

“Ah, Mr. Lancaster, changes here I see.”

I walked to within five paces of him and stopped.

“Yes, as you see.”

“Has the whole of the farm been sold?”

“It has.”

“For building?”

“Yes.”

He was silent for a moment, looking with contemptuous disrelish at the mud and the clutter of our site.

“A nice mess you seem to be making of the landscape. Speculative building, I suppose?”

“That depends upon one’s point of view.”

“Exactly. Had I heard of it, Mr. Lancaster, I think I might have saved this open country. But I was abroad.”

I smiled at him.

“Exactly. I don’t know that I am interested in your point of view, Bullstrode. I shall be glad if you will get off my land.”

I had surprised him. He looked down at me angrily, and I knew that my insolence had stung his pride.

“Certainly, Mr. Lancaster, certainly. There is nothing here to give me pleasure or to detain me.”

Supercilious swine! But I had got my blow in and I was exulting. Also, I realized that some of my men were grinning in the background. I stood there and watched him turn his horse and ride out into the Rudlake Road.

I heard a voice say: “ ’Oly, ’oly, ’oly, Lord God Almighty!”

Beeson was hammering pegs into the turf of the fourth site, and I walked across to him, realizing that Sanchia Cherrill might hear of my abominable rudeness to her husband.

Well, let her hear! My chance had come to say to Bullstrode: “Get out of my way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



IT WAS all very well for the Bullstrode world to decry me as a despoiler of the countryside, but I had not inherited my prides and privileges from my ancestors, and like a new man I had to use my shoulders. Beaulieu's life was secure and spacious, but I did not realize until our clash at Pink Farm that the Bullstrodes regarded the whole landscape as sacrosanct and theirs. I believe our new houses were just visible from the Beaulieu windows, above the fields of Ridge Farm, but that my excrescences were to be like a red flag to "My Lord" was not immediately apparent to me.

I told Old Joe of the incident, and he took it somewhat seriously. He said that the Bullstrode world still exercised a kind of mesmeric power over Sandbourn, and that we might expect interference in the future. A man like Bullstrode could exert social pressures and persuasions, and even bring their money into the market against us.

"But Pink Farm is our freehold. He can't stop us doing what we please."

It was then that Old Joe said an unexpected thing to me.

"Are you going to stop at Pink Farm, Jack?"

I did not catch his meaning for a moment, but when I did, life seemed to leap in me.

"What, other estates?"

"May be. Supposing the business goes big, and Pink Farm is built up?"

"That means a couple of hundred houses, perhaps."

"Would you stop?"

"No."

"Well, don't you see, you might have a man like Bullstrode in the market against you for land. Trying to box you in."

I did see this, but the problem seemed to lie in the distant future. Meanwhile, my enemy's supercilious remarks upon the mess we builder people were making did provide me with an inspiration. Was it necessary for our operations to be so dirty and chaotic? If we organized our activities, and

dinned it into the men, especially into our carters, that it was not necessary to dump material here, there, and everywhere, or to dispose of rubbish in every available place, our sites would look less nauseating. Moreover, we were nearly ready to put up our first house for sale, and its appearance would not be improved by the proximity of dumps of clay and heterogeneous squalor.

I took Bob Beeson into my confidence. He had a good deal of influence over the men, and he could exert authority without rousing jealousy. He saw my point of view at once. A certain amount of mess was unavoidable. Soil had to be thrown out of foundation trenches and drains, brick rubbish and shavings accumulate, dumps of sand and ballast leave their lees behind them. Constant tramping creates a sudge.

“I think we can do better, Mr. Jack.”

I insisted that we must concentrate on cleaning up every plot as we went along, and that all unsightly mess should be removed as far as possible from the neighbourhood of a completed house. I had taken on a couple of gardeners to get to work on the garden of the first house, to trench the ground and construct paths, but the bareness of this first garden revolted me. It was too late in the year to plant trees and hedges, but it was not too late to gamble on the laying of turf. I had some good, sweet sward in one of the meadows, and I had two lawns laid. We were lucky, for April proved showery.

But the problem of dressing these plots so that my houses should not look so raw and new in their setting challenged me that spring. I got the idea of creating an estate nursery of my own, and of buying in and raising young trees and shrubs so that I should have a constantly maturing stock to draw from. I decided to turn the Pink Farm home-paddock into a nursery. Once in being it would save me time and money. Also, I think I was one of the first estate planners to abolish that abomination the slatted or weather-boarded fence, and to use light wire and posts and live hedges of hornbeam, and privet and thorn. I saw my estate as a little green world of gardens, each growing and merging gradually into the other, and not as so many enclosures boarded off like pens in a cattle market. Good hedges well planted and fed will give you privacy in two or three years, and they will reach their full beauty when fences are beginning to rot.

That first house!

It was complete but nameless, standing in the centre of a platform of freshly laid turf, with a gravel path leading forlornly up to its porch, and one young oak and an old thorn decorating its frontage. I must confess that the

house looked deplorably new and raw, and though it seemed to sit down well on the ground, I was beginning to wonder whether it pleased me, or whether it would please anybody. No doubt the views were splendid, the high ground and trees of Beaulieu on one side, Sandbourn and the sea on the other, but a prospective purchaser might not wish to live on the landscape.

I was acutely worried and depressed.

We had not had a single inquiry either at the office or from Finch.

Finch had put a placard in his window.

“THE PINK FARM ESTATE.
Splendid Air. Splendid Views.
Individual Houses.”

I had an idea. I made one of our painters prepare an additional notice-board.

“The Garden of This House will be planted by Messrs. Banyard & Lancaster next autumn. Free of Charge.”

I was watching this notice-board being erected, on a drizzling April day, and my world looked a dreary smudge. I heard a voice hailing me.

“Hallo, Lanks, sold a house yet?”

I faced about to find Bob Snode holding the handlebars of a bicycle, and looking to my mind more than usually smug and smeary.

“No. Only just ready to begin.”

He grinned at me.

“A bit sticky up here, isn’t it? Do you know what we think?”

“Do you think?”

“A lot, Lanks. Some people try to bite off more than they can chew.”

“Not in this case.”

Snode was scrutinizing the new houses, and they seemed to amuse him.

“That’s the new idea, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Rather like red pimples on a bald head.”

I managed to smile, though I was yearning to kick him.

“It won’t be so bald in a year or two. Some of you people have no vision.”

He let out a muddy laugh.

“Thank God for that, Lanks. We shan’t go smash,” and he mounted his bike, flopping into the saddle like a sack of potatoes, and went wobbling off.

I turned and spoke casually to the man who was erecting the board.

“Don’t sink the post too deep, Briggs. We want it to show up over the hedge.”

I began to feel that all Sandbourn was laughing at me, and what was more, that they were laughing at Old Joe. Mr. Joseph Banyard in his dotage had allowed a bumptious pup to make a fool of him. I was not feeling bumptious, but savage and worried. Here we were, pouring out capital upon this enterprise which showed no signs of returning any bread to us.

I think Old Joe knew how worried I was.

I remember him walking all the way up to Pink Farm one evening early in May, and finding me at supper. He was not exactly a gentle person, but he was extraordinarily gentle with me that evening.

“Feeling worried, Jack?”

I was, and I said so.

“They are beginning to laugh at us.”

“You hang on, my lad. The first house is always the worst. People are funny about a new estate. Like a lot of holiday folk on the beach, all afraid to go in and paddle till someone starts them off.”

He was lighting his pipe.

“My old dad had the same trouble with the first terrace he built down there. People like something new, and yet they seem scared of it.”

I too lit my pipe.

“What about putting somebody into that first house on easy terms?”

“Just to see curtains up?”

“Yes.”

He grunted at me.

“Bad business. Besides, it would get about. We’ll just sit tight and wait. And we’ll go on building.”

I always think that month of May was kind to me. It gave us superb weather, and the spring as it should be. In fact it dressed the landscape for me, and shone upon sea and woods, giving them a mystery and an allure that were like the light upon a picture. The Pink Farm orchard was in full flower. I had had the garden tidied up, and planted with wallflowers and forget-me-not. Our stage was set, and we waited only for the players.

I was busy with Thomas in the office when Bob Beeson came for me.

“Someone to look over No. 1, Mr. Jack.”

We spoke of our firstborn as No. 1, and I got up and went out, trying not to feel hopeful and excited and reminding myself that some people amused themselves by exploring houses. I found my visitors standing at the gate of No. 1, and looking towards Beaulieu in all the splendour of its early greenness. The sun was out in strength, and I felt it hot upon the back of my neck.

I took off my hat.

“Good morning. What lovely weather. I’m Mr. Lancaster.”

They were elderly people, just like thousands of other people who were retiring and settling down, but to me they were figures of fate. The man was thick set, ruddy, with blue eyes that smiled easily. His wife was a little, cheery, round-about person, vital and vivid, and with a voice that seemed to break into trills.

“What a wonderful view, Mr. Lancaster.”

“It is, isn’t it. Real England.”

The man was looking at those woods.

“Yes, that’s just the right phrase. My name is Harper, Mr. Lancaster. Can we see the house?”

“Why, certainly.”

His wife trilled.

“We came down here to stay, and we like Sandbourn so much that we feel like staying. My husband does love a view, Mr. Lancaster.”

I warmed to them.

“You will get it here. By the way, you see, we are planting this garden next autumn. We couldn’t do it this year.”

I took them into the house, and there I paused.

“Perhaps you would like to look over it by yourselves. I can assure you it is not jerry. And we give a year’s guarantee, to make anything good, in reason.”

Mr. Harper smiled at me.

“I know something about houses, Mr. Lancaster.”

“I’m rather glad of that, because we have ideas about this estate. So, you would like to look around by yourselves.”

“What is the price?”

“Twelve hundred pounds.”

“How much ground?”

“Half an acre, sir.”

I have often reflected upon the anxious half-hour I spent pottering about while those two were exploring the house. It seems rather ridiculous to me now. When they reappeared, and I looked at their faces, I had a feeling that my luck had changed.

“We have decided to buy, Mr. Lancaster.”

“I am glad to hear it, sir.”

“My wife was as much taken with your ideas upon kitchens, etc., as I am with the view.”

I laughed and said that I had ideas upon kitchens.

“Married, I suppose?”

“No, I’m a bachelor.”

“Well, really! I should have thought a woman had designed that kitchen.”

“I have had to cook and wash up for myself sometimes, madam. That teaches a man. But I had better give you the name of our solicitors, sir. If you are serious, I presume the contract can be got out.”

“That will suit me, Mr. Lancaster. I have no use for people who fiddle about.”

We had no telephone service in those days, or I should have rung up Old Joe and told him the news. I had to act as my own Mercury, and I legged it down into Sandbourn and found Mr. Banyard in the painter’s shop, supervising the mixing of a brew of unusual colour.

“We’ve sold No. 1, sir.”

I continued to call him sir, before the men.

“Sure, Jack?”

“Well, the lawyers are to get busy.”

He pushed out his lower lip at me.

“That’s broken the ice, my lad. We’ll go ahead now. You’ll see.”

He was to be a true prophet. Mr. and Mrs. Harper appeared to bring us luck, or they were like the first swallows of the season, and Sandbourn was to enjoy a phenomenal season. It seemed that Sandbourn had suddenly found its place on the map, and people like the Harpers, who had come to spend a fortnight, were persuaded to stay for the rest of their lives. By June we had sold houses No. 2 and 3, and had purchasers interested in Nos. 4, 5 and 6. Capital was coming back to us, and we planned to build twelve more houses in the course of the next few months. Our staff had to be added to, and contracts for materials prepared in bulk. I was feeling rather big for my boots.

I had bicycled up to Sandbourn Cemetery to put a bunch of flowers on my mother’s grave. It may have been a matter of sentiment, but the passing of time had effaced those memories of coercion and antagonism, and I remembered my mother as she had appeared to me as a child. Nor was I being sentimental when I reminded myself that she had dared much to give me my opportunity, and that without the money she had scraped together Pink Farm would not have been mine.

I had laid my flowers on the grave, and was making my way back to the main gate where I had left my bicycle, when I met Sanchia Cherrill. The main alleyways of the cemetery ended in a broad walk shaded by old cypresses, and she was coming down one alley, and I down another, and I had a momentary glimpse of her face before she saw and recognized me. It was not a happy face, and somehow remote and sad.

She was startled at seeing me. She seemed to come out of a stare, and the look she gave me was brittle and unfriendly. I got the impression that she would have avoided me, had she been forewarned. I too was scared. I had not seen her since the day when we had met in the doorway of Nelson’s library, and things rushed back at me like a sudden flame blown slantwise.

“Mr. Lancaster!”

I had pulled off my hat. I must have been looking rather hard at her, for to me her face was no longer the face of a girl. It seemed to have become suddenly and significantly mature, as though the bloom had been rubbed from

it, and its softness set in a mould of some inward constraint. I would have said that she was many years older since we had last met. And then I realized that she did not wish to be looked at as I was looking at her. It was as though she divined my intuitions about her and resented them, and wished to be casual and remote.

I felt voiceless. I blurted out the bald statement that I had been to look at my mother's grave. But how could it concern her? And what was she doing in Sandbourn Cemetery? Were the shadows of death lying over the old people at No. 7 Sandrock Terrace, and had she come here to choose a resting place for one of them?

I said: "I hope everyone is well, Lady Bullstrode?"

She gave me another of those swift, unfriendly looks, and turned to the left under the cypresses.

"Quite well, thank you."

My impression was that I had been dismissed. I put on my hat, and stood where I was, feeling hot and embarrassed, and angry. Most assuredly she had assimilated the Bullstrode manner! But she still seemed very lovely and disastrous to me, and as I watched her pass down that dark alleyway, I thought how strange it was that our little social vanities should make it impossible and even unseemly for two human creatures to be natural with each other. It has often been said that the aristocrat and the artisan are gentlemen together, and can meet and talk on dogs, children and potatoes, but that the tradesman is somehow tainted and socially unclean. It may be a comforting and pleasant saying for the aristocrats, and said by aristocrats for aristocrats, but like many generalizations I think it is untrue. Our social prides and prejudices penetrate like tree roots into the subsoil. There is no one so obscure and humble that he cannot find someone whom he thinks to be of inferior clay, and whom, if he wishes, and usually he does wish it, he can secretly despise.

I waited for her to go her way. I saw her reach the open space about the ugly little neo-Gothic chapel, and there she was in the full sunlight, I, in the shadow. Her dress had looked black to me under these funereal trees, but out there in the light I saw it to be of a deep, rich green. And suddenly she paused, turned and looked back up the dark aisle. I did not realize for a moment that a mood can be masked, or that it can be as mutable as light and shadow, and that she was choosing to wait for me. My self-love was feeling both down at heel and rebellious, and my impulse was to walk back by the way I had come, and leave her there, and not to play shop-walker to her pride.

It was a petty impulse, and it did not last. She was still standing there,

looking at the chapel, though I was quite sure that blasphemously ugly little building did not interest her. I was conscious of a poignant feeling of suspense as I followed her out into the sunlight. Would she snub me again? And had my silly sensitiveness misread the meaning of her mood?

I saw her in profile. She was not looking in my direction, but I had a feeling that she knew that I was near, and that her aloofness was somehow a pose. I know that all the anger went out of me. The silly, shameful insincerities of sex were lost in the more profound things she roused in me. I was saying to myself that this was the Sanchia Cherrill of my Dream of Fair Women, and that my petulance had been the crude reactions of an ill-bred boy. I felt that there were all kinds of mysterious qualities in her, reserves, shades of feeling, sensitive intuitions and subtleties that I did not understand.

She turned her head, and a little smile came into her eyes. I do not know how or why I understood that she was smiling because she was frightened. It seemed to me that she had something to hide, and a part of me was wondering what that something was.

She said: "How would you classify this chapel as to style?"

I realized that this question of hers was a mere gesture, and that she might be wishing to put me at my ease. I smiled back at her, and remembered a curt criticism that Old Joe had produced to me upon this very chapel. He had classified it as "Early Bastard," for Mr. Banyard did know something of English architecture, but I could not very well pass on the witticism to her.

I said it was snob's architecture, and suddenly I saw her eyes grow infinitely serious.

"I had not thought of it quite in that way. Yes, I suppose it is utterly insincere, like our social insincerities."

"Or a compromise."

She looked at me quickly.

"Compromise?"

"Yes, an artist, in order to live, may have to give the public what it wants."

"Ought one to compromise?"

I felt that I could not answer that question, and I don't think she expected me to answer it.

"Even in houses, Mr. Lancaster? I have seen those new cottages of yours."

"You mean our workmen's cottages?"

“Yes.”

“Did they strike you as—”

“No. I like them. They seem meant for people who have a meaning in life. Some of us seem to have no meaning.”

No meaning in life! Those words of hers were like a spark to the tinder of my infatuation. Yet, I could not believe it possible that she could even hint to John Lancaster, builder and decorator, of the emotional vicissitudes and disillusionments that might be stirring in her secret world. My vanity seemed to become a mere nameless ghost when I was near her. We were walking down the broad gravelled road towards the main gate where I had left my bicycle leaning against the railings.

I am not sure of what I said to her. I think it was something rather platitudinous about work, and the fascination of creating things, but I do remember what she said to me, because it seemed to have a kind of Godiva courage, and to acquit me of being a Peeping Tom.

“I wonder when woman will revolt from being merely ornamental? Social confectionery.”

We had reached the gate, and I took off my hat and stood bare-headed.

“But all women are not—”

She took me up quickly.

“O, yes, I know, Mr. Lancaster. A woman at the wash-tub isn’t merely ornamental. There is a kind of necessity that one—But I am keeping you. You must be a busy man with that new estate. I can see your houses from my window.”

I could not help wondering what her husband had said about my houses. Ought I to apologize for a desecrated landscape? I said: “I’m sorry. If they offend you, I will try to plant them out.”

She turned her head and looked at me.

“O, no, don’t do that. I rather like to see something new and actual.”

Her words so moved me that I wanted to escape and think. Her attitude seemed so unexpected, so instinct with subtle and poignant implications.

“It is rather magnanimous of you to say that, Lady Bullstrode.”

Shall I ever forget the way her face seemed to close up like one of those flowers whose petals fold when a shadow falls on them. She seemed to

become formal and rigid.

“O, not at all. Don’t let me keep you, Mr. Lancaster. I am going down to Sandrock Terrace.”

I did not look at her again. Somehow, I began to divine the truth, and why her sensitive self resented too personal and close a scrutiny. I put on my hat, took my bicycle, mounted, and rode off down the hill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



*H*ERE are a few extracts from my day-book during this period!

Twelve houses sold at an approximate profit of £300 apiece. Which means that I have recovered my capital expenditure on Pink Farm, plus a thousand pounds in cash.

Our building programme for next year is to be twenty-four houses.

What a strange thing is a “Boom”! The wise tell us that the causes are incalculable, but in this case it was planned for.

We have had to enlarge our staff. One or two of Hickman & Snoad’s best men have come to us.

When Bob Snoad and I pass in the street, he no longer gives me that fat, ironical smirk. He ignores me.

Robert Beeson and Jim Pawley have become very responsible gentlemen in black coats and bowler hats. They are doing admirably, but I sometimes wonder whether they regret the loss of personal contact with bricks and timber.

Thomas is shaping excellently. I have raised his salary by twenty pounds a year.

Am I as successful as I feel, or is my self-importance mere swelled-headedness? Sandbourn is treating me somewhat differently. I am conscious of certain subtle and significant changes. They both please and amuse me. I am no longer “Young Lancaster,” but Mr. John Lancaster, and a person. Somehow I seem to have become socially desirable, especially where the household contains daughters.

I am asked out to dine.

I have even taken dancing lessons and learnt to waltz. I could polka as a small boy.

Last winter I turned the Pink Farm home-paddock into a nursery for young trees and shrubs. A local nurseryman on Stonestile Hill was selling off his stock, and retiring, and I bought him out and transferred all his movable trees to Pink Farm. My gardener in charge is raising forest trees, oaks, beeches, larch and chestnut, Scotch fir, Thuja and Fraser's cypress. I have also bought in hundreds of maiden fruit-trees, apples and pears.

I have furnished Pink Farm for myself. The dining-room is old Sussex oak. Also, I possess a parlour-maid. Sarah Pawley remains as my housekeeper and cook.

I am rather worried about Old Joe's health. His heart and arteries seem to be wearing out. Shortness of breath, and distress. He cannot bustle about as he used to, or climb the stairs to his high room.

This failing of an old friend touches me.

For a quick-tempered man he is extraordinarily patient.

I suggested that he should join me at Pink Farm, but he pushed out his lower lip at me.

"Where I live I die, Jack."

I understand his clinging to the old house in Roper's Row. His roots are there.

Old Dr. Warwick was dead, and Christopherson was Mr. Banyard's medical attendant. I liked Christopherson. He was a man in the forties, a rather handsome and forceful person who drove a very smart dogcart, with a little page in blue and silver sitting beside him. The doctor and I met pretty frequently at No. 27 Roper's Row, and I, being somewhat in the position of a son, save that my obligations were spontaneous, was treated by Christopherson as a confidant. I remember him telling me that Old Joe would not live very long, and that he would grow feebler and feebler, and the news troubled me.

"He has been a very good friend to me, doctor. I suppose nothing can be done?"

"I'm afraid not, Lancaster. It's just a case of *anno domini*."

Christopherson was not only the leading practitioner in the town, but he was a man of the world and one of considerable culture, and his wife was a Northumberland woman of good family. In fact, the Christophersons were regarded as county people. Mrs. C. led the town in the matter of fashion. She was a comely creature, rather like Nelson's Lady Hamilton, and to be asked by her to dine at No. 12 Regal Terrace was a sign of social grace.

Christopherson asked me to dinner.

I was somewhat flabbergasted, and he must have divined my shyness.

"Nothing terribly formal, Lancaster. The fact is we want to enlarge the cottage hospital. You will meet a few people who are interested."

"Do you dress, doctor?"

"Yes. It occurred to me that you might be able to help us."

"I, sir?"

"Yes, you could advise us, you know, as an expert. We are all rather innocent in the matter of bricks and mortar."

Assuredly, the walls of Jericho were falling to me! It was not merely a question of my brains being picked, for I knew nothing about the planning of hospitals, or how their functions had to be catered for, but I could advise them on the approximate cost of the raw structure. Moreover, I realized that Christopherson must like me, for, though professionally pleasant to his patients, he had the reputation of being something of a *grand seigneur* in his own house. He liked where he liked, and he knew whom he pleased in the more intimate sense, and there I agreed with him.

I suggested to him that I might visit the cottage hospital and get some idea of possible reconstructions.

"I'll take you over, Lancaster," and then he gave me a whimsical look. "As a matter of fact, the present building is quite inadequate. We are just feeling our way. If we could get the land and the money, we should like a completely new hospital."

"On the same site?"

"Personally, I would prefer something quieter."

"More out of the town?"

"Yes. More space, more room for future growth. I believe you are one of those people, Lancaster, who foresee an expanding Sandbourn."

I laughed.

“I am rather prejudiced in that direction, doctor. It is my business.”

I confess that I was feeling nervous about this dinner at No. 12 Regal Terrace. I was not yet sure of myself as a social person; I was worried about my clothes and my conversation or my lack of it. I did not want to appear as an inarticulate, gauche lout. I had my dress suit pressed for the evening, and I bought the latest thing in collars and white ties. It was a ready made tie. I must have fussed in front of my mirror like a self-conscious girl. Dinner was at seven-thirty, and I had ordered a cab to call for me at Pink Farm at seven-fifteen.

The cab was late. The fellow drove up at twenty-five minutes past seven. He was not the man I had ordered, but a beery brute with a lascivious and insolent eye.

“Where’s Jenkins? You’re late.”

Apparently, I was small beer to this cabbie.

“’Oss fell down. ’E got me to take on the job.”

“Well, you’re late.”

“Ho, h’am I? You’re lucky to get me, mister.”

I climbed in, and told the sulky fool to whip up his horse and hurry, and he sauced me.

“You leave that to me, guv’nor. Where to?”

“No. 12 Regal Terrace.”

I was angry with the beast, and I was to be still more angry with him before he deposited me outside No. 12, some fifteen minutes late. He crawled deliberately into Sandbourn, and I seemed to know by the hunch of his shoulders and the way he let his horse dawdle that he was showing me who was lord of the cab. As I got out, I was aware of people up above on the Christopherson balcony, but I did not recognize them individually. I turned to pay the fellow.

“How much?”

“Seven bob.”

It was an extortionate charge, but I paid it, though I did not add a tip. I was not going to tip the beast. He held the silver in the palm of a dirty hand, and regarded it contemptuously.

“What about somethin’ for a glass o’ beer?”

“You can take it out of the fare, my man.”

He spat.

“Don’t you my man me. I’m used to drivin’ gentlefolk, I am.”

I know that I should have liked to have had the fellow off his box and thrashed him, but I was remembering those people up above on the balcony. Also, I was late. I ran up the Christopherson steps, feeling hot and angry and apologetic. A nice introduction this! My dignity felt perspiring and ruffled. A sedate maid let me in and took my hat and coat. She conducted me upstairs.

“What name, sir?”

“Lancaster.”

Shall I ever be sufficiently grateful to the woman who received me? I was flustered and apologetic. I began to explain that my ordinary cabman had failed me, and that the substitute had been exasperatingly late, and all the while I was aware of a pair of brown eyes smiling at me kindly. Christopherson’s wife was beautiful, but not with a beauty that frightened. She had one of those faces that can become radiant with an effortless, rich graciousness. Her dignity sat so well upon her that one did not realize that she was clothed in it.

“You are not the last, Mr. Lancaster. My husband has been kept at a case.”

O, blessed chance! I felt reprieved.

“It is more than I deserve, Mrs. Christopherson.”

She laughed; she had a lovely laugh, so spontaneous yet so controlled, and so happy.

“Cook has been warned, and there my worries cease. Come out on the balcony, Mr. Lancaster, and be introduced. It is such a lovely evening.”

There were three other guests on the balcony, a man and two women, and as I followed my hostess through the french window I was to receive another shock. One of the women was Lady Bullstrode. She was standing with her two hands resting lightly on the iron rail of the balcony, her eyes looking at the sea.

“Lady Bullstrode, may I introduce Mr. Lancaster to you?”

She turned to us, and it seemed to me that her smile was perfunctory and lifeless.

“Mr. Lancaster and I have met before.”

I cannot remember finding anything to say to her. Her presence had plunged me again in dreadful self-consciousness, and I could not think of myself as being anything but a house-decorator. Her easy serenity chilled me. Meanwhile I was being introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Bramhead, rich people who had a house in the old Frognal valley, and who, I believe, were supposed to be interested in good works, but they were kindly, cultured people, and Mrs. Bramhead must have felt motherly towards the shy boy in me, for she took me under her wing.

“Do tell me something, Mr. Lancaster. I expect you know the town’s history. Is it true that the High Street was once an estuary?”

Thanks to Old Joe I did know something of Sandbourn’s past, and I was able to answer the question.

“Yes, and I believe the old cricket field used to be a harbour.”

“How very interesting. Was there much shipping?”

“Coal brigs from Newcastle.”

“Ah, sea-coal! I used to think that sea-coal was washed up by the sea and picked off the beach,” and she laughed, and I blessed her.

Then Dr. Christopherson arrived, driving that dogcart of his at speed behind a high-stepping horse, his face fresh coloured and untired under the grey top hat he fancied. He was a *gaillard* person. The way he handled whip and reins was definitely dramatic, but the women liked it and loved him for his vividness and vitality. The atmosphere seemed to change when he joined us. He had a happy, mischievous way with him that disarmed jealousy.

“Apologies to everybody.”

“O, doctors are privileged.”

I saw him bend slightly over Lady Bullstrode’s hand, and then he turned and kissed his wife as though she meant much to him.

“Am I forgiven?”

“Every day you are forgiven.”

I heard a voice say: “Dinner is served, madam.”

I sat on Mrs. Christopherson’s left, with Mrs. Bramhead next me. I do not remember anything of what I ate or drank, but as the meal progressed I began to lose some of my nervousness. I was wondering why Sir Beverley was not here. And how would he have reacted to this cad’s progress of mine? It was Christopherson who led the conversation, or rather I should say he provoked

other people to talk, like the excellent host he was. I did not look much at Sanchia, for in spite of the friendliness of these cultured people I felt somehow that I was on sufferance here, and that the white table was like a vast snowfield between us. Also, it seemed to me that she was strangely remote, and that even when she spoke her essential self was withdrawn and silent.

We must have been half way through dinner before the hospital was mentioned. I remember Christopherson saying: "After all, I think our social conscience is more sensitive than it was." I saw Sanchia look at him intently, as though both appraising the man and his words. Was this sincerity or sententiousness? I had just lifted my glass, when she turned her head and looked at me. I don't know why, but I found something profoundly disturbing in that glance of hers. I put my glass back on the table. I had a feeling that my secret self had been challenged.

It was Bramhead who said: "Doesn't our problem begin with the land?"

Land! Christopherson had taken up the point, and I was both listening to him and to a voice within me. It said obvious yet astonishing things to me. I became aware of Mrs. Christopherson making a remark, and suddenly I realized that she was speaking to me.

"Mr. Lancaster, do you think it would be possible to get land?"

So that was it? I, young Lancaster, was the owner of real estate, and I had asked to dine here as a possible purveyor of land. My first reaction was one of cynicism. I was so absurdly ready to be humiliated that I was too ready to take offence. I believe I was on the point of saying something petulant and clumsy when I met Sanchia Bullstrode's eyes across the table.

It was as though my dark fate sat there watching and waiting upon the little, human tragi-comedy. Remote she might be, like some great lady looking out of the window of a tower at some obscure adventurer, and if her eyes disturbed me, they seemed to challenge the grown man in me and not the petulant, bitter boy. And then, the inspiration came to me, an urge that was bigger than myself. I was not the little cynical fool exclaiming that he was being exploited. I was among people who were somehow sincere and friendly.

A part of me was listening to my own voice as it asked that question.

"How much land, sir, do you think you would want?"

"I should think about an acre, Lancaster, or perhaps a little more."

"A cottage hospital should have a garden."

"Yes, a garden gives protection."

I was turning my wine glass round and round by the stem.

“I should be very glad to give two acres, if the site seems suitable.”

There was silence, and I realized that I had done an unexpected thing, and that I had not been asked here to be exploited.

“You mean that you will make a gift of the land, Lancaster?”

I smiled at the doctor.

“Yes, sir. You could have land in Quarry Lane. That is about the nearest point. I should be very glad to give it.”

“Most generous of you, Lancaster. We did not expect—”

“Yes, it is most generous.”

I looked across at Sanchia, and exulted. Her eyes were shining at me. I heard her say: “I was sure that Mr. Lancaster would help us.”

A month later I had to confront what was to be for me perhaps the most crucial crisis of my career. I had to make a vital decision, take my luck in my hands and gamble.

Finch came up to see me at Pink Farm. He had something to tell me in confidence, and I took him into the dining-room and gave him a glass of sherry. It was astonishing to me how Finch managed to unearth all the subterranean happenings in Sandbourn, but he was one of those extraordinarily sociable persons, ever ready to stand a drink and swap a story, though his humanism was not wholly unstudied. Finch and I were working in sympathy, and he had been shrewd enough to foresee that my new estate might bring him much business.

He told me that he had it on good authority that Stonestile Farm would shortly be on the market. The farm lay on the south side of the Stonestile-Winchfield road and beyond Sandbourn Cemetery.

“I thought you ought to know, Lancaster.”

“Do you expect me to buy it?”

“My dear chap, don’t you see?”

“But I am up to the neck in things already.”

“I know. But if you got hold of Stonestile, you’ll have Sandbourn boxed in. You could sit on it and play the autocrat.”

I did see. The position was obvious to me. I should have Sandbourn beleaguered as to land, so far as immediate development mattered.

“What will it fetch, Finch?”

He gave me a sly, whimsical look.

“You won’t get it like you got Pink Farm. People are waking up.”

“Opposition?”

“No, competition. And here is the spice in the pudding. Rumour has it that Bullstrode is interested.”

Something seemed to leap in me. It was as though I had swallowed three ounces of neat spirit.

“Bullstrode! Are you sure?”

“My information is pretty good. His agent has been nosing round.”

“Are they going to auction it?”

“Probably.”

“So it will be a battle of bids?”

“That’s it, Lancaster.”

I knew at once that if it was humanly possible I wanted to seize and control Stonestile Farm. The thought of beating and blocking my enemy inflamed me. It was not a mere gamble but war between us, and if I could rout him, the fruits of victory would lie sweetly in my stomach.

I did not want to worry Old Joe, but I thought it was my duty to tell him. I found Mr. Banyard in bed, propped against a stack of pillows, and looking like a lean old eagle. His grizzled hair had gone quite white; his poor neck was a mere stalk, but he retained his high colour.

“Well, what’s the excitement, John?”

His eyes were as quick as ever. I told him that excitement was forbidden, and he put out his lip at me.

“Fudge! It’s no more than a tot of rum. I’m not going to die in flannel.”

I sat down by the bed, and through the open window I could see Furze Hill with the evening sunlight lying softly upon it.

“O, just a bit more land.”

“May as well tell me.”

“Stonestile Farm.”

I saw his eyes give a flash.

“By God! You’re wanting it?”

“Other people are.”

“Who? Not Slimy & Toad?”

“No, Bullstrode. Rumour has it that he is interested.”

I got up and went to the window, and I began to say that it was a lovely evening, and that the old town was looking like a goblin city. I heard Old Joe give a cough, and I faced about to find him smiling at me.

“Changing the subject and my medicine, Jack. Well, why not buy?”

I stared at him.

“It’s a gamble. I might have to go to the banks for a loan.”

“In for a penny, in for a pound, my lad.”

“What about softly walkee catchee monkey?”

He chuckled.

“Feel under my pillow, John.”

“Do you want a handkerchief, sir?”

“No, keys.”

I felt under the pillows.

“Got ’em?”

“Yes.”

I handed him the bunch of keys, and he selected one, and nodded his head in the direction of an oak bureau which stood in a corner.

“Unlock the flap, and feel in the far right hand pigeonhole.”

I did what he wished, finding there a roll of stiff, legal paper tied up with pink tape. I took it to him, and sat down again beside the bed. He was untying the piece of tape, and looking sly.

“This is the last will and testament of Mr. Joseph Banyard, John.”

He had untied the tape, and he spread the document on the bed.

“You may as well read it, though this legal stuff always sounds bloody silly to me. Like twisting a donkey’s tail and reciting the Athanasian creed. Well, read it. See what you make of it.”

I knew that Mr. Banyard had very few relations, and one or two cousins with whom he had quarrelled consistently, and whom he had not seen for years, but I am not lying when I say that it had never occurred to me that he would appoint me his heir. I may have hoped that he would make it easy for me to buy in his share of the business, or that he might leave it to me, but I had never expected generosity such as this. There was a legacy of a thousand pounds to his housekeeper, and gifts of two hundred pounds apiece to Beeson and Pawley, and another legacy of a thousand to old Ventriss. I was to inherit the rest of his estate, the business and his savings, which amounted to about twenty thousand pounds.

I was profoundly moved. I put the document back on the bed, walked to the window and stood there.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Joe.”

“Well, there are my shoes for you, John.”

I faced about, and walking back to the bed, looked him steadily in the face.

“Joe, I want you to understand that I never counted on this. It wasn’t in my mind. I—”

He looked up at me steadfastly.

“I believe that’s the truth, Jack.”

“It is, absolutely. You have been the best friend I have ever had.”

My voice was a little unsteady, and suddenly I took one of his hands and held it.

“I don’t know whether I ought to accept this, Joe.”

“Fudge, my lad. You are going to carry on the old show. I shouldn’t have liked it to go to pieces. My father and I built this ship. Now, what about Stonestile Farm?”

I gripped his hand hard.

“You want me to try for it?”

“I do. You can take that will of mine to the bank, if you like, and show it to the manager, if you want backing. Or I’ll have the manager here.”

“You don’t do things by halves, Joe. You never did.”

“It’s in the grain of me, John. I’m a consistent old beast.”

I sat holding his hand and looking out of the window.

“Do you remember kicking those steps to pieces, Joe, the first morning you took me round?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“That made me think. No shoddy. I’ll see that the old show never goes shoddy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*T*HE old assembly room of The George on a July morning. Windows open, for we were in the thick of a heat wave, flies buzzing, feet shuffling, a burble of voices, an auctioneer's clerk handing out notices. Old Hussy of Hussy & Gab was to conduct the sale.

I remember heads turning as I walked in, and people nudging each other. Was I regarded as Sandbourn's man of destiny, or as a young plunger who would soon be out of his depth? I sat down in one of the last rows of chairs.

The sale was billed for eleven o'clock. The room was so crowded that I could not see who was here and who was not. Rows and rows of heads. I was looking for Bullstrode's fat neck, and ginger brown caput, but I could not discover it. Would he attend the sale in person?

Finch came sidling between the rows of chairs to speak to me. He put his head down close to mine.

"Jackson's here. Up there in front."

So, the great gentleman had sent his agent!

Just before eleven old Hussy appeared on the dais at the end of the room, and took his place at his desk. He was a bewhiskered old ruffian, very short sighted, who peered at one through pince-nez that clung precariously to the bridge of a thin, Roman nose. It was a mottled nose, with red patches spreading like butterfly wings on either cheek. Old Hussy might be short-sighted, but he was supposed to be as cunning as a wagonload of monkeys.

"Gentlemen—"

He began his address as though he was giving us a pious lecture. He reeled off all the virtues and excellences of Stonestile Farm. He was eloquent as to the farm buildings and their state of repair, and as to the admirable way in which the vendor had fed the farm. All the arable was in a high state of cultivation, the grass rich pasture. We listened to all this conventional verbiage, and waited, for I suppose most of us knew that Stonestile Farm might be destined for other uses, but old Hussy never referred to it as land ripe for development, and I began to have my own suspicions. Had he been primed to

sell in a certain way, and was there some secret understanding between vendor, auctioneer, and a possible purchaser?

The show began.

“Now, gentlemen, will someone open the bidding for me.”

There was a pause, and then a voice I did not recognize offered one thousand pounds.

Old Hussy peered reproachfully at the bidder.

“Come, come, sir, I am asking for serious bids. I am selling one of the best farms in the neighbourhood. Now, gentlemen,” and his voice was unctuous, “give me something serious to work upon.”

He fiddled with his little wooden hammer, and peered right and left.

“Twelve hundred pounds.”

“Come, come, gentlemen.”

“Thirteen hundred pounds.”

I recognized the voice of Mr. Jackson. The Beaulieu banner was in the field, but I had not yet raised my freelance’s flag.

“Fourteen hundred.”

The bidding was carried on by nods and signs to two thousand, and then there was a pause.

Old Hussy brandished his hammer.

“Now, now, gentlemen, we are only just warming up.”

I thought it time to take a hand in the bidding and I let fly.

“Two thousand, five hundred.”

Heads were turned. Old Hussy peered in my direction. He saw more than he seemed to see.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster. Now we’re off.”

We were. I heard Jackson’s deep voice boom like a signal gun.

“Three thousand.”

We went at it steadily for five minutes with laconic nods, Mr. Hussy translating bids into figures, and prompting us like a couple of schoolboys until he had raised the price to five thousand. The last bid was mine. Again, there

was a pause, and somehow I felt that I had taken Jackson to his limit and that he was faltering. Maybe, the Bullstrode instructions did not function beyond the sum of five thousand pounds.

But I was wrong. He boomed again.

“Five thousand, two hundred.”

I capped him at once.

“Five thousand, three hundred.”

Old Hussy was beaming like a benignant goat, and people were turning in their chairs to watch me. I was feeling hugely excited, and like a piece of stretched whipcord, but I had made my voice sound casual and laconic.

Old Hussy was watching Mr. Jackson.

“Now, sir, I’m waiting for you.”

“Five thousand, four hundred.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jackson. Five thousand, four hundred I am bid.”

I decided to cram an extinguisher on Jackson.

“Five thousand, eight hundred.”

Jackson countered me at once.

“Six thousand.”

The room buzzed and perspired. I was aware of one or two people looking at me ironically. Who was I to take on the Beaulieu autocrat, and to put myself against power, prestige and privilege? No doubt many of the audience thought that I should be squashed and routed.

Old Hussy had his hammer in the air.

I nodded at him.

“Six thousand, two hundred.”

The hammer remained poised. The auctioneer was waiting for Jackson.

He boomed.

“Six thousand, five hundred.”

I tried another extinguisher.

“Seven thousand.”

Silence. The room waited and held its breath, as though it realized that

some dramatic feud was being fought out between the new world and the old. I sat quite still, watching old Hussy's hammer, and waiting for Jackson's mastiff voice to bellow defiance. Silence. Old Hussy raised his hammer head-high.

"Seven thousand pounds, gentlemen, going at seven thousand pounds, going, going—"

My ear-drums felt tight and brittle.

Silence.

Bang went the hammer. I had beaten the Bullstrode party, and driven them in rout off Stonestile Hill.

"Yours, Mr. Lancaster."

I remember people standing up to look at me. I remember Jackson ploughing his way down the gangway, between the chairs, like a human thundercloud trying not to burst. He ignored me. I got up and began to edge my way up to the clerk's table, and as I went I drew a cheque book from my inner breast pocket. The room seemed to seethe and bubble round me. I heard someone say: "That's one in the eye for Lord God Almighty."

Tragedy!

Well, was it tragedy?

I climbed Old Joe's stairs, still very full of the flare of battle, to tell him that I had beaten the Bullstrodes and bought Stonestile Farm.

Seven thousand pounds!

Old Joe was in bed, and reading the paper. I think his face had never looked more vital and alive to me. I saw a glitter of excitement in his eyes.

"Got it, lad?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Seven thousand pounds."

I know that it was said of me afterwards by my enemies that my buying of Stonestile Farm killed old Joe Banyard. Seven thousand pounds! No wonder the poor old devil died of shock!

But it was not true. I remember that, for the moment, Old Joe's face lit up with a fierce and jocund exultation. Seven thousand pounds! Yes, but Old Joe

knew that, in spite of what all the sentimentalists may say, life is a bloody business, and that man must fight or be enslaved by futile illusions and decadent dreams. Seven thousand pounds be damned! I had ridden off the field of battle, carrying the enemy's flag.

“Good business, Jack.”

In his excitement he had sat up in bed, and suddenly I saw his face go grey and strange. It was extraordinary how the colour faded from it. I saw his hands clutch at the coverlet. His features were distorted into an agonized grimace, and then, even before I could catch him, he fell back upon the pillows. His eyes remained open and staring, but his jaw had dropped, and his mouth hung open.

I rushed downstairs to the housekeeper.

“Brandy. Mr. Banyard's had a heart attack.”

While she was getting it I ran out and into the yard and shouted at one of our carters, telling him to go and fetch Dr. Christopherson. I remember going back to No. 27, snatching the glass from the housekeeper, and running up the stairs. Old Joe was lying just as I had left him, and somehow I knew that he was dead. But there was a kind of furious, unconsenting grief in me. I held the glass to his lips and tried to trickle some of the brandy into his mouth. It just ran out and down his chin and neck and nightshirt.

I knew that I had lost Old Joe in the moment of victory, and afterwards I tried to believe that death came to him as he would have wished it to come.

But now, in this winter of my years I know that even old men cling to life and do not wish to die.

This is a good world. What comes afterwards is nothing, or a spin of the coin with some unknown, monstrous creature called God.

We buried Old Joe in Sandbourn Cemetery. I closed down all work for the day, and the whole of our staff followed the coffin. Old Joe had had the reputation of being a hard man, but Jim Pawley and one or two of the old hands shed tears, and such emotion is worth more than conventional obituary notices.

When I put a stone up to Joe, I felt that I should like to have had two words carved on it.

“No Shoddy.”

Finch, who for professional reasons, was a member of the Sandbourn Conservative Club, passed on to me the prophecies that were put forth by some of the members.

Old Joe had been the god behind the gods, and the brains of our enterprise. Now that he was gone our house of cards would crash.

Mr. Hickman gave me exactly a year. At the end of twelve months I should be in the bankruptcy court.

Certain gentlemen who upheld the Bullstrode tradition, in order that they might feel themselves associated with a world that was County, asserted that I was a menace to the community. Finch, as a candid friend, sweetened these pills with a coat of sugared humour.

“You might have one or two of them for slander, Lancaster.”

I said that I was too busy to bother about Sandbourn’s gossips.

Meanwhile I had presented to the Hospital trustees two acres of ground fronting on Quarry Lane. The site was an excellent one from their point of view, neither too near nor too far, and easily accessible. Moreover, it would not interfere with my building scheme, as I could carry one of my future roads just to the west of it and treat it almost as an island site.

I do not know who gave the information to the local press. The committee were preparing the public mind to accept the suggestion of a new hospital, and my gift may have appeared to be useful propaganda. I did not see the paragraph in the local paper until Sarah Pawley, who was a diligent reader of the *Sandbourn Argus*, thrust her copy upon me.

“Have you seen that, Mr. John?”

The paragraph was headed “Generosity of a Local Citizen,” and it advertised the fact that Mr. John Lancaster had made a presentation of the site for the proposed new hospital.

I said: “We seem to be getting into the papers, Sarah.”

Her answer was: “I think it’s a very good way of getting into ’em, Mr. John.”

So other people may have thought, especially my enemies, and those who accused me of being a snob and a social climber. As a matter of fact I was so absorbed in the rage of creation, and so missing poor old Joe, that I was quite unconscious for the moment of social provocations. I was up to the eyebrows

in work, for the building of new houses was progressing furiously. Sandbourn appeared to be enjoying a boom as a pleasure resort, and the Railway Company were beginning to advertise it. Their activities gave me a useful suggestion. I travelled up to London, and greatly daring, contrived to penetrate to the presence of the managing director. He was a large, genial and sardonic person, and somehow I seemed to amuse him and take his fancy. My proposal was that we might co-operate in advertising Sandbourn and my new enterprise. It was all in the way of business.

He laughed and said: "There is nothing like making an intelligent use of other people, Mr. Lancaster."

"Quite so, sir, but every house I build means more freight on your line, and probably more passenger tickets."

He clasped his comfortable, fat tummy and beamed at me.

"Words of wisdom, Mr. Lancaster. What do you want us to do?"

"Put up posters at your principal stations. 'Live at Sandbourn-on-Sea.' "

"In one of Mr. Lancaster's houses?"

"Words of wisdom, sir. It is an example of what the scientists call symbiosis."

I was particularly pleased with that word.

Meanwhile, Dr. Christopherson and his committee had launched their campaign, and though the summer was slipping away, they decided to inaugurate the attack upon people's pockets with a social function. The local hospital served not only Sandbourn but the neighbouring villages, and the committee proposed to include the "County" in their appeal. Christopherson knew his public. If a hospital fête was to be held, the park of Beaulieu was the God-ordained place, for not only should it propitiate the "County," but attract all the middle-class people in Sandbourn. Beaulieu and the Bullstrodes had their glamour.

The fête was to be held early in September. I do not know who inspired that other social attraction, a fancy dress ball at Beaulieu on the night following the fête. Rumour had it that the suggestion had come from Lady Bullstrode, who was chairwoman of the ladies' section of the committee. At all events, Beaulieu deigned to lend its ballroom. Tickets were to be a guinea each, and admittance by invitation.

The problem piqued me. As a patron of the new hospital I might claim the inevitable invitation, but how could Beaulieu ask its particular enemy to dance

on its sacred floor? I imagined that Bullstrode would censor the names of those who were to be welcomed, unless of course he was bored with the whole business, and had delegated the authority to his wife.

But I received my invitation. It came in the form of a printed card, with my name filled in by the hand of some feminine member of the committee.

“Mr. John Lancaster.”

I was not yet esquire, nor had I crossed that mysterious Rubicon which separates the esquires from the misters. I sent my guinea to the committee and received my ticket.

Did I intend to go to Beaulieu and meet Bullstrode in his own house, after my routing of him at the battle of Stonestile Hill? I had put a temporary tenant into Stonestile to manage it as a dairy-farm until such time as I might need the land for building. But was I going to Beaulieu? I most certainly was. Such a *gaillard* adventure piqued me. Also, I remembered that it was a costume dance, and that I could go disguised.

What part should I play? I had been re-reading *The Three Musketeers*, and I chose the part of d’Artagnan. I foresaw that every fly and cab in Sandbourn would be pressed into use for the night of September 10th, and I reserved my cab in advance. As to my costume, it should be of the first water. I had heard of Clarkson’s shop in London, and I went up to town to discover whether they could dress me as d’Artagnan.

They could. They happened to have in stock a costume that had been used in a romantic colour play. It was a particularly rich affair in blue velvet and white lace, complete with wig, hose, shoes, and cavalier plumed hat. The expert who attended to me insisted upon my wearing a little peaked black beard, and moustachios. There was a “property” sword in the outfit, and though I accepted the sword, I decided, after a dress rehearsal, to dispense with it. The thing might have got between my legs, or between other people’s legs, and it was not an aid to dignity.

I felt that I should need all my dignity.

I paid in advance for the hire of the clothes, and left a deposit to cover their safe return within a fortnight.

Finch included among his various social activities some experience as an amateur actor. He had been a member of a suburban amateur dramatic society, and he assured me that he knew how to make up a face and to guarantee the secure attachment of hairy appendages. Finch had not been invited to Beaulieu, he was just beyond the limit of the possibles, but he seemed to enter with zest

into my adventure. We had a full dress rehearsal, with a little rouge and mastic, and when I examined myself in the glass I could swear that I was not recognizable. I spent the whole evening in full dress, with the idea of becoming somewhat at ease in it. Sarah Pawley had to inspect me, and she was full of frank enthusiasm.

“O, Mr. John, you do look lovely.”

“It is more than I feel, Sarah.”

“What’s it supposed to be, sir?”

“I’m a French gentleman of two hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Oughtn’t you to have a sword, Mr. John?”

“Yes, Sarah. But I wasn’t born with a sword. I might fall over it.”

“Yes, that would be awkward, sir.”

“Very.”

It was one of those very blue nights when my cab, following half a dozen other carriages, drew up outside the Beaulieu portico. The great, grey pillars seemed to lose themselves in a canopy of darkness. A strip of red carpet had been laid upon the steps, and there were a couple of flunkeys waiting at the top of them. My card was scrutinized by one of the men-servants, though I don’t suppose my name meant anything to him.

“Gentlemen’s cloakroom first on the left, sir.”

I passed a Mephisto in the cloakroom doorway, and went in to assure myself that my adventitious hair was in order.

The ball was to be held in the Beaulieu great gallery, and I climbed the stairs with other costumed guests to find a portentous person in court dress waiting for us at the head of the stairs. Apparently he was to announce us by name, and as my eyes came level with the gallery floor I saw two stately figures posed in front of a great oak armoire. Sir Beverley and Lady Bullstrode! They were standing to receive the guests, Bullstrode as Henry VIII, Sanchia as Mary, Queen of Scots. She was in black velvet, he in red and gold. Henry the Eighth! He had a reddish beard, and flat black velvet cap on his head, and his massive straddling legs seemed to me stuffed with Tudor arrogance. Nor could I help thinking that he was a veritable reincarnation of that ulcerous, wenching, prize-bull of a king. He seemed to tower and swell beside the slim black shape of Sanchia, and to me she was somehow a tragic and mysterious figure like the

queen she had chosen to portray.

The official in court dress was speaking to me.

“Your name, sir?”

I had a sudden inspiration.

“Mr. d’Artagnan.”

He looked a little puzzled, and then, with a raising of the eyebrows, announced me.

“Mr. d’Artagnan.”

I don’t think either of the Bullstrodes recognized me. Sir Beverley, with his massive, straddling legs, and his arms akimbo, so like the pictures of his prototype even in his pose, met me with a blue-eyed stare. I held my plumed hat to my chest and bowed over it, and my lady gave me a little, stately bending of the head.

“Welcome, Monsieur d’Artagnan.”

Bullstrode nodded at me. He appeared to be in a Tudor temper, and prodigiously bored, and concealing his boredom behind a grand manner and that florid beard. I passed on, leaving other guinea-guests to be received by our host and hostess. The great gallery was like a bed of many coloured tulips, for everyone seemed to be standing, and the exquisite plastered ceiling was like a drum to the rat-a-plan of the many voices. The orchestra was tuning up on a dais at one end of the gallery. Feeling very much a stranger in this crowd, I went and stood in a window recess, and tried to feel remote and historic.

Four young women dressed as eighteen century shepherdesses were going round with programmes. One in a pink flowered petticoat and sky blue jacket came to me. She was wearing two black patches, one on her forehead, the other on her cheek. She simpered.

“King Charles must have a programme.”

I tried some school French.

“Pardon, m’amselle, *je suis* Français. Monsieur d’Artagnan,” and I finished —“From Gascony.”

And then I asked her for a dance, two dances, and entered her for a polka and a waltz as “Shepherdess with Pink Petticoat.” She scribbled something on her own programme, curtsied and passed on with a backward glance over her shoulder.

I heard the voice of the official person.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is the wish of the committee that the evening shall be informal and without introductions. Will you please fill up your programmes, in costume.”

I did not fill up the whole of my programme, perhaps because I felt myself a stranger in this crowd, and also because I was interested in watching two people. I wanted to see whether Bullstrode would dance with his wife, and I am afraid my partners must have found me absent and no dashing Gascon. I danced once with Mrs. Christopherson who was dressed as a Venetian lady, and it amused me to find that she did not recognize me. She was in a happy mood, she was one of those women who always seem happy, and she tried to laugh me into revealing my identity. I fenced with her, and said that when I was blessed with a partner who danced as she did, I was content to be anonymous and mute.

“I seem to know your voice.”

“Possibly you do, madame, though, as a Gascon, I may not speak pure Parisian.”

I am afraid I was always scanning the crowd for the Bullstrodes instead of looking into the faces of my partners. I saw Sanchia dancing with Mephistopheles, and again with Christopherson who was dressed as an Austrian hussar, but Henry the Eighth appeared to have retired to the council chamber, where a few of the more elderly were permitted to play whist.

Did Bullstrode not dance with his wife!

Then, came that moment when I was alone, and she too was alone standing by a Chinese lacquer cabinet, and with a faint smile and a remote air, watching the waltzing crowd.

They were playing the Blue Danube.

I took my courage in my hands, and making my way past the dancers, bowed to her with my hat pressed against my chest.

“May I have the very great honour?”

She looked at me with a little tentative smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster.”

So, she knew me, and I wondered how, and suddenly I felt supremely shy of her, and like a frightened boy trembling at the nearness of this woman. She seemed too exquisite to be touched, and the sweet fragrance of her confused

me. I left my plumed hat on the cabinet and put an unsure arm about her, and my left hand linked itself with her right. Her fingers seemed cold. Her face, too, had a serene, pale languor like a white flower touched by the year's first frost. My fear of her may have been a tissue of illusions, and her mysterious, tragic languor a mere veil hiding reality, but I know that when we began to move to the music my body seemed a mere jerking mechanism pulled by discordant strings. I could not get the rhythm, and I seemed to have forgotten all that I had learnt.

We collided with another couple, and she gave me a sudden, wide-eyed smile.

“No, it was not my fault!”

“I'm sorry I'm so horribly clumsy.”

She must have known what was amiss with me, and I shall never forget those words of hers and their implication.

“How strange that two people should be afraid of each other.”

For the moment I was mute. How was it possible for her to be afraid of me? Was she trying to be kind, and to put a distressed young man at his ease? All I know is that the rhythm of that most intoxicating of waltzes seemed to get into my head and heels, and that suddenly I was Strauss. I remember her smiling at me again, as though she realized that she had touched some secret spring and set my imprisoned self free.

I said: “The Queen is gracious, and I am grateful.”

Her eyes were half closed.

“I can't talk when I am dancing.”

I remember the music dying away, and people clapping for an encore. They were all rather confused to me, mere masks and blurs of colour. We were standing a little apart in a corner of the gallery, and I looked at her as one looks at something which is infinitely precious, and of which one is afraid. My hands went out, and she smiled at me.

“Yes.”

But it seemed to me that a strange languor possessed her, and that she was tired.

“Would you like to rest?”

“I think I would. It is so very hot in here.”

Where did she wish to sit? There were chairs and settees in the gallery, but she turned towards the stairs.

“Let us go down to the terrace. It will be cooler there. We have had chairs put out on the terrace.”

We went down the stairs together, and across the black and white marble of the hall to the terrace door. A moon had risen, and the night air was like iced wine.

“It will be too cold for you here.”

“No. The air is lovely. Besides, we can walk up and down.”

I had enjoyed philanderings on other evenings such as this, but I knew that both the night and the woman were part of a more mysterious and exquisite world. If I loved her, and I did, I had no illusions about our attitude towards each other. My vanity was stone cold. I was no cheap ass imagining that she was tempting me to flirt with her. The very word sounded shabby and repulsive. Somehow, and for some reason she was being kind to me, and was treating me like a friend, a man of her own age to whom she could talk. That I was flattered I will admit, but at the same time I was feeling profoundly grateful to her, and ready to stand like the peasant boy in the picture, gazing up at her with wondering and adoring eyes. Yes, I know that to adore is a ridiculous, Victorian superstition, nor did the word express all the subtle reactions she roused in me. She seemed more of a spirit than a body, a dream woman who had stepped out of the world of sleep to walk with me. She might be near me, but she was as remote as the moon.

She said: “You will not spoil my view from here, will you, Mr. Lancaster?”

I hesitated for a moment. Was she finding my new world so very raw and ugly?

“No. I’m sorry that—”

“O, no, I don’t mean what you think. But now I can see the sea over the Ridge.”

“You shall always have the sea. Besides, I don’t own the Ridge.”

“But you might.”

“Aren’t you crediting me with—”

“But you captured Stonestile Hill.”

What was I to say to her? If her husband had felt savagely offended by my

impertinence in opposing him, did she sympathize with Bullstrode? Had she become “County,” and so prejudiced against my exploitation of the landscape? I felt that I had to ask her a particular question.

“You don’t like my new houses, Lady Bullstrode?”

She paused before answering me.

“Yes, and no. The pioneering spirit, yes.”

“But the product, no?”

“Yes, in a way, I do. One is rather groping at things in these days. One feels that changes are coming.”

“Progress, so-called!”

“I wonder? But what I am thinking of is that the people who come to live in your houses—”

“Must like them?”

“Yes.”

“And is that my justification?”

“I suppose it is.”

Again there was silence between us, and she paused and stood looking at the moon.

“I wonder if you will tell me, why—?”

“I began to build houses?”

“Yes.”

I felt that I had to be honest with her, and that if I dressed up my enterprise in sentimental humbug I should not deceive her.

“O, just the urge to create, and through creating, to be somebody.”

“Need one be somebody?”

“Forgive me, but you have never been a nobody.”

“I am a nobody.”

“That is quite incredible.”

“All that I have, others gave me.”

I could not tell her that her essential, living self was to me the most wonderful thing in the world.

I said: "You have power, spaciousness, peace."

She echoed that last word: "Peace! Should one ask for peace?"

"It is one of the things that money gives. My houses mean money to me."

"Just money?"

"No, not only just money."

I do not know how long we had been out in the moonlight together, but suddenly she gave a little shivering sigh as though she was finding the night air cold.

"I am deserting my duties, Mr. Lancaster."

"I'm afraid you are cold."

"Just a little. I think we'll go in."

We turned back to the yellow panel of the open doorway, and I saw the black and white squares of the hall floor, and someone standing there like a great red yeoman of the guard. It was Bullstrode. He had his back to us at the moment, but as we reached the door he turned about. His blue eyes had a glaze of anger.

"I have been looking for you everywhere. A hostess should not desert her guests."

She seemed to falter on the steps, and then to draw herself up and to become more slim and straight. His incredible rudeness shocked me. She answered him with a kind of cold, casual serenity.

"Even a hostess may be allowed five minutes respite."

He was glaring at me now as Henry must have glared with his brutal blue eyes at many a wretched underling.

"Who is the cavalier?"

I heard her say: "Surely you remember Mr. Lancaster?"

It was the maddest thing she could have said, and I have often wondered whether she said it wilfully. He gave me a look of savage scorn, and turning, crooked an arm as though to lead her off.

"Good evening, Lancaster. I did not recognize you in d'Artagnan. The Gascon! Yes, quite apposite."

I bit back the words I wanted to utter.

“Thank you, sir, for your appreciation.”

I stood watching them. I saw her ignore his arm, and the quick, angry look he gave her. She seemed to have drawn apart from him with an air of wishing and willing to be her separate self. Nor did he attempt to touch her. I could have said that there was a sheet of ice between them. But they went up the stairs together side by side, her black skirt lapping the steps, and his thick red legs massive with a kind of ponderous truculence. There should have been exultation in me, but I was not conscious of any such splurging of my unregenerate self.

I felt that there was tragedy here, tragedy for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



*I*N SPITE of the capital I had inherited from Mr. Banyard my various commitments were so heavy at this period that I was hard put to it to pay my way. I suppose that most pioneers have to pass through these worrying years when the output outruns the intake, and wealth is the potential crop maturing in the soil. My wages bill was a very heavy one, and it was not a liability that could be juggled with; also my bills for materials might have frightened me into sleeplessness, for I was buying in large quantities to get my discounts. I remember one particular month when my overdraft at the bank amounted to seven hundred pounds.

I was sensitive about it, and went to interview the bank manager, and to assure him that I should be able to wipe out the debit in the course of the next six months.

He was a comfortable and laconic person. He said: "I'm not worrying, Mr. Lancaster."

"Would you like me to pass over some security to you?"

"I don't think it is necessary."

I thanked him for his sympathy and his faith in me, and he laughed.

"I don't think we need any cover for your credit."

I was spending very little on my personal needs, and living a hard and almost ascetic life. My work satisfied me, and filled all my day, though there was that secret, emotional pang deep down in my consciousness. I could not put the picture of Sanchia Cherrill out of my life, nor did I wish to be without it. I did not see her for weeks after the hospital ball at Beaulieu, but she was always behind my thoughts, and her secret presence there seemed to make all other women appear trite and tawdry. So absorbed was I in my work that the call of the casual sex adventure did not disturb me.

Actually, I was in a very strong position, for I controlled all the land behind Sandbourn that was available for immediate expansion. I had put up a kind of ring-fence of real estate about the town, and so long as I could build and sell houses at Pink Farm, I could wait upon opportunity. I suppose that in

these later days I should be pilloried as an exploiter and receiver of unearned increment, but after all it was my own work and my willingness to take risks that increased the value of the Sandbourn hinterland.

Then, a particular thing happened, the kind of thing that happens to those who have imagination, and who exercise foresight.

I received a note one day from Mr. Tyson, the Local Board surveyor. He had been out with his dumpy-level doing surveying for me, and I had a feeling that Mr. Tyson was very much in my pocket. He invited me to come and enjoy an informal evening meal with him and Mrs. Tyson at No. 3 Prospect Terrace, and I guessed that such informalities might cloak some business that was informally formal.

It proved so. We had our meal, and the Tyson geniality was prodigious, if a little smug. He found me a good cigar. Mr. Tyson's profession appeared to make him a receiver of such luxuries, and he enjoyed them. He put me into an armchair, and sat down solidly in another with the air of a man who could pat and praise his little round jocund paunch. He was suffused with a digestive complacency.

I saw Mr. Tyson as a little yellow pagoda hazed with the smoke of incense. His temple of privilege was soon to be overthrown, but meanwhile it served him, and me, his patron. Had I heard rumours as to the advent of an Electricity Company? I had to confess that I had not, but I began to glimpse the golden symbol through the incense-cloud.

“What company?”

“The South Coast Electric. I had a visit from their representative two days ago.”

“Serious business?”

Mr. Tyson nodded with deliberate, sly sagacity.

“Light, and possibly, traction.”

“Trams?”

“Yes.”

“Rather in the experimental stage. I take it that they will need a local generating station.”

“That's the point, Lancaster. They may have to come to you for land. They will need a site that is fairly central. I hinted to their representative—”

“That I am the person—?”

“Exactly. I even suggested that the most practical site would be that corner of the Pink Farm estate which you call the Quadrant.”

I began to be wise as to the situation.

“I don’t think I could let them in there.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I am reserving that site for future shops. It is very valuable. I don’t think I want to sell.”

“Not at a price?”

Almost, he winked at me, and I understood him, and the secret *douceur* he would expect for helping to father the deal.

“I might sell at a price. It would be a pretty stiff one.”

“What is your idea of a stiff price?”

I reflected for a moment.

“Ten thousand pounds, at the very least, for half the Quadrant, I want to control the remainder of it.”

He smiled upon me benignantly.

“My dear Lancaster, make it fifteen thousand.”

It has been said that a limited liability company is a soulless entity, and I would add that it has no posterior that you can kick. Old Tyson proved a true prophet. I was showing some possible purchasers over a new house, when Thomas came to find me. He passed me a visiting card.

*“Mr. Harold Bastable
South Coast Electric.”*

I went in to interview Mr. Bastable, and found a superfine person sitting at ease in my office chair. He was so obviously well-dressed both in clothes and manners that I took him to be a highly responsible member of the company, and one who came to me with authority. He did not get out of my chair, but leaning back comfortably with folded hands, he nodded and smiled at me.

“Mr. Lancaster?”

Evidently I had to deal with a very superior person. I gave him nod for nod, but I did not smile. I glanced again at his card, as though to refresh my

memory.

“I’m afraid I am rather busy. What can I do for you?”

He glanced suggestively at Thomas who had followed me into the office.

“I have a rather important matter to discuss, Mr. Lancaster. I would prefer ___”

“I see. Mr. Thomas, you might go and attend to the people at No. 33.”

“Very good, sir.”

I had my own ideas as to how business should be conducted with a gentleman like Mr. Bastable. One should be both courteous and casual, without giving the impression that one was assuming a pose. I sat down in Thomas’s chair, and waited for Mr. Bastable to bowl me the first ball.

“I dare say, Mr. Lancaster, that you are not wholly uninformed as to the purpose of my visit.”

“Is it about one of my houses?”

I asked the question so innocently that I think I deceived him.

“No. I represent the South Coast Electricity Co.”

I opened my eyes wide.

“O, I see. You think of introducing electric light into Sandbourn, and you would like us to take up your service on this estate?”

“Yes, Mr. Lancaster, probably, we shall hope to do business with you. But our immediate concern is to select a site for our generating station and offices and a possible tram dépôt.”

“You mean you want land?”

“Precisely.”

“Where?”

“Have you an estate map, Mr. Lancaster?”

“O, yes,” and I found a map and spread it on the desk before him.

He bent over it, and after examining it for a minute, he looked up at me sharply.

“Would you be willing to sell us land, Mr. Lancaster?”

I showed myself cautious and hesitant.

“I don’t know. It would depend upon its position.”

“You have a site here which I see you call The Quadrant.”

I took him up at once.

“O, I couldn’t sell you that.”

“Why not?”

“It is the most valuable piece of land on the estate, and I have it ear-marked as a future shopping centre.”

“Is that so? But, one might be able to arrange—”

“Quite out of the question, sir.”

“You mean you refuse to sell?”

“Absolutely.”

He eyed me as though trying to divine how serious I was, or whether I was putting up a bluff.

“Would you sell half that site, Mr. Lancaster?”

“No.”

“Not even at a profitable figure?”

I looked him straight in the face.

“I have particular ideas as to how this estate should be developed.”

“Quite so, Mr. Lancaster, but we could agree to meet you as to the amenities.”

“I don’t want to sell, sir.”

“Not even at a profitable figure? May I ask you, have you any idea of a figure?”

I was rude enough to look at my watch.

“No, I don’t think I have.”

“Would five thousand pounds tempt you?”

I laughed.

“No, I’m afraid not. On the spur of the moment I should ask for three times that figure.”

“Fifteen thousand pounds?”

“Yes.”

“Come, come, Mr. Lancaster, that may be a very good joke, but I am here to try and do serious business.”

“I have told you, sir, I don’t want to sell.”

“Well, why not consider the matter?”

“At five thousand pounds?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid we are wasting each other’s time, sir.”

He left me. He had a cab waiting outside, and he drove away down to Sandbourn, but I was sure that I should hear more of the matter. I did. I received an official letter from the company offering me six thousand pounds for half The Quadrant.

I replied to their letter, stating that I was not inclined to sell, and that no figure under fifteen thousand pounds would tempt me even to consider a sale.

The company raised its offer to eight thousand pounds.

I stuck to my fifteen.

They rose to ten.

I remained obdurate.

I suppose that meanwhile they were chasing all over Sandbourn trying to find an alternative site that would suit their purposes, and I knew that such a site did not exist. They would have to plant their station some three miles out of the town to escape my ring-fence.

They raised their offer to twelve thousand pounds.

I felt that I had bled them sufficiently, and that this sum would put me in a very happy position.

I agreed to sell half The Quadrant to them, with certain restrictions, for the sum of twelve thousand pounds, the company to pay all legal expenses. Lastly Mr. Tyson received his present, but it cost me more than a box of cigars.

I was over the crest of the wave. I had cleared my overdraft, and had sufficient fluid capital at my disposal to give me fair water ahead. I ceased to think of new houses in groups of six, but blocks of twenties and forties. I enlarged my staff; I took on two more clerks to work under Thomas. A

brickfield near Rudlake came on the market, and I bought that brickfield so as to be able to supply myself with bricks. I used to wonder at times whether Sandbourn's boom would fizzle out, but there were no signs of a slump. People seemed to be coming from all over the country to settle in the place. I sold houses to folk from Lancashire and Yorkshire who had made their money, and were retiring, and to whom this south coast town offered a pleasant and gentle journey's end.

But how life links one up unexpectedly with other lives!

It was in the spring of the year. I had had the Pink Farm garden planted with bulbs, and the orchard was in full flower. It was not a case of mere window-dressing, for I found that I was growing more and more sensitive to atmosphere, and realizing that there is more appreciation of beauty in the world than we commercialists admit. I was, in a sense, a commercialist, but the texture and temper of my work was coming to matter to me more and more. My working-window at Pink Farm overlooked the garden, and I was able to see the faces of the people who came to us in quest of houses. I had watched people, elderly strangers come in at my gate, and pause and look, and I had seen faces, especially the women's faces, grow soft and surprised and tender. Maybe, I did plan to give the world beauty and serenity as I saw them, and though someone else was to teach me yet more of the essential mystery of these things, my flowers and my fruit-trees had their effect upon my purchasers, seeming to say to them: "This is a good and pleasant place in which to make a home."

I was looking out of my window on this spring morning when I saw a carriage draw up outside the gate. I recognized the Bullstrode livery, claret and old gold, but though I could see the man on the box, the occupant of the carriage was hidden from me by the thuja hedge I had planted. Ye gods, had Bullstrode come to call upon me, or to leave with me some declaration of war? I stood up, and two heads became visible to me, one in a bonnet, the other capped by what was called a toque, black with a posy of violets. Lady Bullstrode and her mother! I went out into the garden to meet them.

I had not seen Sanchia for some months. She looked to me pale and more slender, and her face seemed brittle with some secret strain. It was not a happy face. The bloom of youth had passed from it. The nose and lips had a sharpness of outline, and little shadows seemed to lie under the eyes. She looked to me like a woman who walked by herself in a shadow world, separate and aloof, and too conscious of being alone.

Even the smile she gave me was different. It was both defensive and disarming, putting the world gently but decisively at a distance. It seemed to me that she did not wish any one to come too near to her, or to trespass and touch her intimate, still reserve.

I was formal, because I had a feeling that she wished for some such conventional carpet under her feet. I did not look at her too closely, though I wanted to look at her as a man looks at the one particular creature who can stir in him a profound comprehension of what life should be and might be. She was the one woman who could efface in me the possessive self, and touch me to intuitive understanding and compassion. I loved her better than I loved myself.

“Can you spare us a little time, Mr. Lancaster?”

And I could have spared her my life! I was smiling at Mrs. Cherrill whose eyes were as bright and birdlike as ever, and I wondered whether the mother’s eyes had marked and pondered the changed face of the daughter. I said that I was wholly at their service, and for as long as they wished, nor did the estate office appear a fit place for two such women. I took them into my parlour, for I called it my parlour.

Lady Bullstrode stood for a moment looking round my room. It had pleased me to dress it as I had done, and I felt that it pleased her. I had pushed forward an armchair for Mrs. Cherrill, and all the while I was wondering what they wanted with me. Had she asked me to fetch her the Apples of the Hesperides, I would have done my damndest to get them for her.

“It is a question of a house, Mr. Lancaster.”

She turned slowly to the window, and sat down on my sofa, and the shape of her was like the stem of a flower.

“A house?”

“Yes, my father is not at all well, and Sandrock Terrace seems rather airless.”

“And more noisy,” said her mother.

So they wanted a house on my estate! I said at once that they could have any house they pleased. I was beginning to build along Quarry Lane, and the lie of the land was more gentle and sheltered there.

I saw daughter and mother glance at each other.

“Would it be possible for you to rent my father a house?”

“Why, of course.”

“I will be frank, Mr. Lancaster. You see, my father’s retired pay and his small private income—”

I interrupted her gently to say that I could let them a house at a very moderate rental, and I felt her eyes fixed searchingly but sensitively upon my face.

“Please don’t think that we are asking you—”

“Of course not. I am putting up a smaller type of house in Quarry Lane, each with a good garden. I think I could meet your needs and your wishes.”

She smiled at me.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster.”

“Perhaps you would like to see one of the houses?”

“We should.”

We had just completed a little gem of a house in oak and toned red brick. As a matter of fact it was my show-piece in Quarry Lane. I had built it in the corner of an old meadow, with a little grove of beeches and pines sheltering it from the north, and I had preserved the old thorn hedge and a rather splendid oak tree. Also, a part of the garden had been planned and planted before the building of the house, so that my exhibition piece should be dressed. All the builder’s rubbish had been cleared away, and the paths made up, and the turf laid down. We got into the Beaulieu carriage, and were driven down to Quarry Lane. It was a day when the sun was more silvery than gold, delicately hazed, and with the hedges pricked with green.

I watched Sanchia’s face as I opened the gate. I am afraid I was completely prejudiced in wishing her to be pleased, and that poor Mrs. Cherrill was hardly in my thoughts.

“I think this is the best thing I can show you.”

She stood at gaze for a moment, and then she seemed to remember her mother.

“It looks so un-new, as though it had grown here.”

I laughed.

“That’s the studied cunning of the thing.”

Did she understand what I meant by cunning? But the moment was her mother’s, and I heard Mrs. Cherrill’s birdlike chirrup.

“It is perfectly sweet, Mr. Lancaster. So dressed. And can one see the sea?”

“I’m afraid the thorn hedge is rather high, but one could have bays cut in it.”

“And the house is really to let?”

“Yes.”

I had brought the key with me, and I let them in. I was turning over in my mind what rent I should ask, and how much they could afford to pay.

“O, Mr. Lancaster, could one manage with one maid?”

“I think so, Mrs. Cherrill.”

Sanchia was being silent, perplexingly silent, and it occurred to me to wonder why Bullstrode was not helping the old people in this quest of a new home. Was he or was he not? Or had the situation become such that his wife did not choose to accept that which he might have given to the Cherrills? This strange, pregnant silence of hers! Her face had a shadowed look, and suddenly I was aware of her eyes searching me.

“What would the rent be, Mr. Lancaster?”

The economic rent might have amounted to seventy pounds or so. I said: “Fifty,” and I saw her eyelids flicker.

“That seems—”

“If it seems too much, I shall be only too glad to—”

She caught me up, and I saw a kind of glow suffuse her face.

“No, I meant that it seemed too little.”

I lied to her.

“That was the figure in my mind. But, perhaps, you and Mrs. Cherrill would like to look round alone. I have some work to inspect further down the lane.”

She seemed to be smiling to herself over some intimate sweet thought as she turned to her mother.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster. Come, dear, let’s explore. We mustn’t waste Mr. Lancaster’s time.”

Did she know that I wanted to give all that a man can give, but that I understood the delicacies of giving? I almost suspect that she did. If so, her tolerance touched me.

They must have spent more than half an hour exploring the house, and in considering how the Cherrill furniture would fit into it, for when I came back I saw Sanchia at an upper window. She had opened it and was standing there as though the spring and the silver grey landscape with its winter lacework blurred with green had for her the mysterious strangeness of another incalculable year.

She looked down at me and smiled.

“I stood tip-toe upon a little hill.”

I was able to give her the second line, for Keats was one of the few poets whom I could read. She seemed to savour the unexpectedness of my response, and then I saw her lips quiver.

“Windows opening upon foam. My mother is busy with a tape measure, seeing whether the Sandrock carpets will adapt themselves to a new home.”

“Realism and romance! I hope there is nothing very seriously the matter with Captain Cherrill?”

Her face seemed to cloud over and grow thin.

“I’m afraid there is. Heart. Somehow, one gets into the way of thinking of certain people as timeless.”

“Yes, I know. Like something breaking, something that one—”

But Mrs. Cherrill was calling her. I heard the old lady’s high-pitched chirrup. “Sanchia, Sanchia, the stair-carpet will be too narrow.” I remember her giving me a half-humorous, half-poignant look as she closed the window. “Yes, dear, but you can have the boards stained.”

I knew now that they would take my house, and that I should have her father and mother as my tenants. Was I glad? Yes, more than glad, for this linking up of my life with theirs seemed to bring me nearer to Sanchia Bullstrode. Almost, I felt that a secret and intimate understanding had been created between us. She had stood at an open window and quoted Keats to me, and I had been more than her echo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*A*BOUT this time a number of the local Sandbourn clubs did me the honour of electing me a vice-president. Also, I was invited to serve on the committees of various charitable societies. I was wise as to the implication. I wrote cheques, and excused myself from active service, pleading that I was a very busy man, for I had to work most evenings upon plans and specifications and accounts. My spider's web was growing more and more complex, and I wished to retain control of it.

I remember sitting in the orchard one summer evening, and jotting down on a long envelope a rough estimate of my position as a man of property.

Here it is. I still have the envelope.

Part on deposit at Bank:—

50 Houses sold at Pink Farm at an average
profit of £250 apiece.

£12,500

Part as working capital:—

Sale of half The Quadrant	£12,000
Residue of Old Joe's estate	£8,000
80 Acres of Pink Farm estate unbuilt on.	
Estimate £100 an acre	£8,000
Buildings and work-shops, etc.	£1,500
Stonestile Farm	£8,000
Rudlake Brickfield	£2,000
Equipment and Plant	£2,000
Roper's Row, house and business premises	£2,000
Goodwill of business	£5,000

Yes, potentially, I was a wealthy man, though much of my capital was immobilized.

I jotted down on the other side of the envelope my expenditure in salaries, etc.

Personal Expenses	£300
Thomas	£250
Four clerks	£450
Beeson	£250
Pawley	£250
60 Hands, roughly	£5,000

I could estimate my income as follows:—

Profits of Banyard & Lancaster	£1,200
Twenty houses sold yearly at a profit of £250	£5,000
Twenty built to let at an approximate rental of £60 apiece	£1,200
Interest at 4% on investments held, £10,000	£400

I decided to build for sale on the Pink Farm estate, and to put up a cheaper type of house to let at Stonestile. Stonestile would provide me with an increasing personal income, while the Pink Farm profits would supply me with working capital.

I had taken my risks and dared the adventure, and my bread was being returned to me as plum cake. Nor had I yet arrived at that state of wisdom when a man discovers that too much plum cake may make him revert to a liking for plain bread.

I had Jim Pawley with me in the Mill Mount field. Jim had just returned from his holiday as a salaried and trusted supervisor, a bowler-hatted, black-coated Jim who had taken his two daughters to Torquay for a fortnight. Mr. Pawley had stayed at a boarding-house, and when I asked him how he had enjoyed it, he had looked at me whimsically and confessed that he could not quite accustom himself to the idea of being waited on. Jim had joined the class who are expected to produce tips, and I gathered that the Misses Pawley were finding themselves more at ease in the new world than was their father.

“Missing your tools, Jim?”

He was and he wasn't. The new world was enabling him to give his daughters more plum cake, and he had built himself a workshop in his back garden in which the old craft urges could express themselves as a hobby. Whenever someone was to be married, Jim Pawley produced for them a bookcase or a chest of drawers or an occasional table.

I had taken Jim with me to plot out the sites for a new batch of houses. Not only was he a working philosopher, but I had discovered that he had an eye for the lie of the ground, and that most unusual of gifts, intuitive vision, the capacity for seeing how a house would look when it had become an objective reality in bricks and mortar. More than once I had been saved by Jim from making a mistake in the siting of a house.

"If I were you, sir, I'd have it ten yards further back. It will break up the frontage."

I understood what he meant. The cult of the straight line produces monotony. Jim had a bundle of pegs and a mallet with him, and while he was driving in pegs, I took a look at the landscape. I was facing north, and over the plateau of Ridge Farm I could see the Beaulieu woods, and in a green cleft between their swelling tops a whiteness that was the portico of the Bullstrode house. The sun was shining on it, and suddenly I remembered those words of Sanchia's. "You will leave me my view of the sea."

I spoke to Pawley.

"Hold hard, Jim."

"What's wrong, sir?"

"Come here a moment. I have remembered something. See Beaulieu over there?"

Jim stood at gaze, his blue-eyed, fresh-coloured face peculiarly serious. And then he said a strange thing to me.

"Makes you think of a big mouth full of teeth."

"You mean, the pillars?"

"Yes."

I remembered Bullstrode's big, flat incisors, and the simile seemed peculiarly apposite. Beaulieu was showing its teeth at us as though we were two impudent and interfering underlings trespassing on its horizon.

"If we build here, Jim, we shall block their view."

Again, he surprised me.

“And a damned good thing, too, Mr. Jack. Teach ’em they don’t own the earth.”

I was reflecting upon the position I held, and how, if I chose, I could brandish a red flag to enrage my particular bull, when Jim said another unexpected thing to me.

“The Bullstrodes always were rough with women. I hear he treats her dreadful.”

I was suddenly and fiercely alive to the thing he had said to me, but I made myself answer him casually. I walked across to look at the pegs he had driven into the turf.

“Been listening to gossip, Jim? Let’s have a few more pegs in.”

I heard him say in his quiet, honest way: “It isn’t gossip, Mr. Jack.”

“O, how do you know?”

I pretended to be primarily interested in the site we were pegging. The Bullstrode *ménage* was extraneous matter.

“I’ve got a niece in service there.”

“What, at Beaulieu?”

“Yes. If you ask me, I wouldn’t have a girl of mine in that house.”

“Then why does your niece stay?”

“Because of the lady, sir.”

“Fond of Lady Bullstrode, is she?”

“Yes, and sorry for her. He’s struck her more than once.”

“Nonsense, Jim.”

“It’s the truth, sir. Mary’s a good girl, I’d take her word.”

I said: “I’m sorry. I thought that sort of thing only happened in bad back streets. Let’s have a few more pegs in, Jim.”

I was profoundly moved by what he had told me. Almost, it seemed incredible, and yet I am fain to confess that in my hatred of the man I was guilty of savage exultation. I wanted to hate him with blood and brains and bowels, and behold, he was making my hatred seem good and murderous and inevitable. This Tudor beast! I am afraid my hatred was stronger than my compassion. I stood and watched Jim Pawley driving in pegs, and each smart

smack of the mallet was like a blow clinching my purpose. Yes, I would build houses here, bright red houses, and hoist my flag within view of the Bullstrove windows. If it angered my enemy, that would please me. And she? Well, perhaps she had ceased to care about this particular landscape and the sea. I stood in a kind of savage, hot-headed dream. Immoderate and fantastic premonitions seemed to boil up in my consciousness. What if her tragedy should become mine?

Jim was hammering in his last peg.

“That’s the lot, sir. How does it shape to you?”

“Excellently.”

I had made up my mind to build those houses here.

With the fall of the leaf we had our first death on the Pink Farm Estate, and though it was a very peaceful ending, it was to involve me yet more surely in the interplay of other lives. I did not hear of Captain Cherrill’s death till two days after it had happened, and it was Jim Pawley who brought me the news. Sanchia’s father had died in his sleep. I was more moved by the news than I should have expected to be, for old Cherrill was one of those lovable, and unsoiled people who make a selfish world seem a little less shabby.

In going down to Thorn Cottage I obeyed an impulse that did not originate in a mere desire to seize an opportunity. Some inevitable impelling force seemed to take me there. The beech trees in the little plantation were like great tongues of flame against a sky of a delicate, pastel blue. The thorn hedge, powdered with yellow, was wet with dew. I saw that the blinds were down, and for the moment I felt that I had no adequate justification for thrusting myself upon this silent little house. I hesitated before opening the gate and walking up the path. Someone had been at work recently in the garden, tidying up one of the borders, and I noticed that a digging-fork had been left standing in the soil, and a robin was perched upon the handle.

I walked up to the door and gently knocked. It seemed to me that the ringing of a bell would have been a blatant and disturbing piece of churlishness. I waited. I thought that I could hear a sound of movement in the house. Someone had heard my knock and was coming to the door. I expected to see the face of a maid, but the opening door uncovered to me the one person in the world whom I wished and yet somehow feared to see.

“Mr. Lancaster.”

I had taken off my hat, and her pale, frozen face shocked me into silence. What was it that I saw, a little stain at one corner of her mouth, a faint bruising? I suppose I must have stared at the mark with a kind of incredulous questioning of its significance, and then I found my voice. All through those few moments I did not look again at her face.

“I wanted to come and say how sorry I was to hear—”

The words seemed so banal that my voice died away. Also, I was feeling that I had rudely uncovered the picture of some other person’s unhappy self, and that my shrinking from the reality was also hers.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Nothing, I think. It was good of you to come.”

“I had to.”

I could not look at her. I turned away. It was as though we both had divined secret prides and humiliations that did not ask to be challenged. I found myself looking at the fork standing in the border, with the robin still perched on its handle. What moved her to say what she did, I do not know, but she saw what I saw, and turned it into sound.

“That was his robin. It used to follow him about.”

Then, I imagine, she must have recoiled from that moment of sentiment, and felt it to be false and facile. Her voice became almost cold and remote.

“Thank you, Mr. Lancaster. The funeral is to-morrow at Sandbourn Cemetery.”

I walked down the path and out of the gate, still carrying my hat in my hand, and wondering whether she had resented my attempt at sympathy.

Was it credible that a man like Bullstrode could behave like a drunken navvy to a creature so sensitive as Sanchia?

I could not quite believe it, or understand that the very exquisite temper of her too sexless beauty might bore and exasperate the lustful animal in him. I had much to learn about sex, and its strange, sadistic manifestations and frustrations, though I did suspect that something brutish in him had been balked by her essential otherness. Had marriage, or marriage as she had experienced it, nauseated her? But I had to break away from such too intimate thoughts, and to thrust them back into the secret underworld of self, for I too was becoming raw flesh, and feeling that violence was more potent than

compassion.

It was as though the dreams of my youth were being renewed, the Ivanhoe days, with my Rowena waiting to be rescued, but this was no boy's dream, but a Spanish quarrel. I was hating my enemy with a hatred that could justify itself. I even said to myself that there are occasions when a man has a right to kill. I am afraid I have never been a cream-bun saint, and in my savage moments I could have dug a foot of steel into Bullstrode's big belly. As I have confessed, my hatred was almost stronger than my love, a secret rage to be exulted in, and fed like some sacrificial fire with the wrongs of the woman whom I desired. In the old days I suppose I should have waited for Bullstrode in some secret place, and tried to kill him, but mere killing can be too kind. There may be more joy in humiliating a man's pride than in running him through the body. I was ready to strip my enemy of his self-conceit as he had once stripped me of my trousers, and exult over his nakedness, so the sweet pacific people need not acclaim me as a Christian gentleman, but damn me as unregenerate man.

I walked down into Sandbourn, and into the principal florist's shop. Garland, the proprietor, came forward in person to attend to me. He had bought one of my houses on the Pink Farm Estate.

"Good morning, Mr. Lancaster. What can I do for you?"

I will not say that the incense of eager service did not please me. Sandbourn was treating me as a rich and potent person, and I wore my garland with secret satisfaction.

"I want some flowers for a funeral."

"Anything you please, Mr. Lancaster, lilies, white carnations."

"The best you have. I'll leave it to you to send up the best wreath you can put together."

"Thank you, sir. Would you like me to fix a price?"

"No, I leave it to you. The best you can do, and send me the bill."

"Very good, sir. And what address?"

"Mrs. Cherrill, Thorn Cottage, Quarry Lane."

"Ah, very sad, sir, that. Such a fine old gentleman. Only been in the house a few months. Fond of a garden, too. Would you like to write on a card, Mr. Lancaster? I have one."

I wrote my name on the card, and added "With profound sympathy," but

when I had written the words I did not like their conventional flavour. I tore up the card, and asking Mr. Garland for another, put nothing but my name on it.

“You will send the wreath to-day, Mr. Garland?”

“Certainly, sir. It shall be made up at once, and despatched by special messenger.”

I walked out of the shop, realizing that Sandbourn had come to appreciate me as a “Person.”

I attended Captain Cherrill’s funeral. I did not drive, but walked up to the cemetery on a serene October day, and attached myself inconspicuously to the little crowd. It was a very small crowd, but the most significant thing to me about it was the absence of Bullstrode. Mother and daughter walked to the grave, arm in arm and alone.

Bullstrode’s absence shocked me. It seemed such a caddish affront to these two women, nor was I so complete an egoist as not to be moved by what I saw. I have always hated the conventional situation, but in this laying to rest of old Cherrill I seemed to divine the mystery that transcended black crêpe and our little funeral pomps and easy pathos. This passing might mean another sort of death to the partner who was left behind. One spirit and one flesh, good memories, yes, and perhaps a pair of tired hands groping in the unknown for an illusion.

Immortality!

Could a creature like Sanchia become mere dust?

I was standing a little apart, and close to a neglected wooden cross when the two women left the grave. Mrs. Cherrill was bowed down, and had a handkerchief to her face, but the daughter walked erect, holding her mother’s arm, her face infinitely yet poignantly serene. Almost, it was as though she had watched a good life put to sleep, and knew that such sleep may be beautiful and final in a world of proud flesh and blundering treacheries.

I could not help watching her as she came down the path, for something in her face made me feel chastened and ashamed. I did not pity her. She seemed to be far above so poor a thing as pity. And in passing she turned her head and saw me.

I did not move, nor did her eyes flinch from mine, and suddenly I seemed to feel that the look she had given me was different, the look that one gives to a friend, and more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I IMAGINE that some members of my staff, and Thomas in particular, were puzzled by the character of the houses that I proceeded to build in the Mill Mount field. Thomas, being a Celt, was musical, and cultivated æsthetics, and I know that he was flabbergasted when I showed him the front elevation of the first two houses. They were semi-detached villas in the brightest of bright red brick, rearing themselves skyward to be capped with a carapace of lobster-coloured tiles. They were to possess white bargeboards and white timber in the gables, and tall chimney stacks supporting purple pots.

“How do you like ’em, Thomas?”

He was a person who wished to please, and he said that most certainly the houses were colourful and striking, but I suspect that he must have thought that my taste had become butcherly.

“Yes, very striking, Thomas. They’ll be seen.”

He did not know my reason for erecting these monstrosities, and I did not enlighten him. There were to be six of these flaming villas, and when I had shocked him sufficiently, I produced the plan of the seventh house. It was a completely different and chastened building, and on the ground plan of the site I had shown it screened from the red abortions by a row of Lombardy poplars.

I saw that poor Thomas was puzzled.

“If you’ll excuse me saying so, this other design is rather superior—”

“Quite. I agree.”

Then, why the devil was I putting up those abominations? What did my wilfulness suggest? That I was indulging in forcible contrasts, perpetrating a studied discord?

“One must have a clash of cymbals sometimes, Tom.”

“Yes, sir, but—”

“I know just what you are thinking. Don’t worry about those six red sentry-boxes. I’m just being a little puckish.”

I met Sanchia at her mother's just before the foundations of the first two villas were laid. Mrs. Cherrill had asked me to tea, and I had been wondering whether she would find herself overhoused and over-rented now that her husband was dead. I gathered that she had been left with a miserable pension of fifty pounds a year, and that the interest on Captain Cherrill's savings did not amount to more than a hundred a year. As to Thorn Cottage I was ready to let her live in it rent free, but I knew that the family pride would not accept charity. Nor did I know whether "Henry the Eighth" was in a mood to grant largesse to his mother-in-law.

Sanchia was different to me. There was a stillness about her, a quiet, wide-eyed candour that made me wonder and hold my breath. I wanted to tell her about those houses, and to discover whether she wished to hold me to my promise. I don't know why, but I felt that I could say things to her which I had never said before, and that there was a new understanding growing up between us. Almost, she had become Sanchia Cherrill to me again, virginal and free, and yet far more subtly so. Her eyes seemed more ready to look steadfastly into mine.

We were alone together for five minutes on that winter afternoon, and I remember saying to her that if her mother wished to stay on in Thorn Cottage, I should be only too ready to alter the terms of the lease. She was sitting looking at the fire, and she did not move her head, but answered me as though speaking to the fire.

"O, no, you will do nothing of the kind. We can manage."

Had I hurt her pride?

"Please don't think I'm parading—"

"I am not thinking anything of the kind. We have not quite decided yet, whether—"

She paused, and I waited.

"A smaller house might be more practical."

"That could be arranged."

She turned her face to me.

"You mean—?"

"I am a builder. There is a pleasant little plot farther along the lane."

She turned again to the fire, and then she said a significant thing to me.

"One does not always wish to take."

“I’m sorry. I understand.”

“Do you? I should have said, from particular people.”

“Then I am more sorry. I won’t pretend—”

There was a sudden quickness in her voice.

“No, you don’t quite understand. But never mind. Sometimes it is so easy, sometimes so difficult.”

“When one’s sensitive?”

“Perhaps.”

We were silent for a moment, and the silence had for me a strange new meaning. It was not constrained, but tentative, and charged with a delicate comprehension of the mood that seemed to be manifesting itself between us.

I said: “There is something I want to ask you. May I?”

“Of course. Provided—”

I understand her inward reserve. Perhaps she was not quite sure yet whether I should become the silly, splurging male.

“It is about a promise I made.”

“Oh?”

“About your view, and new houses.”

She stared at the fire.

“Oh, the view. That kind of view has ceased to interest me. I won’t hold you to the promise.”

“Nor reproach me?”

“No.”

“There may be more in this than you suspect.”

She turned her head and looked at me with peculiar steadfastness.

“I think I understand. Build your houses where you please.”

She must have come to know of the feud between me and her husband, and I realized that in releasing me from my promise she was suffering me to raise my flag against the autocrat of Beaulieu. And was that how she saw him now,

as the autocrat and tyrant, feudal both in his social conventions and in his dominance as man? It did occur to me to ask myself whether she was admitting me as a hired bravo into her quarrel, but the cynical realism of the suspicion revolted me. Dear God, she was not that sort of woman. Unhappy she might be, but not with the ruthless recklessness of a dissolute woman of fashion, who could go cloaked in the grey of the morning to see her paramour's sword cut the knot of marriage.

I often think she bore what she did while old Cherrill was alive with a brave and cold serenity that was a mask to assuage suspicion. She did not wish her father to know that so socially triumphant a marriage had become shabby and shameful. She was much less of a rebel than I was, and far more magnanimous in her restraints and silences. She withdrew into a kind of arctic remoteness where I would have raged. She had a sensitive creature's horror of violence, and of all dishevelled and butcherly emotion.

Thank God I was somewhat wise as to the fineness of her temper and her pride. It taught me to divine that which was essential in my loving her, restraint, a fiercely controlled compassion, a selflessness that did not rush in prematurely and babble and indulge in passionate gestures. She asked much more from me than that. Having been so fooled by the impetuositities of sex, she was infinitely suspicious of the thing called love. She asked to be able to trust, and to trust utterly, before she would say yea to any other man.

My first hostile houses went up, and I waited and wondered whether Beaulieu would roar at me.

I had not long to wait.

I was in my private office one winter morning when Thomas came in with the whimsical look of a man who has begun to enjoy the inwardness of things.

"Mr. Jackson wants to see you."

I smiled at Thomas.

"Show Mr. Jackson in."

Only a few years ago I had regarded Mr. Jackson with a proper sense of awe. He was a gentlemanly second-edition of the great, booted and spurred, and armoured with a hard, positive assurance. When he came into my office, wearing his hat, and carrying his gloves and riding-crop I realized how much older he was. He looked smaller, shrunken, coarsened in texture, and behind the bulbous blueness of his eyes I divined worry. I felt that a clash was imminent, and that I was going to enjoy it. I was in the position of a man who could be smooth and debonair.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson. Please sit down.”

But he did not sit down. He stood straddling on the other side of my desk, and I gathered that he was out on the high horse.

“No need for ceremony, Mr. Lancaster.”

“So I observe,” and I fixed my eyes on his hat.

My irony seemed to flick more colour into his raddled, alcoholic face, and like many hard drinkers his self-control had no safety-catch. He flared.

“I don’t want any impertinence from you, Lancaster.”

I smiled at him.

“That, like your hat, is a little superfluous, Mr. Jackson. I happen to be busy. What can I do for you?”

I could see his hands gripping hard at gloves and crop. He made an effort to control his temper, and not to uncover himself to my glib thrusts.

“It is about those new houses of yours.”

“Oh? I have so many new houses.”

“You know what I am referring to, Lancaster. Those new red bastardly places on the sky line.”

“What about them?”

“Well, you have got to stop building there.”

I leaned back in my chair, and laughed at him.

“Really! This sounds almost like an ultimatum. And on whose authority —?”

“It is obvious to us that it is being done on purpose.”

“What?”

“Those damned houses.”

“Can Sir Beverley see them from his windows?”

He glared at me, and I thought he was going to rap my desk with his crop.

“Look here, Lancaster, I came here to see if we couldn’t compromise—”

“Did you, indeed! Your ideas of compromise seem rather peculiar.”

“If you won’t meet us in the matter, we—”

“Don’t be silly, man. I suppose I can do what I please with my own freehold?”

“You can’t.”

“And why?”

“Depreciating your neighbours’ property.”

“Why not use the blessed word, amenities?”

“I will. We’ve got a case against you. We’ll fight you and apply for an injunction.”

I smiled at him.

“Go ahead. In the words of the old Jingo song, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the guns, we’ve got the money too. Is that your tune?”

I saw him biting at his ragged, ginger-grey moustache.

“You’re a damned pup, young man, and we’ll give you a lesson. If you think—”

I looked him straight in the eyes.

“Mr. Jackson, I think that you have lost your temper rather badly. It rather gives your case away. I should advise you and Bullstrode to calm down a little. If you want to fight, it will be a pleasure to fight you.”

He swallowed, glared, and turned to the door.

“Very well, Lancaster, now we know where we are.”

“Quite so. Good morning, Jackson. As I said, I happen to be rather busy.”

But life was teaching me that when you have played with one big chance and captured it, it behoves you not to gamble with subsequent circumstances. Bullstrode might be bluffing, but I knew that he had money and influence behind him, and that even the Law might be more in sympathy with an angry country baronet than with a jumped-up speculative builder. Legal opinion and a judge’s ruling can be tinted with prejudice. I straightway went down to take counsel with Mr. Gregson, and in his dry way he reassured me.

“I don’t think you can commit a nuisance, John, at a range of a couple of miles. Nor does any particular magnate own the horizon.”

“If we went into court where would the case be tried?”

“In London.”

“So it wouldn’t be a local affair, with all the county prejudice sitting in judgment upon me?”

“No.”

“Would you be offended, sir, if I asked for counsel’s opinion? It isn’t that I—”

“We will have counsel’s opinion, John. The best that can be had, eh?”

“Thank you, sir.”

“It will cost you—”

“Never mind the expense. I should like the matter settled finally and fully.”

“And if they want to fight?”

“I’ll fight them all the way to the House of Lords.”

We feed Mr. Compton Macnalty, K.C., to provide us with an opinion upon the case. He came down in person to spy at the land, and spent the night at the Victoria Hotel, all at my expense, but his considered opinion was wholly in my favour. He did suggest that Bullstrode had a grievance, but that it was not a grievance of which the law could take cognizance. I might be marring the perfect symmetry of his landscape, but he could not claim to control the landscape.

If, like myself, Bullstrode took expert advice, it must have been discouraging and negative in quality, for though we continued our offensive there was no sally from Beaulieu. Bullstrode’s obvious remedy was to surrender his view of the sea, and to plant out my houses. I had brought Old Joe’s telescope up to Pink Farm, and daily I turned it on to the broad vista leading up to Beaulieu house. I could discover no signs of change, nor any preparation for the planting of a belt of trees.

Bullstrode’s apparent passivity caused me to think ahead in the time-space scheme. The plateau of Ridge Farm was the only neutral ground left between Bullstrode and myself, and if I obtained possession of Ridge Farm I could carry my offensive right up to the park walls of Beaulieu. Ridge Farm was independent property, and I put out feelers through Finch. If the owner should find himself willing to sell, he could assume the existence of a ready purchaser.

As it happened I did not know that Paynter who owned and farmed Ridge Farm had no cause to love the Bullstrodes. The Paynters have lived on the place for three generations, and the last of them, Joseph, was a rather grim and disappointed old man who had been fighting for ten years against the prevailing depression. I believe his motto was "I'll farm The Ridge properly if I bust." He was very near to busting at this period, so near to it that his wife had managed to persuade him to sell and get out with what capital he had left.

He came to see me one gloomy January day. He had a peculiarly ascetic face draped with much straggling hair, and though his clothes were shabby, his black boots shone like polished jet. He stood in my office, and eyed my clerk, and grunted, and I gathered that his business with me was particular and private.

"Got sommat to talk to 'ee about, Mister Lancaster."

I took him into the house and offered him a glass of sherry. He accepted the sherry, and sat glowering and nursing his hard felt hat.

"They do say as you want to buy my farm. Be that true?"

I felt that discretion was necessary, and I said that I was a possible purchaser, but that I had no wish to thrust myself into his affairs.

"Do 'ee or don't 'ee want to buy?"

"I'll make you a firm offer now, Mr. Paynter, if you want me to."

"That's talkin'. I do hear as you and Bullstrode be'unt exactly David and Jonathan."

I nodded at him and smiled.

"In confidence, that is so."

He finished his sherry, and hiccoughed.

"You needn't beat about the bush with me, man. What would you give me for the farm?"

"What do you want for it, Mr. Paynter?"

"Four thousand pounds."

"I'll give you four thousand for it."

He sat and blinked at me.

"Will you put that on paper?"

"I will."

“You’re a smart one at doin’ business. If you’ll put it on paper, I’ll give ’ee first refusal.”

“On paper?”

“Sure.”

I was a little puzzled by his cautiousness, and by his tentative methods of doing business.

“Is it that you want to think things over, Mr. Paynter?”

He shut one eye at me.

“Fact is, Mr. Lancaster, I’m feelin’ a little mischeevous. I’ve got someone else after my farm.”

“I see.”

“He rather thinks he be goin’ to get it, but he be’unt. Just playin’ a game with him, I be.”

“Baiting the bull, Mr. Paynter?”

He gave a grim chuckle.

“Surely! You put that offer on paper, and I’ll give ’ee my signed promise, and I’ll just go on diddling Bullstrode about. That’s my little game, sir.”

I laughed.

“Well, I’ll help you to play it, Mr. Paynter. Tom Tiddler’s Ground, what?”

“Yes, and may God damn his soul.”

So, I was not the only man in the neighbourhood who hated “Henry the Eighth,” and in this case a healthy, human hatred seemed likely to prove more useful to me than love. Old Paynter and I exchanged signed promises, and when I took mine to Mr. Gregson and exhibited it to him, and asked to be advised as to Mr. Joseph Paynter’s integrity, he told me that I need not worry. Mr. Gregson had known the Paynters for forty years. They were like Sussex oak, thick and tough in the bole, with heart-wood of the Puritan tradition, ruthless to their enemies, cunning over a deal, but to be trusted when a bargain had been sealed. Ridge Farm was as good as mine, in that no one else could filch it from me.

A letter.

It was the first letter that I had received from her, a formal little note, yet causing me to draw my breath more deeply.

“Dear Mr. Lancaster,

I wonder whether you would meet me at my mother’s on Thursday afternoon about four. I want to discuss a certain matter with you.

Truly yours,
SANCHIA BULLSTRODE.”

It was a dim day with the clouds trailing on the hills when I went down to Thorn Cottage. There was no carriage waiting, and I wondered whether she had walked all the way from Beaulieu, and if so what her walking signified. Was her pride so estranged that even a Bullstrode carriage offended her? Or did she wish to be more completely herself, and away from the curious eyes of servants?

A little maid opened the door to me, and took my coat and hat, and in the drawing-room I found two black figures sitting by the fire. The grey day was closing in, and I noticed that though Thorn Cottage had gas laid on, a brass lamp was waiting to be lit. Economy? Mother and daughter had risen. Mrs. Cherrill’s voice twitched at me, and the hand she gave me was meagre and cold. “So kind of you to come, Mr. Lancaster.” Sanchia did not give me her hand, and she seemed remote and a little constrained, and I wondered whether she disliked the part of suppliant. I was pretty sure that she wished to speak to me about the house, and the frailness of her mother’s finances.

“Sit down, Mr. Lancaster.”

Would she ever call me John?

Mrs. Cherrill chirruped at her daughter.

“My dear, I think I will go and help Ellen with the tea.”

“Yes, Mother.”

I wanted to save her from pleading poverty, and when the old lady had gone, I leaned forward and warmed my hands at the fire.

“I am glad you sent for me. I have the plans out for a little cottage on the plot farther up the lane. I was wondering whether it would suit Mrs. Cherrill.”

I could not see her face, for I was bending forward and she was further from the fire.

“But the lease of this house?”

“That need not worry you. We can cancel the lease. I can relet quite

easily.”

“What would the rent of the new cottage be?”

“O, about twenty pounds a year.”

She was silent for a moment, and then she said: “Mr. Lancaster, there are certain courtesies that touch me. I will be very frank with you. Unfortunately, I am not able to help my mother as I wish to help her. She has about a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and I—”

“There is no need for you to tell me this, Lady Bullstrode.”

“Yes, there is every need. You have shown us such—”

“O, no. Please let it be understood—”

I heard her rise. She was going to light the lamp, and I turned my head a little so that I could see her face. She removed the shade and the chimney-glass, and turned up the wick. But matches were lacking.

I had a box in my pocket, and I stood up and passed them to her.

“You seem to be a universal provider, Mr. Lancaster.”

I dared to say the thing that was on my lips.

“May I not be something more than that? I mean, a friend.”

She stood poised, holding my box of matches. And then she turned her head and looked at me. It was as though she was gazing right down into the secret well of my self, and fearing to find some surreptitious, sexual smirk there.

“I think you are that, Mr. Lancaster.”

I must have bent my head to her.

“Thank you. I hope I know how to honour it.”

She struck a match and lit the lamp.

“A little flame, so easily put out! When one is sensitive—”

I heard footsteps coming to the closed door, and I said: “May I build that cottage?”

She turned down the wick and replaced the chimney.

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

She was putting the shade on the lamp when her mother re-entered the room.

“I thought we would have the lamp, Mother.”

“Why, yes, my dear. How silly of me. I had forgotten it.”

She came to the gate with me when I left Thorn Cottage. It was one of those dim, moist nights when the earth and the sky are rolled in the same blanket of darkness. I was not surprised at her coming to the gate with me, for we had one or two details to settle about the Cherrill cottage. It had been obvious to me that the old lady was not quite capable of managing her own affairs, and that Sanchia had to think for her. She asked me to design the cottage that work should be reduced to a minimum. Three small bedrooms would be sufficient. I had closed the gate and was standing with one hand resting on it when she said that strangely significant thing.

“Shall you ever want Ridge Farm for your building?”

I held my breath.

“Yes, I might need it.”

“I happen to know that it might be bought, I mean, before you hear of the sale.”

“Thank you, Lady Bullstrode.”

Somehow our hands met in the darkness over the gate, and her fingers did not flinch from mine.

“Good night.”

“Good night, John.”

I went down the dark lane like a man to whom the winter night had become secret and intimate, and full of strangeness and exultation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



*S*N CASTING back through the pages of my journal I find several entries that would be boring to the reader, but which were not without their effect upon my social philosophy.

The new hospital scheme was in being. The committee offered me the contract for building Sandbourn's new hospital, and though I knew very little of the planning of such an institution, I accepted the contract, mainly because I did not want a strange firm functioning upon my estate. As to the contract I offered to charge the committee the cost price of the building, plus four per cent profit, and a vote of thanks was accorded me for my moderation. I had pointed out to the committee that the work on the hospital would hold up some of my own building, and that I should have to engage an expert, and take on additional labour. We had no architect in Sandbourn capable of planning such a place, and I engaged a London firm to architect the work; they had had considerable experience of hospital construction.

Officialdom was on the march. Sandbourn had become an Urban District Council, and though Finch and Thomas asserted that this innovation might cause us endless trouble, I am afraid I was a little more cynical in my prognostications. The U.D.C.'s first chairman was Tom Vowles, a retired brewer who had been chairman of the Local Board, and most of the councillors who were elected were acquaintances of mine. More than one of them was interested indirectly in the progress of my operations. Mr. Tyson had retired, and the new surveyor was a rather mild young man whose chief concern appeared to be to please everybody. Mr. Gregson himself had been invited, because of his position and experience, to act as clerk to the council. Bell, a junior partner of Christopherson's, was appointed medical officer. Also, I had begun to realize that I had Sandbourn and its U.D.C. very much in my pocket, for I can say that I was Sandbourn's most progressive and potent citizen. The town was benefiting financially from the scores of new residents I had attracted, and every house I built added to the town's rating list. The shopkeeping class were with me solidly, and on voting strength they controlled the council. As for their building bye-laws I had no fear of them, for I had

carried on the Banyard tradition, and much of my work was superior to the official requirements.

Socially I was becoming acceptable to Sandbourn's intelligentsia, such as it was. I was not county, but I was asked to dine at professional houses, and I gave an occasional dinner at the Victoria Hotel. I was allowing myself a smart dogcart with a coachman in livery, though I admit that the coachman was sometimes my gardener. I had educated myself out of a young man's sensitive gaucherie, and could carry my clothes and wear my manners without appearing conscious of them. I was reading a good deal, science, economics and philosophy, but I was careful not to talk too much in public, nor to parade an excess of information.

One of the most significant incidents to me was the laying of the foundation stone of the new hospital. A marquee had been erected, and all Sandbourn was there. I and the architect were on the platform, and I had detailed Bob Beeson to act as the official with the trowel. Lady Bullstrode was to lay the stone. I had supervised the erecting of the tackle, and arranged for the stone to be draped with a Union Jack. One of Tom Vowles's daughters was to present Lady Bullstrode with a bouquet, and my tribute was to be the silver trowel she would use.

It was a hot and oppressive day in June, with thunder in the air, and the marquee was promising to become like a Black Hole of Calcutta. We were waiting for Lady Bullstrode to arrive, and I remember Christopherson whispering to me: "We shall have somebody fainting here, or I'm no prophet." Old Vowles and one or two civic worthies were waiting at the marquee door for Sanchia. I could see him fanning himself with the notes of the speech he was expected to make.

Mr. Thomas Vowles's fat, frock-coated figure became solicitously welcoming, like a cock-pigeon inflated with sedulous cooings. I saw her framed in the marquee doorway, with her slim black sheath of a figure, and her flowerlike face. My feeling was that she was frightened of something, of the crowd and her public occasion? But a figure loomed up behind hers, Bullstrode himself, polished with the heat, florid and ominous. He was in a grey morning-coat and trousers, and carrying a grey top-hat, and he had a white rosebud in his buttonhole.

Old Vowles was strutting and cooing beside her on the way to the platform. We stood up. I ceased to see the rows of faces; they might have been

loaves of bread in a shop; all that I saw was her face very pale and set, floating under its black hat. I don't think she saw me. I don't think she was actively conscious of any person or object. My feeling was that she was frightened of the man behind her.

She climbed the three steps to the platform, and sat down in her chair above and behind the flag-draped stone. Bullstrode had not been expected, and his presence made us a chair short on the platform. I slipped back behind the row of chairs, so that my seat should be available, and old Vowles nodded at me. "Thank you, Lancaster." I stood behind her chair. Bullstrode was just on my right. I could study his massive neck, and the way his collar compressed it, and seemed to show up the pittings of old acne scars. It was a brute of a neck, straight and thick, and almost as broad as his head.

Old Vowles was speaking. He enjoyed speaking, and I thought he would go on for ever. I was watching Sanchia now. She was utterly and strangely still, yet with the stillness of inward tension. The marquee was unbearably stuffy. There were beads of sweat on Thomas Vowles's forehead.

Her occasion arrived. I had the silver trowel ready. She was slow to rise as though her knees had turned to water. I saw the fingers of her right hand make a kind of groping movement. There was a pause before she seemed to find her voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure—"

I think it was the spasm of the fingers of her right hand that made me divine the intense and inward effort she was making to control some weakness in herself. Then I saw her sway very slightly. Her voice died away, and suddenly I realized that she was going to faint. I was conscious at that moment of rows and rows of faces rather like gaping oyster shells. It was I who caught her as she was about to fall.

It all happened so quickly. There was a shocked silence, and then a kind of spreading, sympathetic murmur. She was limp and relaxed in my arms. Old Vowles was up with a kindly and horrified face. I remember saying to him "Move the chair." I lifted her up, and carried her down the steps and along the turf gangway and past those rows of faces out into the open air. It was the sweet air that she needed. I saw a young oak tree and a grass bank, and I laid her down in the shade on the soft turf of the bank.

Suddenly I felt myself jostled, and bullocked to one side. Our eyes met for a moment, and the blue glare in Bullstrode's seemed to snarl at me: "Get out of the way, you cad. How dare you touch her!" Christopherson had followed us out. The doctor was down on his knees, loosening the neck of her dress. I saw

him slip her black hat from under her head. Bullstrode was bending down, and his brutal neck looked fat and flushed.

“It was the damned heat in that tent.”

Christopherson was terse with him.

“Leave her to me, please. Don’t crowd.”

Old Vowles was standing in the doorway of the marquee. I saw him spread his arms and hold people back.

“Keep your seats, please, keep your seats.”

Shall I ever forget what Bullstrode said to his wife when the Beaulieu carriage and pair drove out of the field. I was standing by myself near the old field hedge through which a gap had been cut. I had watched Christopherson help her into the carriage. Her black hat lay in her lap, and she was as white as ivory.

A ditch had been partially filled in where the hedge had been cut away, and the coachman had to take the carriage gently over the soft earth. I was half hidden by the hedge, and neither of them was aware of my nearness. I saw Bullstrode snatch her hat from her lap, and plant it on her head.

“Making a public exhibition of yourself!”

I could have killed him.

But the foundation stone was waiting to be laid, and Mrs. Christopherson was asked to act as understudy. Quite a number of women were leaving the marquee as I returned to it. No doubt they were feeling faint, by suggestion. I went up to the platform and sat down in the chair that Bullstrode had occupied. Old Vowles was on his feet again, perspiring but loquacious. “Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Christopherson, our dear doctor’s wife, has consented to act for Lady Bullstrode. But, ladies and gentlemen, before we proceed with the ceremony, I think we should send a message of sympathy to her ladyship.” Casual applause. But some of us were growing impatient, and I saw Christopherson tweak old Vowles’s coat-tails. There might be more fainting if this garrulous old gentleman did not refrain from too much oratory.

Anyhow, that stone was laid. I handed the silver trowel to Mrs.

Christopherson, and she did the business with her characteristic, smiling happiness. The tackle worked without a hitch, and the stone sank doucely to its brick bed. Mrs. Christopherson made a few graceful passes with the silver trowel. Bob handed her a mallet, and she tapped the stone. The marquee applauded, and then emptied itself gladly into the fresh air.

I found myself standing alone with Christopherson in a corner of the empty marquee. His handsome face had a flushed fierceness.

“Lancaster, there is one person whom I should like to kick.”

Little did I think at the moment that the pranks of a mischievous old Puck would bring Bullstrode and myself together again before a week was out. I received a letter from Mr. Joseph Paynter asking me to call on him at Ridge Farm, and giving me a very definite time for the appointment. He had underlined his 10.45 a.m.

I went. I found Mr. Paynter dressed in his Sunday clothes, and seated in that social sanctuary, the farmhouse parlour. It had all the stuffiness of a room that was Victorian. It smelt of the Sabbath, and I could divine dry-rot in the floor joists, and book-lice in the family bible on the round, pedestal table. Obviously, Mrs. Paynter had a passion for wool mats and Pampas Grass and family photos, and china ornaments of a formidable ugliness.

Mr. Paynter was wearing a wicked look, like a fierce old dog who has buried a bone.

“Do ’ee still want to buy my farm, Mr. Lancaster?”

I told him that I had a cheque book in my pocket, and he chuckled.

“I’m expecting another visitor at eleven o’clock.”

“Are you, sir?”

“Yes, Bullstrode.”

I sat and stared at him. What was this old punchinello proposing to do? Play us off against each other? He was watching me with a little, sly glimmer in his eyes.

“No need to worry, my lad. I sent Bullstrode a letter, telling him to call on me. Do you think he will come?”

“What is the idea, sir?”

“I reckon he’ll come all right. He thinks I be going to sell him t’ farm. And if he comes, he’ll find ’ee sitting here. And then I can tell him to go to hell, and that I’ve sold ’ee the farm.”

The old devil! He was persuading Beaulieu to call as a noble suppliant, for the pleasure of displaying an ironical and hobnailed boot! What a situation! If I had staged it myself I could not have felt more savagely pleased.

“Have you led him to believe—?”

“Sure, I have. But a man can change his mind, eh? I reckon he’ll look like a boar when t’old sow’s unwilling.”

I brought out my cheque book.

“Would you like the whole sum, or a deposit, Mr. Paynter?”

His eyes twinkled at me.

“You write me a cheque for ten per cent. I’ll have it here on the table.”

There was an inkstand and a rather rusty pen on the table, and I wrote the cheque, and I was tearing it out of the book when I heard a sound of horse’s hoofs, and turning to look, saw Bullstrode dismounting on the other side of the white fence. I tore out the cheque, and passed it to Mr. Paynter, and he placed it by the family Bible on the table.

“Supposin’ you sit in that there chair behind the door.”

I laughed. Old Paynter’s malice was thorough in its shrewdness.

I do not know who opened the farmhouse door to Bullstrode. He rapped on it with his riding-crop, and Mr. Paynter sat caressing his beard and whiskers. I heard the door opened, and Bullstrode’s big, throaty voice full of magisterial affability.

“Good morning, Mrs. Paynter, is there anyone who can hold my horse? I have left the bridle looped over the gate.”

Mrs. Paynter had one of those hard boiled voices.

“I’ll call one of the lads from the yard, sir.”

The parlour door opened, and I heard the floorboards creaking under Bullstrode’s Tudor bulk. He came in like Jove, graciously shining upon the mere mortals who were to serve him.

“Ha, good morning, Paynter. Good weather for the hay.”

And then he saw me, and the debonair smile slipped from his face. I have never seen a human countenance change so swiftly.

“Ha, Lancaster!”

He must have suspected at once that Old Paynter had a sneer tucked away in his whiskers, but he closed the door, and laying his hat and crop on the table, sat down on a hard, black sofa. I could see that he was trying to control himself, and to retain a grand manner, but the blue glare was still in his eyes.

“Is it to be a conference, Mr. Paynter?”

I saw the farmer’s nobbly hand creep across the table to my cheque. His face had a smug solemnity, yet a mischievous smirk seemed to hang in his whiskers.

“Not exactly that, Sir Beverley. I’ve bin thinkin’ as how I ought to tell you straight to your face that my farm be’nt for sale now.”

Bullstrode was recovering his grand manner. He appeared to have made up his mind to ignore me.

“O, we all change our minds, Mr. Paynter.”

“Sure-ly. But, y’see, Bullstrode, I’ve just sold t’farm to Mr. Lancaster, and unless he wants to sell it back to ye it be’nt for sale. That’s how it is, y’see.”

He picked up my cheque, and fluttered it, and his face was radiant with happy malice.

“So, if you want t’farm, you’ll have to go beggin’ to Mr. Lancaster.”

I was wondering what Bullstrode’s reaction would be, and I watched him as one might watch an angry bull in a gate. He did not look at me. I could see the veins standing out on his forehead; his blue-glass eyes seemed to have gone dull and muddy. He stood up, reached for his hat and crop, and glancing at the slip of paper in Mr. Paynter’s fingers, smiled with a kind of savage geniality. His coarse lips were retracted over his big flat teeth.

“Thank you, Mr. Paynter. Most courteous of you. So, that settles the matter. I do not think I desire to do business with Mr. Lancaster.”

He turned to the door, opened it, put on his hat, and walked out into the passage, leaving the door open. I was aware of old Paynter’s eyes watching him with hatred and stinging relish. How long had this fierce old sheepshead been waiting for some such chance as this? We heard the outer door slam. Old Paynter got out of his chair and went to the window to watch Bullstrode make his retreat. I heard him give a kind of dry, hissing chuckle.

“That’s got he in t’belly. Mother, bring us a jug o’ beer.”

His voice had become an exultant screech.

“Beer, Mother, Ya. Get on yer bloody high horse, Mr. Bullstrode. Thought

y'd have my farm, did 'ee? Beer, Mother. I've twisted Beaulieu's guts."

Did I realize then that in my exultant hating of the man, I was sending him back in a savage blaze to the woman whom I loved?

Did I want her to be more unhappy?

What insufferable egoists we are!

I had aided and abetted the chuckling malice of this old pantaloon. Certainly, I had not conspired to put Falstaff in the dirty-linen basket, but I had formed an appreciative audience of one. I drank a glass of Mr. Paynter's beer, proposed that the lawyers should get out the contract, and took myself off. If I had any qualms about this episode in which I had allowed my hatred to be associated with an old man's malice, I quickly smothered them. It has been my experience that in loving or hating, one should be thorough even in one's ruthlessness, and that a too facile pity is more vice than virtue. Our hesitations, and our falterings and our silly sensibilities make for us more trouble in the end. There is a wise efficiency even in ruthlessness. One may hesitate and compromise, and pollard a tree when it would be much better to fell it, and the final issue may compel us to lay the axe and the crosscut saw to its trunk. Sentimentality wastes time and tissue.

But I did ask myself whether Sanchia would hear of the incident. Was Bullstrode a man who took his rages to his wife, and wrapped her in them as in a poisoned cloak? Would it react on her?

About this I had qualms.

Her crisis was nearer to me than I dreamed of. I went down that afternoon to see Mr. Gregson and to tell him that Paynter had sold me Ridge Farm, and that the old man had accepted a deposit and that the contract could be prepared. Mr. Gregson had never quite ceased from a god-fatherly attitude towards me, but he was so wise and kindly a person that I was not piqued by it. He could give me advice, and I would listen.

"More building, John?"

"In due course, perhaps."

"The fury to accomplish. Leave something for your old age, John."

I smiled at his kind, austere old face.

"Did you, sir?"

“The more human part of it, John. One loses the dust in the sun-ray.”

“Does one?”

“Or sees it, as dust.”

I had a feeling that he was going to ask me why I did not marry, for marriage to him had been no episode. It was not a question of settling down, but of taking into one's life other humanities.

“I'll remember that saying, sir.”

“And not as coming from a prig or a prophet!”

I walked back by way of the High Street to see how the Electrical Company were progressing with their dépôt at The Quadrant. I had begun to sell shop-sites at The Quadrant at the approximate rate of a thousand pounds a site. My mood was to return by Quarry Lane. I wanted to look at the Cherrill cottage, and to see how it was shaping. Also, the walls of the new hospital were rising in rose red brick.

Quarry Lane climbed steeply for its first furlong, and then flattened out into a gradual ascent until it reached the plateau. I was within a hundred yards of the Cherrill cottage when I saw a carriage standing outside the Thorn Cottage gate. The coachman was down off the box, and carrying something, that looked like a small black portmanteau into the Cherrill garden. I suppose my inner consciousness was so full of her imagined presence that any incident that was associated with her lit up my intuitions. The world in which she moved and breathed and had her being was another world to me, magical and alive and rich with colour, like a young man's world when his inward eyes are first opened to beauty.

Was that black portmanteau hers? Had she come to stay with her mother?

Had she run away from Beaulieu?

I was aware of acute, inward tension. If life up yonder had become insupportable, had the incident of the morning proved to be the last straw? If so, I was, in a sense, responsible.

I saw the coachman emerge from the gate, climb to his seat, and drive away. He passed me without seeing me, a stolid, oafish fellow who blew out his cheeks and whistled. I walked up to the Cherrill gate, and stood there, hesitant and challenged.

She must have been at a window and seen me at the gate. I could not make up my mind to dare the issue, or to trespass upon what might be some intimate

family affair, when I saw her come out into the garden. She had taken off her hat, and her face looked to me small and tragic and very pale. It had a quality that I find it impossible to describe. It seemed to me that she was frightened, and with a fear that fluttered desperately and fatally like a white moth to the candle flame. She was on the brink of her crisis, and so shaken by some emotion that she was ready to rush over the edge of things, while stretching out her hands, and crying: "Help, oh, help me."

I know that I was suddenly and profoundly moved. I opened the gate and entered the garden. I must have been the most selfless thing in the world at that moment. I did not want to take from her, only to give, and to give in full measure, blindly and yet with compassionate understanding.

"May I speak to you?"

I saw her glance back at the house, and then she came towards me.

"She does not know, yet. She thinks I have come to stay. Oh, what am I saying?"

I stood there with my hat off, looking at her.

"You can say anything to me."

I remember her eyes growing momentarily wide and bright. They had a kind of staring innocence, as though something that she saw in my eyes surprised her. Surely, she should have known what she meant to me, and yet, when I reflected upon it, I realized that she must have been blind to the reality until that moment. I think it shocked her a little, and made her draw back within herself, and look at me with a fastidiousness that mistrusted the thing called love. She seemed to grow slim and straight, and a little remote, like a young tree recovering its stateliness and poise after a gust of wind had shaken it.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I—"

But I was not going to draw back after coming so near to her. I felt that she needed me, and that in this moment of recoil she was more alone than ever. Moreover, I wanted her to understand that I loved her differently from any other creature on the earth, and that I was no greedy lout seizing my chance to tear the apples out of the tree of life.

I said: "If you will think of me as a friend, I shall be very proud and happy. You need tell me nothing. But if I can help in any way, please send for me."

I made as though to go, and I saw the fear come back into her eyes.

“John, don’t go, yet. I’m frightened.”

I knew of what she was afraid.

“You have no one here but your mother and the maid?”

“No.”

I had my inspiration.

“Why not go to friends for a few days?”

“To whom could I go?”

“Why not the Christophersons? I’m perfectly sure—”

“But, would they?”

“Of course. Would you like me to—?”

I had seen the look of relief in her eyes, but she was so shaken that she seemed unable to make a decision.

“But, my luggage? The carriage has gone.”

“What have you?”

“Just a small portmanteau and a bag.”

“I can arrange that. There are men working in the cottage. I’ll send two of them down with your luggage. Why not go at once?”

“But, my mother?”

“Why, tell her the Christophersons have asked you to stay. Go down there at once. Mrs. Christopherson is your friend.”

I saw that she had been persuaded.

“I will. Before anything happens. Would you see to the luggage?”

“Of course. Put on your hat and go.”

She looked at me wide eyed.

“Thank you, John. Thank you for everything.”

There was a flair in me that afternoon. I seemed to know what would happen and to be prepared for it. When she had gone by way of a pathway and steps leading down into West Sandbourn, I went back to the new Cherrill cottage. I had a press of men working there in order to finish it as speedily as possible, carpenters, tilers, a bricklayer and his labourer pointing off the plinth. The two men whom I had sent with her luggage had been clearing builder’s

rubbish from the site, and digging in fencing posts. I went into the cottage, and found Garland, one of my carpenters, nailing down floorboards. His tool bag lay in a corner.

“I’ll borrow something of yours, Garland.”

“Very good, sir.”

I picked a big hammer out of the bag, and slipped it into the righthand side pocket of my jacket, head downwards. The handle stuck out, but it would be all the more ready in case of necessity. I left the men at work, though I suspect that they guessed there was thunder in the air, and walked up to the little group of trees beyond Thorn Cottage. There was a big beech here whose lower branches almost brushed the ground, and I sat down under this tree in ambush. From it I could command the whole of Quarry Lane from the point where it climbed up out of the valley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



*I*T MUST have been about half-past four when I saw what I had expected to see, a figure on horseback topping the rise. It was Bullstrode, and he was alone, and riding a black horse. I stood up, and hidden by the green vallance of the tree, I could look down into the Thorn Cottage garden.

Bullstrode came cantering up to the gate. He dismounted, looped his bridle over a gatepost and went in. He was carrying a heavy riding-crop. I saw him go to the door and try the handle. The door was locked. I don't know what Sanchia had said to her mother, but the old lady must have been wise as to possible invasions.

That locked door seemed to enrage the man. He hammered on the door with his crop. He began to shout. I knew him to be a savage sort of beast, but I had never seen a man who was supposed to be civilized so lose control of himself and behave like a mad bull. He kicked at the door, and then transferred his attentions to a lower window. He was shouting.

“Damn it, I'm coming in, locks or no locks.”

I saw him slashing at the window with his crop, and heard the glass splinter. A stout fellow this, to beat up a house in which women might be cowering. I felt that it was time to intervene. The horse was standing quietly at the gate, much less of a beast than his master, and as I slipped past him and in through the gate, I saw that Bullstrode had an arm through the broken window, and was feeling for the catch. He was still shouting.

“O, you are there, are you, dear mother-in-law. Tell your damned daughter to come down.”

Poor old Mrs. Cherrill must have been cowering like a terrified hen in that lower room, too frightened probably to move. As I had entered the gate I had seen that some of my men had come out into the lane. Bullstrode's raging voice, and his smashing of glass might have graced a tavern brawl.

I walked half way up the path before letting my voice go at him.

“Stop that, Bullstrode.”

He swung round and saw me, and I suppose I must have been the very

symbol of the things against which he was raging, nor was I mere glass and wood, but live flesh to be smitten. He came at me with crop raised, teeth bared, his eyes protruding.

“What are you doing here, you swine?”

He cursed as he came at me, but if his rage was noisy and trumpeting, mine was silent and perhaps more fierce. I put my hand to the handle of the hammer, for I was not going to let a fifteen stone mad human bull savage me as he pleased, but the head of the hammer caught in the lining of my pocket. He got in two blows with his crop before I could get the hammer out, but in his fury he struck wildly, and I was able to block both blows with my left arm. I had the hammer out before he could get in a third, and as his arm went up and bent to flail me I struck at his bent elbow. I could not have hit a nail on the head more cleanly. I both heard and felt something crack as the hammer head jarred the bone.

The blow seemed to paralyse him. His right arm remained bent for a moment, and then I saw the crop drop out of his hand. His face was contracted with pain, but his fury transcended pain. I saw that he was going to charge me with his left fist raised, and this time I meant to hit him in the face, but my men had come stampeding into the garden. I will not say that they loved me dearly, but they loved Bullstrode less. I think it was Garland and Bates who got hold of him, and he struck one of them in the face.

“Get out, you swine.”

My men struck back, and in a second or two, three or four of them had got hold of him, and I saw him hustled roughly to the gate. They flung him out with such good will that he overbalanced and sat down in the lane, looking like some grotesque and large-headed child who had collapsed in the thick of a screaming rage-storm. I remember the nasty, mocking laughter of these men, and the way Bullstrode’s face seemed suddenly to change. He must have realized what a blundering, blazing fool he had made of himself.

He got up, holding his right elbow with his left hand.

“Some of you may be sorry for this.”

“You go to hell,” shouted one of them. “We saw you strike Mr. Lancaster first.”

“Yes, we all saw it.”

“Asking for trouble, and you’ve bloody well got it.”

With that smashed elbow he could not mount his horse, but he had

recovered that which was Beaulieu, a grand manner, and the air of assuming us to be of inferior clay. "Would you gentlemen mind letting me pass." I think my men liked his irony less than his anger, but they stood aside and allowed him to get to his horse. He looped the bridle over his left arm and walked away, and as I watched him I was struck by one of those ridiculous features that pop up even in the thick of tragedy. Bullstrode was wearing a fawn-coloured bowler hat, and all through the scuffle and his sudden subsidence the hat had remained attached to his massive head.

Full of conversational facetiousness my men went back to their work, teasing Garland about the bloody nose he had got, and I re-entered the Thorn Cottage garden. I found Bullstrode's crop lying on the path, and I took possession of it as a trophy. I had returned Garland his hammer. I saw a face at the broken window, poor old Mrs. Cherrill looking like a frightened marmoset, and I went to the window to reassure her.

I said: "I am very sorry. I don't think this will happen again. Besides, my men will be close by."

Her agitation had to voice itself.

"How disgraceful! A gentleman, too, like Beverley! I couldn't have believed it possible. I am so grateful to you, Mr. Lancaster."

I smiled at her.

"I am glad your daughter was not here."

"Poor dear Sanchia. Who would have believed—? But I hope he did not hurt you, Mr. Lancaster?"

As a matter of fact my left forearm was feeling rather sore, but I was not feeling sore at heart.

"No, nothing to speak of. I will send a man round and have your window mended, Mrs. Cherrill."

She stood, fluttering her eyelashes at me.

"What am I to do about poor Sanchia? Who would have believed—?"

"She should be at the Christophersons. It is better that no one should know."

"O, quite, quite; it would be terrible if Beverley made another disgraceful scene. In confidence, Mr. Lancaster, she has been so very unhappy."

I nodded at her.

“One who should be so happy. But I don’t think her husband will behave like this again. Would you like me to go down to the Christophersons?”

“It would be so very kind of you, Mr. Lancaster. I ought to go, but I feel so dreadfully upset.”

“I’ll go at once, and come back and tell you.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Lancaster.”

Her wishes matched my inclinations, but before leaving Quarry Lane I went and asked the men to keep their eyes and ears open and to take care that Bullstrode did not make a second attack on Thorn Cottage. “The old lady and the maid are alone there.” They assured me with stiff grins that they would throw Bullstrode out a second time if he trespassed, and I left them and made my way down to Regal Terrace. My left arm was beginning to feel stiff and sore, but even if it had been broken I know I should have felt happy.

I asked for Christopherson and was told that he was in. I was shown into his consulting-room, and I think he had expected me. He was both physician and friend. Yes, Lady Bullstrode had come to them, and they had been glad to take her in. She was upstairs with his wife.

And had I seen anything of the husband?

Yes, very much so.

“I’m afraid I have smashed up his right elbow, doctor. He turned up like a raging bull, and frightened the poor old lady.”

“Are you sorry, Lancaster?”

“Not a bit.”

“How did it happen?”

“I went to stop him breaking his way in, and he turned on me with his crop. I had a hammer in my pocket, and I got in a good one.”

“Did he hit you?”

“Twice on this arm, before I got him. My men rushed in from the new cottage and threw him out.”

“Arm hurting?”

“A little.”

“Let’s look at it. Off with your coat.”

He helped me to peel off my coat, and turned up my shirt sleeve. There

was a big bruise on the forearm, and the skin had been badly grazed in another place. Christopherson felt the bones, and twisted my left hand to and fro.

“No fracture. But I’ll put a dressing on that. Sit down, Lancaster. This is a damned bad business.”

“More than that.”

“Yes, difficult. The humiliation of the thing. The worst of it is, she hasn’t a penny.”

“You mean he has kept her without money?”

“Practically so. The power of the purse.”

“The beast!”

“Exactly. A man like Bullstrode is a social disease. Hypertrophy of the ego. And so damned sure that the whole earth is ‘county’ and his. It’s a devil of a problem.”

“You’ll let her stay here?”

“Of course, my dear man. As long as she likes. But that is only the beginning of things. We shall have Bullstrode and the lawyers on our backs. The Law is more than an ass. It’s so often on the side of the brute.”

“You mean, he can compel her to go back?”

“Restitution of conjugal rights. What irony! To make it legal and right for a woman to have to—”

Christopherson was bandaging my arm, and I winced, but not because of the arm.

“I’m damned if she shall!”

The doctor did not look at me, but my voice must have betrayed me.

“A man can knock a woman about, but unless he commits adultery, Lancaster—”

“Yes, I know. Pretty filthy, isn’t it. If I were the wife I would go to Spain or South America, or anywhere.”

“Without money, Lancaster!”

I was silent.

I remember asking him whether he thought Sanchia would care to see me. I said that I had promised to reassure her mother. The doctor had taken a large

triangle of white linen out of a dressing-table, and with a little whimsical smile at me he placed one corner of the triangle over my shoulder.

“Better have that in a sling, Lancaster.”

“Need I? Surely not.”

“Doctor’s orders. The bone is bruised.”

He was a man who saw much further than the immediate issue, as a physician should, for there are many more things to be set in life than broken bones. I imagine that he had diagnosed my case, and probably he discussed the prognosis with his wife, for we were to receive nothing but kindness and understanding from both of them. They were in advance of their generation in their attitude to the so-called sacrament of marriage, and when it had become septic and no sacrament Christopherson believed in a radical operation.

He said that he would go and ask Lady Bullstrode whether she wished to see me, and while he was gone I walked up and down his room in a state of emotional tension. I supposed that the last thing she would wish me to show, if she saw me, would be feeling. She had suffered enough from unkempt emotion for one summer day.

Christopherson came back and said that she wished to see me. I should find her in the drawing-room.

She was alone, sitting at an open french window, in a high-backed chair. I saw her eyes glance quickly at my slung arm, and the quality of her glance was such that I knew that we had come very near to each other.

“You’ve been hurt, John?”

“O, nothing. Christopherson has been rather fussy. Mrs. Cherrill asked me to—”

“Did he do that to you?”

“Does it matter?”

Her face was poignant.

“Yes. It does matter. I ought not to have left you to face my—”

“I was a volunteer, not a pressed man. Besides, I was not exactly the victim. My men and I—But I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You must tell me what happened.”

“There is no need.”

She contradicted me. She was a woman compelling herself calmly to confront her problem, and her young dignity sat erect and pale. She was mistress of herself now, completely and irrevocably so.

“There is every need. Did he try to frighten my poor little mother?”

I nodded, and I saw her face go hard.

“It is rather incredible. I may be the legalized victim. I hope you—”

“Yes, we put a stop to that. I don’t think it will recur. I warned my men.”

She said, as though accusing herself: “I should not have been such a coward. I think that I shall be able to meet him myself, next time.”

The words seemed to be forced from me.

“Good God, there must be no next time.”

I remember her rising from her chair and going out on to the balcony as though she realized how near we both were to the elemental sea. I was angry with myself for that splurge into emotion. I could understand her frozen mood and her shrinking from the storms of the flesh. She wanted to confront her problem coldly and calmly, and with the dispassionate clarity of a woman prejudiced against romanticism and illusion. She stood with her hands resting on the iron rail, and her eyes gazing at the sea. How often had I seen that same sea from my mother’s house! I went to the window and spoke to her.

“I am sorry for those words. May I say one thing?”

She answered me very gently.

“I only ask you to remember, John, that I, things, are rather torn and ragged.”

“I know. That is what is in my mind. One has a secret self that asks not to be ravaged.”

“My dear, you do understand.”

I held my breath.

“Yes, I think I do. What I wanted to say was that I am your friend, always and everywhere. I do not ask for anything save to be used, as a friend.”

“Thank you, John.”

“I think I will go back now and tell your mother I have seen you.”

“Yes, if you will. Tell her that they have asked me to stay here. Their kindness passes belief.”

Christopherson was waiting for me below. I told him how calm she seemed, and how infinitely grateful she was for their kindness.

“My dear man, that is not very difficult.”

“But it is going to be the most difficult thing on earth to help her. I mean, in other ways, as one might wish to help.”

He understood me.

“Well, that’s as it should be, Lancaster, being what she is. And much of it will be matter for the lawyers.”

I don’t think I was ever happier in my life than on that summer evening when I walked back to Quarry Lane. I knew that I loved her more profoundly, and with a conviction that my love was good and right, not because it was my love, but because she had shown her proud self to me, and made me understand its strength and temper. This was no illusion, no sex dream, but the ultimate sure splendour in which human feeling transcends itself. I knew that my love for her was infinitely wise.

I found Mrs. Cherrill sitting demure and becaped in her drawing-room with her Bible in her lap. She belonged to a generation that fled for refuge to that most human of books, though its humanity depends upon how you read it. I had, of course, to explain my slung arm, and to accept her twittering sympathy.

“How dreadful! That a gentleman should behave in such a way.”

She still adhered to her labels, poor old thing, or, rather, they adhered to her. I am afraid it has been my experience that our ruling class is stricken with indolence and cynicism, though Bullstrode’s sensuality could not be described as indolent. I sat down in one of the Cherrill plush-covered chairs, and was gentle and reassuring. I said that the Christophersons were being brother and sister to Sanchia, and that the ultimate issue would be a problem for the lawyers.

Mrs. Cherrill looked frightened.

“But such a scandal! Do you think she ought to go back to him?”

“Do you?”

She blinked at me, poor, conventional old lady.

“Perhaps this will be a lesson to him, Mr. Lancaster. Besides, lawyers’

bills! So expensive!”

Had she found that in her Bible?

Also, I gathered that Mrs. Cherrill was one of those dear snobs and sentimentalists who pretend to believe that marriage is final and sacred, and that a woman should suffer humiliation gladly to preserve the sanctity of holy wedlock. I understand that some priestly persons still insist, that though a man may drink and whore and exercise every sort of small male meanness, a woman should remain with him. Much of this sacerdotal nonsense is now dead and past praying for, but in the days that I am writing of it was smugly dominant. I often wonder how responsible Mrs. Cherrill had been for her daughter's marriage. Her poor little social vanities had not foreseen the ironic poverty of a Lady Bullstrode who had no economic standing in the world.

I went down that evening to see Mr. Gregson. That Bullstrode and I could issue counter-summonses for assault was a matter of no importance. I wanted a legal opinion on Sanchia's position, and I gave Mr. Gregson in confidence a frank and complete account of all that had happened.

He was exceedingly grave and guarded. I found that he was somewhat wise as to the discords in the Bullstrode ménage, but when I pressed him for an opinion, he met me with the old adage: “It is dangerous to interfere between man and wife.”

I smiled at him.

“If you are trying to safeguard me, sir, you need not worry.”

“But what right have you to intervene, John?”

“I haven't intervened.”

“Excuse me, you have, and most seriously so. On your own showing you have advised Lady Bullstrode to leave her husband.”

“Hardly, sir. She made the decision herself, and I abetted it. But do you want to know my justification?”

He looked at me with shrewd, kind little crinkles round his eyes.

“As man to man, John.”

“All right, I'll tell you. I have been in love with Lady Bullstrode from the very first day I saw her.”

“My dear John! And she?”

“I don’t know, sir. How should I know? One’s vanity—All I can say is that I want to help her, if it is possible to help her.”

He explained to me that should Lady Bullstrode refuse to live with her husband he might institute proceedings against her for restitution of conjugal rights. The suggestion made my gorge rise. Anything was better than that. Alternately, Lady Bullstrode might plead cruelty and apply to the court for a separation order, in which case Bullstrode would be compelled to provide her with an income.

I said to Mr. Gregson: “That seems the worst sort of compromise. Besides, what if she got her separation, and refused to accept money from him?”

“It would be hers legally.”

“I know, but I should sympathize with her if she refused to be kept by him. And then, what is the alternative? Living with her mother on a hundred or so a year?”

“That would be the position.”

“And the law costs money. How could she raise money?”

“She might insure her life, and raise money on the policy.”

“Supposing a friend could persuade her to accept money?”

“My dear John, if the matter became public knowledge, a very sinister inference might be drawn.”

I said: “Sinister inferences be damned! It seems to me one is tied up in quibbles. Besides, I don’t believe she would accept money from me, and I should be terribly shy of offering it.”

“Why not wait upon events?”

“With a man like Bullstrode on the horizon! She must be protected. I want her to come to you. Would you act?”

He nodded and smiled.

“Provided you keep in the background.”

“For my sake?”

“For her sake, in the present situation.”

I got up and walked up and down the room.

“Mr. Gregson, you have always been a good friend to me. Forgive what I am going to say. In the matter of fees, could she be charged a nominal sum,

and I be held privately responsible?”

“No, John.”

“But—”

“I might charge no fees.”

“That’s like you, sir. But in the case of litigation, there would be other charges?”

“Exactly.”

“She would have to raise money to meet them?”

“No, the husband would be responsible for her costs.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

All this hypothetical stuff exasperated me, and I am afraid I challenged it.

“It seems to me much more rational and helpful for a person to commit adultery. That’s final and human and thorough. One would cut straight through all this confounded equivocation.”

And then he astonished me.

“Yes, John, I’m not sure that I don’t agree with you.”

I stood and stared at him.

“You! You do?”

He smiled at me.

“Sometimes, John, in one’s ripe old age the lawyer becomes lost in the man. The letter dies, but the spirit survives. Scandal! But what is scandal? The passion to blame. I am not sure but that the ruthless and elemental way is sometimes the best way out.”

I could not help asking him a question.

“In this case, sir?”

He looked at the ceiling.

“That would depend on the spirit of those concerned.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



*T*HE spirit of those concerned!

So far as my own self was concerned it was ready to spread deliberate and adventurous wings and take the air with her, but if ever there was to be such a love-flight, the yea or nay would be hers. My self-love may have preened itself with other women, but with her I was the most unsure and tentative lover. Moreover, I was still socially self-conscious, and aware of the grotesque things the world might say of a romance between Lady Bullstrode and a local tradesman. I do not think that I was a snob, but I was most absurdly sensitive about the situation, and ready to resent Sandbourn's sneers, not on my account, but on hers. I might be wise as to what casual opinion would be worth, but I did not want her to suffer for it. Also, one's title to fame has strange origins. I believe I was to be known as the first man to own and drive a motor-car in Sandbourn.

Wide eyed, considered comradeship, that was my ideal.

I walked down late in the evening from Pink Farm to Thorn Cottage, one of those serene summer evenings when the light lies like a golden bloom upon the landscape. I wanted to be sure that Mrs. Cherrill had suffered no more invasions, but all was well there. I found her with her spectacles on, knitting at the open window. I suppose those clicking needles are soothing to women.

"How very kind of you, Mr. Lancaster. Really, you have put yourself to so much trouble."

Dear old thing, her person exhaled a faint perfume of patronage. I think I continued to be "The young man from Banyards," and had I built her a palace she would still have regarded me as a creature of common clay, clever and successful of course, but never quite the gentleman. The amazing tyranny of caste! A sentimentalist like Mrs. Cherrill could give her daughter to an educated blackguard like Bullstrode, but I felt that she would be shocked had she suspected that I was in love with her daughter. Such presumption! But I am convinced that she had not the slightest suspicion, and continued to be completely blind to the situation. I suppose she considered that I was

sufficiently rewarded by the social illumination I received.

Two days of silence and suspense.

I was wondering whether Beaulieu would indulge in some violent gesture.

Was Bullstrode sulking like Achilles?

I did not go near Regal Terrace. I thought it more tactful to leave matters in Christopherson's strong and capable hands.

I heard nothing from him, and on the third day my restlessness got the better of me. I went down at an hour when I knew that I was likely to find him in. He had just finished seeing the last of his visiting patients, and I was shown into his consulting-room.

"Hallo, Lancaster. I wondered what had happened to you."

He was looking mordant and amused.

"Malin called on us this morning"—Malin was a local doctor—"He asked me to see Bullstrode with him as a consultant."

"And did you?"

"Hardly. I couldn't very well attend a fellow whose wife I was sheltering. Besides, I didn't want to. You seem to have smashed up his elbow joint with your little hammer."

"I cannot pretend to be sorry."

I asked him whether Sanchia had made any plans and whether she had been to see Mr. Gregson. Apparently she had, but she had refrained from discussing her own affairs, and out of delicacy they had respected her silence. She had been up to see her mother with Mrs. Christopherson as a protection against possible invasions from Beaulieu. Bullstrode had not been near the place. He appeared to be nursing his elbow and an Olympian wrath.

I told Christopherson that I had purposely kept away from his house because I did not want to stimulate idle gossip. I think he understood me.

"I have given orders that Bullstrode is not to be allowed inside this house, in my absence. I should imagine that he must have found out by now where she is staying, if he has troubled to find out."

"He is not the kind of man not to trouble."

"Yes, Lancaster, and if he had any decency he would have come down to

try and make peace. But it is a tradition with people like the Bullstrodes never to say that you are sorry.”

Though I did not loiter like a bewitched boy outside Christopherson’s door, I could not keep away from the house. Sandbourn was beginning to fill with its holiday crowd, and the insect hum of voices went up from its beach. The voice of the seller of Chelsea buns was heard in the land, and nigger minstrels twanged banjoes. These pseudo-blackmoors wore straw hats, black swallow-tail coats and red and white striped linen trousers. They had evolved a new trick for attracting the crowd, and stood in the sea up to their middles, plucking strings and singing. Sandbourn’s pleasure yachts, the *Skylark* and the *Conqueror*, put out from the old town beach full of sixpenny passengers. It always amused me to listen to the watermen shouting against each other.

“Come on for the *Conqueror*. No other boat like the old *Conqueror*. The *Conqueror* just sailing.”

The opposition would bawl: “This way for the *Skylark*. Come for a sail in the *Skylark*. No other boat like the *Skylark* on the whole south coast. Come on, ladies, and gen’lemen. Sixpennorth of sea in the saucy *Skylark*.”

In the evening I joined the holiday crowd. There were some green seats just along the parade, tucked away in the recesses of an euonymus hedge, and from one of these seats I had an oblique view of the Christopherson house. I could see Lady Bullstrode on the balcony with its dark green iron-work and cream roof. She was in black. She sat in a straight-backed, early Victorian chair, reading a book, *Beauty on the Balcony*, to be discovered and gazed at by loungers on the parade. I could suppose that she was unconscious of this scrutiny, and that she had learnt to freeze her face against other scrutinies, blue-eyed glares across the Beaulieu dinner-table. Her still, dark figure with its white face seemed to me infinitely remote and chastely serene. She was at one with the sea and the great spaces of the sky, and the clouds that floated, and Tom, Dick and Harry on the parade did not exist for her. So, she was not afraid of showing herself to the world, or of challenging other revelations. Did Bullstrode know that his wife sat reading on the Christopherson balcony like a girl to whom life was all sea and sky?

There was for me an exquisite, sharp poignancy in her remote loveliness. She seemed so far away and above me, and I no more than a casual cad upon the parade. And yet I was constituting myself her champion, and she had accepted my friendship.

Friendship!

Did she understand why I was refraining from haunting the Christopherson house?

Would it not be better for us both if I told her the truth about myself?

Dared I tell her the truth?

If she recoiled from so intimate a confession, might not the severance prove too final?

I came down earlier to my green seat on that particular afternoon. I saw her appear on the balcony with her book, but she sat and looked at the sea instead of at the printed page.

She had been there less than ten minutes when I noticed a dogcart approaching behind a high stepping chestnut horse. A man in the Beaulieu maroon and gold was in the driving-seat, and beside him sat Bullstrode, his arm in a black sling.

I jumped up. I saw the dogcart pull over towards the footwalk, and suddenly the balcony was empty. She too had seen what I had seen. I caught a glimpse of her black skirt vanishing through the french window.

I sat down again on my seat. I saw Bullstrode get out of the dogcart, enter the gate, and climb the three steps to Christopherson's door. I saw him ring the bell. Was the doctor in? If Bullstrode attempted to force his way into the house, I knew that I should be fiercely moved to intervene.

A white capped and aproned maid opened the door. She stood in the doorway, one hand holding the door. There was some conversation between them, and then she stood back and let Bullstrode in. So, Christopherson must be at home.

I sat and watched and waited. I had not to wait long for the finale. The door opened again. Christopherson had his back to it and was politely but inexorably showing someone out. I saw Bullstrode appear on the step. He stood there with his back towards me, and it struck me even at a distance that his truculent neck looked flushed and red. I got the impression that both men were angry, but that the doctor's anger was polished and flawless like some unyielding surface.

Bullstrode turned about abruptly and went down the steps, and Christopherson remained up above in the doorway. The repulse appeared to be

absolute. I saw Bullstrode walk round in front of the horse's head and climb up into the dogcart, and the body of it tilted with his weight upon the step. He sat down, ominous and flushed. The coachman touched the horse with the whip. The black and red wheels revolved as the dogcart rolled past my seat towards the west end of the parade. I stood up and saw it turn to come back, and I sat down again with my face to the sea.

I was telling myself that I was going across to talk to Christopherson. I wanted to know what had happened. I was in a mood to assume that I had a right to know.

When I crossed the road and rang the doctor's bell I expected the maid to answer it, but it was Christopherson himself who opened the door to me.

"O, it's you, Lancaster."

His face brightened, and I gathered that he had expected to find Bullstrode back upon his doorstep, and had come himself to confront a second attack.

"I happened to be on the parade."

"Come in, Lancaster."

He took me through into his consulting-room, and sitting down in the revolving chair behind his desk, pointed me to the chair that was occupied as a rule by patients. His mordant, handsome face had not lost all its fierceness, but he managed to smile at me.

"I'm afraid I lost my temper, Lancaster."

I gave him smile for smile.

"Not quite, I think. Also, it seems to have been effective."

"Well, yes. I don't think I have ever been threatened in my own house before. If the fellow had not had an arm out of action—Yes, I boxed for Barts, light heavy weight. But it would have been a rather unseemly show."

"Did he want to force his way upstairs?"

"Yes. The colossal pachyderm. The Bullstrodes have always been tough customers, more than ready to go out for a rough and tumble with poachers. I stood on the stairs, Lancaster, and I looked at that great boot of a chin of his, and I thought—But get thee behind me Satan."

I said: "I'm glad you didn't let him up. As a matter of fact I should have come across if he had forced his way past the maid."

Christopherson nodded at me.

“Well, he would have found my wife up there, and though you might not think it, Lancaster, she has a little temper of her own when people need it.”

And then I asked him that inevitable question.

“Do you think I might see her for a minute?”

“Sanchia?”

“Yes.”

He looked me straight in the eyes.

“Well, I think you might. I don’t know whether my wife is with her at the moment. Go up and see.”

She must have thought that Bullstrode had returned and found the stairs unguarded, for when I opened the door I saw her standing in the open french window, with her back to the sea, as though she had been prepared to take refuge on the balcony. Even a man of Bullstrode’s temper could not quarrel with his wife in full view of the people on the parade. I saw the fear go out of her eyes like frost on an autumn morning.

“O, it’s you, John.”

She seemed to relax and draw her breath in deeply.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I—”

But her face grew young again. It had looked hard and stone-bright like the face of a statue, but now it was alive like the face of Galatea, soft wax with the bloom of blood in it. So sudden was the change, and to me so poignantly significant that I lost my head to my heart. That which I had thought to conceal from her came storming up in me.

“I ought not to be here, but Christopherson—”

Her eyes challenged my self-distrust. Why Christopherson? Was I not sufficiently man?

She moved from the window as though she had no further need for the balcony, and its protective publicity, and sat down in a chair with her profile to the light. I stood for a moment, looking at her, feeling that life was running away with me. Had I the courage to tell her? Was I on the edge of behaving like a tumultuous and passionate fool?

I said: “If you had asked me to come. I mean, if you—”

I could not get my words out, and I think I should have gone on fumbling if she had not helped me.

“Does one ask? If I wish it.”

“But it’s so difficult for me, Sanchia.”

It was the first time I had used her Christian name, and I watched her face for any shadow of displeasure.

“Isn’t it difficult for both of us?”

My impulse seemed to free itself.

“So much depends upon what you want. No, not from me, in that sense. I’m troubled by what I don’t know, and have no right to know. Whether you want to go back.”

“To Beaulieu?”

“Yes.”

I stood shaking. Would she snub me? She was looking out of the window at the sea, calmly and fixedly, as though confronting what to her would be inevitable.

“I shall never go back to Beaulieu.”

“Is that utter and final?”

“Yes.”

I felt that I wanted air, space. I went out on to the balcony and stood there, gripping the rail, and staring at the horizon. It seemed easier for me to say what I had to say from there.

“That makes things different, to me. I’ll promise never to speak of this again. I’ve cared and care so much. You can’t have known this.”

Her voice came to me with deliberate calmness.

“I have known.”

“But that’s not possible.”

“John, doesn’t a woman always know?”

There was silence between us, the silence of a profound and mutual comprehension, or rather, of an understanding that was still tentative and groping. I stood gripping the rail of the balcony, acutely conscious of this strange silence. It seemed to smother all human sound, the little adventitious

and trivial noises of the life below. A carriage went by on wheels of wool. The people down yonder were so many immaterial mutes.

I heard her voice say: "Can you be patient with me?"

Life seemed to leap into the air like a bird. So, she did care!

"Always and ever."

"I'm so torn just now. Everything is ravelled up. I should want to be so sure."

The quietness of it all somehow astonished me. What had I expected? Nothing? Or a sudden surge of unforgettable, physical happenings? Raptures, embraces, and all the theatrical stuff? We were a pair of quietists; she by the window, I leaning over the rail and saying what I had to say to the sea and to her. I remember glancing right and left at other balconies to assure myself that we had no interested listeners.

I said: "You cannot know how wonderful this is to me. It began on the very first day I saw you. Do you remember your piano, and Chopin's sixth waltz? Everything has been different for me since then. I'm not talking romantic rubbish. But now that I have said this I'll not speak of it again unless—"

Her voice came out to me.

"Isn't too much chivalry rather cowardly, John?"

"Cowardly!"

"Yes, does it not ask too much of the woman? I am afraid that all the dear, conventional stuff is dead in me. I want to be free."

I seemed to feel the sea wind on my face.

"Then, by God, you shall. Have you considered things?"

"Completely. I have seen your dear old wise man. It is not going to be easy."

"Nothing that is worth while is."

"Freedom! But that is not yet, only my right to be apart, a separate self. Does a man ever understand that? You men are all so sure that it is in your power to make the particular woman happy."

This challenged me, but it was true.

"We're vain creatures. But there is a sort of humility in me."

"Is there, John?"

“Towards you, yes. Towards other people, no. I don’t think that I should ever assume complacent infallibility.”

“Thank you.”

“Because I have had to climb and fight—”

“No other reason?”

“No snob’s reason. I think I should always be afraid of something in you.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, of the something that I am not, lest I should do ugly, vulgar things, no, not in my table manners, but in more subtle ways. You see, I subscribe to the illusion of beauty.”

“Illusion?”

“You have me. The thing we fear to find an illusion, and yet pray to possess.”

“Be brave, in possessing.”

“I will.”

We had come to a pause, and like two exiles going out together from some city, and seeing the land strange before us, and we held hands in the spirit and spoke of the way we should go. That we should be apart from each other in those early days I understood too well, and yet I was content to safeguard her unsureness and to remember that the thing called love was suspect. I had to think for her, rather than for myself, knowing that in a conventional world escape may be more hazardous and bitter for the woman.

She said: “I think I shall go away quietly by myself, John, for a little while. I shall want no one to know where I am.”

“May I know?”

“Yes. I talked it over yesterday with Mr. Gregson. He thinks I can obtain a legal separation.”

But what a compromise was this!

“That settles nothing.”

“It will give me time to breathe and think. It will have to be some very quiet place, a Cornish village, or something of that kind.”

I knew that she was troubled as to ways and means, and I dared to ask her that question.

“You would not let me help you?”

“No, John.”

“That beastly thing money! I have masses of it.”

“Not from you, John, please, or not yet. Do you understand me?”

“Utterly. But how—?”

“Mr. Gregson suggested that I could raise money on my interest in my mother’s will.”

“The reversion?”

“Yes.”

“Will it be—?”

“Not very much.”

“But if you win your case I understand that you can claim—”

Her voice had a poignant note.

“No, John, please. I don’t think I could bring myself to that.”

“But, my dear, you have to live!”

“I am living, John, wonderfully and strangely. Don’t let us speak of money now. In my perfect world money would not be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



I AM inclined to agree with the Orientals that other people's love affairs should be matters for the inner chamber, and that too much love on paper or in public can be both boring and nauseous. It may be that this abstention lies in the mood of an old man, and that to be in the fashion and literary I should be of the generation that applauds "Lady Chatterley's Lover." Some relationships are a little too sacred for that, nor did I, like that author, enjoy devastating rows with my good comrade. Sex and sadism may be part of the same picture, and despite the "Ballad of Reading Gaol" I did not kill the thing I loved. If I speak of it at all it is because this journal is a record of a successful hatred, and love was the crown of my hate.

Seven o'clock on a summer morning. I had the sun and the sea to myself, a flat and almost opalescent sea so calm that it had no watery facets to reflect crinkles of light. There was the faintest of moist sounds along the shingle as the edge of that sheet of glass shivered itself softly upon the shore. A milk-float jangled home along the parade. A few early bathers were making for the bathing-beach and the row of white huts on wheels. Here and there a maid turned her print frocked stern towards me as she whitened door steps.

I saw a cab waiting outside the Christophersons' house. I had received my secret orders, and so well had I timed my early morning walk that my passing along the parade at that moment might have appeared to the casual eye as pure coincidence. The cabbie was down off the box, and shouldering a little black portmanteau down the steps, while his old grey horse stood like a creature consenting to wait patiently with broken knees upon every occasion.

I saw her come down the steps into the limpid blue eye of the morning. The cabbie was placing the portmanteau on the front seat of the cab. The gloss on his top-hat was like his horse's coat, a little smeary and ancient. As I crossed diagonally from the parade I looked at the windows and the balcony of the Christopherson house and found them sympathetically empty. They must have been wise, and tolerant of the occasion.

She was in the cab when I reached it. The man was climbing to his seat, and seeing me there, gathered up the reins and waited upon our pleasure. We used our eyes but not our voices. I don't think we said anything to each other. I

saw something white in a gloved hand. She passed it to me, and I slipped the letter into my pocket.

“All right, driver.”

He threw me a friendly, quirking look over his left shoulder, touched his hat and gave the reins a shake, and the cab rolled away to take her to catch the seven-thirty train at Sandbourn station. No one at Beaulieu was likely to know of her early leaving, or to interfere with it, but to me her going alone upon this exile was pure pain. Everything that concerned her touched me and moved me to quick compassion. I was yearning to follow her cab to the station, and to be with her for a moment, but I knew that there might be peril for her in my presence, and that if I shared her secret it behoved me to be somewhat selfless.

I went down to the beach, and sat on the shingle close to the infantile prattle of the summer sea, and opened her letter and read.

“John,

My address will be No. 3 Prospect Terrace, St. Merrials,
Cornwall.

Thank you, for everything.”

Prospect Terrace! How suggestive of prayer-books and crinolines, bombazine and bonnets, and gentlemen in top-hats strolling domestically upon the sands and holding the hands of small daughters in long frilly white drawers. But there were only four people in the world who knew what her address would be, Mr. Gregson, the Christophersons and myself. Mrs. Cherrill was being kept in ignorance of her daughter’s place of refuge, for Mrs. Cherrill was a weak vessel, and might spill the secret if Beaulieu jostled her. Her letters were to go to Mr. Gregson, to be forwarded under cover, and posted to Mr. Gregson’s London representatives, who would re-address the packet to St. Merrials.

I went to see Mr. Gregson that afternoon, and I was as frank with him as with some father-confessor. I said that I was beginning to feel that I had a right to be responsible for Sanchia, not only emotionally but materially, and though he listened to me like a wise and benignant bird, I could not persuade him to admit the immediate rightness of my point of view.

“But how will she manage for money?”

“It may be easier for a woman to borrow from a woman than from a man,

John.”

I questioned this, and he smiled at me.

“Fastidiousness, John. Mrs. Christopherson is helping her. She can afford it. She has private means.”

“That’s rather great of Mrs. Christopherson. Besides, she’s not a woman who would emphasize a favour.”

“She is what we call a gentlewoman, and more than that.”

“Look here, sir, couldn’t I deposit, say, five hundred pounds with you, to be used, in confidence, for her legal expenses?”

“No, John. I cannot accept that.”

“But if she and I had gone to St. Merrials together and made the break complete, you would have accepted it.”

“That’s quite another matter, a very serious matter. I think a woman should be allowed time to breathe and reflect, and not be regarded as, shall we say, a trophy.”

“I’ll accept that from you.”

“She is going to have a very difficult time, John. We want to keep Bullstrode away from her. All kinds of pressure might be brought to bear on her, and a sensitive person is always somewhat at the mercy of her own sensitiveness and the way other people may try to exploit it. I am pretty sure that Bullstrode will fight us. The prestige of the possessor.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Apply for a judicial separation on the ground of cruelty. The suit would be heard in the Divorce Division of the High Court of Justice.”

“And Bullstrode’s counterblast?”

“I expect he will oppose the suit, and probably petition for restitution of conjugal rights.”

“And if he were to win, that means dragging her back to him, giving him the right to ravish—That’s unthinkable. I’m damned if it shall happen.”

“Be careful, John.”

“I’d rather jump with her over the edge of a cliff.”

It was not easy for me to admit to myself that Mr. Gregson's restrained attitude was the right one, and that Sanchia was no sex slave or trophy to be fought for by a pair of angry men. My hatred of Bullstrode was more intense than ever, but I did realize that a woman should be allowed her right to reflect in peace upon a choice that to her would be so profoundly vital. I was willing to efface myself for a time, and to stand aside and wait like a good comrade who was within call, but who would not distress a friend with passionate interference. I may have been wrong, and I may have been right. I believe that there are moments when a woman asks for passionate interference.

I told myself that only in the event of Bullstrode winning his case would I rush in and play Lochinvar.

But there was another aspect of the case. Would Bullstrode exercise any chivalrous or legal restraint? Hardly. The Bullstrode tradition proclaimed the tyranny of self, the gentleman's right to do what he pleased. And what if Bullstrode was having her watched? Supposing he was able to discover her retreat in Cornwall, and attempted to bully and frighten her into surrender?

I was afraid of her fear of him. I dreaded her sensitiveness, and the way a woman may react to social pressure, and to her feeling for marriage as a sacrament. Bullstrode had all the conventions to support him. It was she who was the rebel, and the world is not kind to solitary rebels.

I decided to play a hand on my own. I went up to London for a night, and called on a firm of Private Inquiry Agents. The principal was an ex-Police Inspector, a rather grimly genial person with, I imagine, no illusions upon life, and completely shrewd and unfastidious. I found it a rather nauseating business explaining my affair to him. I wanted a certain person shadowed, and all his movements reported to me.

"O, we can do that, sir. No risk to you, at all. All in the day's business."

"The whole matter must be absolutely confidential."

"Of course, sir. Do you mind telling me whether you want evidence for divorce?"

I hesitated.

"No, not at present. Just his movements, especially with regard to his leaving home."

"Quite, sir. And how long would you want us to watch him?"

“O, indefinitely. Or until I call you off. Your fees? I’ll leave a cheque on account.”

“You may rely on our discretion, sir.”

Mr. Gregson was the only lawyer I have met who did not uphold the dignity and mystery of the Law by dressing it in interminable delays. Having received his instructions and deliberated upon them, he put them into action without shilly-shally and pompous procrastination. I believe he sent his managing clerk, a discreet person, to interview certain of the Beaulieu servants and to make sure that he could command witnesses who would swear to cruelty. Having obtained his evidence and tested it, the first official letter went in to Bullstrode, stating Sanchia’s case, and informing him that Lady Bullstrode was applying for a judicial separation.

Mr. Gregson was replied to by a London firm, Messrs. Cork & Quatermain, of Lincoln’s Inn. Mr. Gregson showed me their letter. It was stately and sententious, and warned us that Sir Beverley Bullstrode would fight the case, and that he considered Lady Bullstrode’s action frivolous and unjustifiable.

So, the fight was on.

Moreover, Bullstrode now knew who was Sanchia’s lawyer, and how the field of battle was being prepared.

I was worried lest Bullstrode should attempt some violent adventure of his own, but Mr. Gregson was sceptical and pointed out to me that any such act might injure his case, and lie against the advice of his lawyers.

My shadow-man had arrived from London, a little, horsy fellow with mouse-coloured hair and a predatory face. I did not like him at all, but he turned out to be just the shrewd and surreptitious creature that I needed. He had infinite cheek, and a wicked eye. Even now I don’t know how he managed to get into touch with Beaulieu as he did, and I asked him no questions as to his methods. He may have bribed somebody, or made love to one of the maids. He was lodging in the old town, and pretending to be a groom in search of employment, and every evening he came to Pink Farm, after dusk, to report to me. His name was Sawkins, Alfred Sawkins. He was able to convince me that Sir Beverley Bullstrode had not left Beaulieu, and he assured me that the gentleman would not leave the place without his being fly to it.

I was looking over the plantations of young hedging trees, yew, thuja, hornbeam, thorn and privet in the Pink Farm nursery when one of the junior clerks came out to me with a sealed envelope.

“By hand from Mr. Gregson, sir.”

The envelope was legal and large, marked “Personal” and sealed with red wax, and when I went to open it in a quiet corner under two old damson trees which hung over from the orchard, I found a smaller envelope inside Mr. Gregson’s.

*“Mr. John Lancaster,
Pink Farm,
Sandbourn.”*

It was from Sanchia. I’ll confess that I was a little afraid of opening her letter, and of facing what it might reveal to me, for I dreaded lest she should relent after the way of women, and let herself be persuaded by too sensitive a conscience into a sentimental surrender, but the first words I read reassured me.

“I have found peace here.”

Peace! Was that woman’s inevitable urge, and man’s the struggle that should give her peace? I’ll not reveal all that she said to me, for the things were too sacred, but there were other and pregnant sayings in her letter that moved me to future schemings.

“I have always asked for beauty, John, serenity and a kind of spaciousness, the beauty of trees and fields and gardens, and the quiet breathing of some old house. But I have come to realize that there is no beauty unless we share it with someone who understands. Beauty in one’s surroundings should beget beautiful behaviour. That it shouldn’t is strange and tragic. I often wonder whether Adam appreciated Eden? Man can be so like a destructive, mischievous child.”

Again: “It is rather wild here, but its summer wildness is gentle and clothed. I have a piano, though it is a little asthmatic.”

“My prospect is St. Merrials bay.”

“There are so many things I would say to you that cannot yet be said.”

I put that letter of hers away in my pocket-book, and went back to my work like a man who has had a secret door opened to him. It revealed her to me, and

it revealed me to myself. Peace! Might it not be my destiny to give her peace, and the beauty and the spaciousness and quiet breathing she asked for? A man might have no happier urge in life than that.

How quickly discord was to follow the quiet, restful breathing of her letter!

I was sitting at my desk in my private office when I saw through the window a figure on a bicycle come into view. It was Jim Pawley. I saw him dismount, lean his machine against the wall, and come bustling in through the garden gate. His face had a flushed and flustered seriousness.

I went out to meet him.

“Bullstrode’s down there.”

“Thorn Cottage?”

“Yes.”

I purloined Jim’s bike and rode off like a reckless boy.

In Quarry Lane I saw a dogcart stationary outside the cottage gate. The driver was standing at the horse’s head, and two other fellows who looked like gamekeepers were by the gate. So, Bullstrode had brought an escort with him. I wondered whether they would try to stop me from going in, but I was alone, and possibly I did not look very formidable, or they may have taken me for a rent collector or insurance tout, for they made no attempt to keep me out. All three were strangers to me, even the groom having an unfamiliar face. Had Bullstrode sacked servants who knew too much? I saw that the front door was open, and as I walked up the path Bullstrode’s bulk came to fill the doorway.

He had his right arm in a sling, and he stood for a second or two looking at me with his bull’s eyes as I walked up the path. Then he drew the door to with emphasis, and came towards me. It was a narrow path, not sufficiently wide for two people to pass without brushing against each other, and Bullstrode walked down it as though meaning me to give way.

I did not give way, and as we approached each other I saw his eyes fill with a menacing glare.

“Good morning, Lancaster. Collecting the rent?”

We were almost in contact when I said: “You go to blazes, Bullstrode. I know how to deal with gentlemen of your sort.”

I saw that his left fist was clenched, but he did not raise his fist, and we jostled past each other like a couple of bullocks meeting in a hedge-gap. I had my left elbow out, and it dug into his ribs. It was all rather absurd and

primitive, but I knew that if he struck me I should turn and give him my boot.

We faced about and eyed each other, and I got the impression that big brute that he was, he was a little afraid of me.

“I should like to ask you a question, Lancaster.”

I said again: “You go to blazes. I’m not answering any questions.”

He took that as final, and we parted, and I stood by the Cherrill front door and watched him and his bravos drive away.

In the Cherrill drawing-room I found a little, agitated and lachrymose old lady, and some disorder, the flap and drawers of her bureau open, and papers scattered over the floor.

“O, Mr. Lancaster, it’s really disgraceful. I have never been so treated.”

“What has happened?”

“He demanded Sanchia’s address.”

“But you do not know it?”

“O, yes, but I do, Mr. Lancaster. Part of it. She wrote to me direct only yesterday.”

“Did she give her address?”

“No, but I could read the postmark.”

“You did not tell him?”

“O, no. Such impertinence! He turned my bureau and drawers inside out. I am sure he had no right to do that.”

“Had you destroyed the envelope?”

“No, Mr. Lancaster, I’m afraid it hadn’t occurred to me, that—”

“And he found it?”

She whimpered at me: “Yes.”

Savage and shocked though I was I could not very well scold her, for it would not have occurred to me that Bullstrode could come down and ransack his mother-in-law’s bureau. But he had found that envelope and its revealing postmark, and he knew now that Sanchia must be at St. Merrials in Cornwall. I realized only too vividly what his discovery might mean.

I told Mrs. Cherrill that I would go down at once and report the matter to Mr. Gregson, and that something should be done to discourage her son-in-law from adopting these high-handed methods, but my chief concern was that Sanchia should be warned that her retreat had been discovered. I had her letter in my pocket, and I thought how damnable it was that she who asked so passionately for peace should be at the mercy of this violent egoist.

When I broke the news to him, old Gregson sat up very straight in his chair. It was the only occasion when I had seen him seriously ruffled.

“This is intolerable, John. I will wire Lady Bullstrode at once and warn her.”

“Don’t you think someone ought to go down to St. Merrials, sir?”

“Not you, John.”

“All right, sir.”

“If necessary I will go myself. Of course, she may move to another place. We shall hear.”

I said: “If Bullstrode goes down there and behaves like a beast, I won’t answer for—”

“Tut, tut, John, you must try and keep your temper.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



IT was all very well for Mr. Gregson to tell me not to lose my temper, and to urge me to wait patiently upon the austere deliberations of the Law, but when Sawkins came to report to me that evening with the news that Bullstrode had left Beaulieu for London, and that he, Sawkins, had travelled in the same train with Bullstrode and had seen him and his luggage unloaded at the Salisbury Hotel, I threw all the legalities to the winds. Mr. Gregson had despatched his telegram to St. Merrials and had followed it with an explanatory letter, but such formalities were mere official dust to me. I was man, not part of a legal process.

I packed a bag, took thirty pounds from the office safe, for we kept a supply of petty cash there, and walked down to Sandbourn station. The stars were with me, and her precious letter. I caught the nine-thirty from Sandbourn to London, and taking a cab from Charing Cross to Paddington, managed to catch a night train going west.

I had the carriage to myself, and I lay down on the seat and slept, for the inward stress and turmoil associated with one's confrontation of a crisis had passed away. I felt curiously calm and tranquil, and somehow sure that I could carry the adventure through.

I woke to find the sun rising on a landscape that was mysterious and strange to me. I felt healthily hungry, and in need of a shave. We ran into Exeter at an early hour, and finding that there was a stop of fifteen minutes here, I dashed into the lavatory with my bag, and achieved a wash and a shave. The refreshment-room was shut, and so far as my hunger was concerned I had to satisfy it with three bars of chocolate from an automatic machine. Later, at a station whose name I do not remember I got a cup of scalding coffee and a desiccated sandwich.

St. Merrials! I saw clusters of grey houses, a lunette of blue sea, and a great black headland with a green velvet cap. It was just after nine o'clock. I found a fly waiting in the station approach, and I told the cabbie to drive me to Prospect Terrace. We went up a steepish hill under the shade of high elms, and half way up the hill Prospect Terrace revealed itself as a row of little Regency houses, some of them bow-fronted and with green balconies, and each with a

strip of garden sloping to the south. I had told the man to stop at No. 3, and I got out, leaving my bag in the cab, and telling him to wait.

No. 3 had a green balcony, and its walls were painted white. Its door too was green, and the brass knocker meticulously bright. I rang, and an elderly woman in black came to the door. I took her to be the tenant of the house. She had a rather tired and kindly face, and her greyish hair was arranged in plaits.

“Is Lady Bullstrode in?”

She looked me over a little suspiciously.

“Yes. But I’m afraid she’s engaged.”

“My business is rather important. Will you take a message, and say that there is someone from Mr. Gregson’s of Sandbourn to see her.”

“Will you wait, please.”

“O, yes, I’ll wait here.”

She left me, half closing the door, and I heard voices. They seemed to come from the window above, the window behind the balcony. It was a sweet place this, secret and sunny, with its little strip of garden ending in a fuchsia hedge, and across the way two old ilexes darkly green against the hazed blue of the sea. I was listening to the voices of Sanchia and the woman with the plaited hair, and I got the impression that the landlady was being anxiously and closely questioned.

The voices ceased and I heard her returning.

“Lady Bullstrode will see you.”

I followed her up stairs whose carpet-rods were as bright as the knocker. A door on the right of the landing hung half open, and I saw a hat and gloves lying on a chair.

“The gentleman from Sandbourn.”

I walked in and she closed the door behind me.

Sanchia was standing by the fireplace with a big, gilt framed mirror behind her. I saw her lips shape themselves as though in astonished protest: “John!” But I held my hand up, shook my head, and glanced meaningly over my shoulder at the door.

She understood me instantly. She had gone very white at the sight of me, and I saw her draw a deep breath.

“Excuse me a moment, Mr. Lancaster. Yes, I received Mr. Gregson’s

letter.”

She left the room as though to go to her bedroom for something, and when she returned her eyes met mine steadfastly and without fear.

“No one there. Why have you come, John?”

“I had to.”

“I have just finished packing.”

“And I kept my cab waiting.”

“You must have travelled all night.”

“Yes, I slept in the train. How long will it take you to get ready?”

She went to the window and stood looking a little regretfully at the sea.

“Must I go, John?”

“It is for your peace. He left Beaulieu yesterday. He may be—”

“Where am I to go?”

“Where were you going?”

“To St. Ives.”

“Not far enough.”

“Where then?”

“Is there any place? You see, the landlady thinks I am from Gregson’s. If he comes here after you have left she will give him the impression that Mr. Gregson sent a representative.”

She stood considering.

“If not here, Wales. There is a place we used to go to when I was small. Tenby. It is rather like St. Merrials.”

“Well, let it be Tenby.”

I felt that she was troubled about something. Money? Very probably.

“It is a rather long journey.”

“You can draw on your solicitors.”

“John, I—”

I stood very still, loving her.

“Why let that trouble you? I may be just as sensitive about it as you are.

Have you settled everything here?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is nothing to keep you. I'll travel back with you as far as Exeter, or leave you at St. Merrials station if you wish it. All I ask you to do is to let me take the tickets."

She remained by the window, and facing the sea, but I saw her left hand come out, its fingers spread.

"John, I'll go."

I went to her, and held her hand for a moment, but she did not turn her face to me.

"Am I forgiven for coming?"

"O, my dear, I have been so peaceful here. Yes, let's go, and go quickly."

I carried her luggage downstairs and out to the waiting cab, while she said good-bye to the woman with the plaited hair. I stood at the gate by the fuchsia hedge, and saw the two figures appear in the doorway. Both were in black.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Pengelley, you have been so very kind to me."

I saw Sanchia kiss the woman, and I faced about, and spoke to the cabman. Could he tell me when the morning express from London reached St. Merrials? Of course he could; he met the train daily; it arrived at four thirty-five. I had calculated that if Bullstrode was spending the night in London, and catching a morning train, we should have ample time to elude him. I asked the driver when a train was leaving for Exeter, and he told me that I could catch the ten forty-five.

On the way to the station Sanchia asked me how a certain person had found out that she was staying at St. Merrials. So, old Gregson had not told her! And was I to distress her by describing Bullstrode's descent upon her mother?

"Need you know?"

"I don't want anything hidden, John."

"Do you remember writing direct to your mother?"

"Yes, but I did not give any address."

"The postmark."

"But how?"

“Your mother did not destroy the envelope, and a certain person found it.”

“You are concealing things, John. I want to know everything.”

So, I told her that Bullstrode had invaded Thorn Cottage and ransacked Mrs. Cherrill’s bureau. She took the news more calmly than I had done, but I could see by her set face that the thing had made their estrangement more irrevocable.

“How despicable.”

“It won’t happen again. Gregson is taking steps to protect your mother. Besides, someone is spoiling his own case.”

“It needs no spoiling, John.”

She was silent for the rest of the way, and at St. Merrials station I sent her into the waiting-room while I paid the cabman and got hold of a porter. I thought it best that she should remain in the waiting-room until the Exeter train came in. I took two first class tickets for Exeter, for I gathered that she would have to change there, and that her journey to Tenby might be a cross-country affair, and that she might have to stay the night somewhere. Still, South Wales seemed to me to be sufficiently vague and remote to baffle Bullstrode, and a somewhat circuitous train journey all the more frustrating.

We had the compartment to ourselves. I had decided to travel with her as far as Exeter, and when I said so she smiled at me sadly.

“Mr. Gregson doesn’t know that you have come?”

“No one knows but you. No one else need know.”

“I think I can manage my own ticket to Tenby, John.”

“Aren’t these prides of ours rather superfluous. No, that’s the wrong word.”

“There’s nothing quite so good in life as pride.”

“Blessed are the meek! God save me from meek people. But when we get to Exeter I want you to go straight to the waiting-room while I see about trains and connections and tickets. A particular train might be stopping in Exeter station.”

She did not question my caution. She sat and looked out of the window, and I had a feeling that she was rather like a child going alone to a strange school. She was so very near to me. I had only to put out my hand and touch her, and yet something in me knew that she did not wish to be touched, and that she would be grateful to me for not vexing her with emotion.

I remember her looking at me suddenly as though she understood what was passing in my mind.

“Thank you, John.”

“For what?”

“Don’t you know? O, my dear, for a something that doesn’t rush at life and paw it.”

I felt a kind of exquisite shame in her presence.

“O, well, some things are rather too sacred, or different. One doesn’t realize how different they can be, until—”

She had taken off her hat, and let her head rest against the cushions.

“Isn’t that rather rare? But how consoling. That someone should realize that one is a person. The presumption that everything is so obvious, when we should always be a little mysterious to each other! You have never told me about yourself, John.”

“I? O, I’m just the ordinary acquisitive male.”

“My dear! Tell me about things, how you began to build houses.”

“I just began to build them.”

“Was it quite so simple as that? Tell me. You see, it interests me. You do things. You weren’t just born to be there.”

“Does it really interest you? I mean, I shall be talking about—”

She smiled at me with half-closed eyes.

“Tell me everything, right from the beginning.”

I may have damned meek people to her, but at Exeter she took refuge in the waiting-room while I arranged her journey for her. The first thing I did was to inquire when the London-Truro-Penzance express would be expected in the station; it was timed to arrive at about two-fifteen. I found that she would have to travel via Bristol, Gloucester and Newport, and that it would hardly be possible for her to reach Tenby in time to settle herself in rooms or an hotel. Besides, it was summer, and Tenby might be full. She could break the journey at Newport for the night. A train was leaving for Bristol at one-fifty, and I bought a first-class ticket for her to Tenby, and then remembered that she might be hungry. We had time for a quick lunch in the refreshment room,

though the menu was limited to cold ham and chicken, sandwiches or sausage-rolls. We sat opposite each other at a marble-topped table, and I passed her her ticket, and explained her itinerary.

“Must I stop at Newport, John?”

“I’m afraid so. You wouldn’t reach Tenby until some unearthly hour. I believe there is a good hotel at Newport.”

“Strange, anonymous places.”

She was feeling rather lost and lonely, and I cursed a sensual selfishness that could hunt her out of St. Merrials and deny her the peace of that white house with its fuchsia hedges. I wanted to comfort her, and I said that in a little time she would be safeguarded from such tyranny. It seemed to me unthinkable that the Law should decide against her, and send her back like a recaptured slave to a beast like Bullstrode.

“I wish it was over, John.”

I felt that she had no more appetite for this anomalous and vagrant life than she had for the railway cold ham and chicken. She was no restless spirit, one of those gad-about who can travel all round the globe with a toothbrush and one spare nightdress. She asked for more gentle and static things; her piano, beauty, a little world that was not at the mercy of human circumstance, security, things to which sentiment can attach itself like the essential perfume of a flower.

Her unhappiness troubled me. I was so afraid that it might persuade her to surrender. After all, Beaulieu had beauty, and if Bullstrode really cared for her —!

I said: “Be brave, dear, for a little while. All this will pass.”

But I think she realized as I did how relative and incomplete her freedom would be even if the Law allowed her to live apart.

I saw her to the Bristol train. She had not looked at her ticket, and she paused by the door of a third-class carriage. A porter was following us with her luggage.

“I think this will do, John.”

“You are travelling first.”

She gave me a quick, poignant look.

“Am I? What luxury!”

We moved on and I opened a door for her. The porter disposed of her luggage. I realized that she had nothing to read, and I offered to go and buy her some magazines at the book-stall.

“No, John, thank you. I would rather look at the country.”

I let down the window, and closed the door for her.

“Would you like me to go now?”

“You have a train to catch.”

“I haven’t looked up my train yet. It’s completely unimportant.”

“Stay a little while.”

She stood at the window with her hands on the polished wood of the frame. I was feeling rather desperate about her, but I held myself in. A kind of dumbness possessed us both. I wanted the train to go, and I wanted it never to go. I felt that she was almost as torn as I was. The whistle blew. We must have lost count of time. I looked up at her and saw that she was suffering.

“Sanchia, remember, nothing will change certain things.”

I put one of my hands over one of hers, and felt her hand turn over and clasp mine.

“It does matter to me, John. Good-bye.”

We held hands until the train began to move, and then she drew back quickly as though to hide her face from me. I felt a thickness in my throat. I did not stand to watch the train move off, but turned and walked away.

I found that a London train left Exeter at two-twenty. I put my bag on a seat and strolled up and down the platform, thinking of Sanchia and what the future might offer us. There were other people waiting for the London train, but they were mere anonymous shadows to me. The opposite and down platform also was full of people, and I became aware of a stir among them, and looking up the line, saw the down train coming in, and suddenly I remembered Bullstrode. What if he happened to be on that train?

I thought, for a moment, of disappearing into the waiting-room, but curiosity overmatched my caution. The down express drew up, and I walked along my platform, scanning the carriage windows of the first-class carriages. Sanchia might travel third, but Beaulieu would suffer no such economies!

A cigar, a large red face, spectacles! It was Bullstrode in the corner of a

first-class carriage, sitting with his back to the engine. But, spectacles! I saw a paper raised by two large hands, and I supposed that Bullstrode had to wear glasses for reading. It could not be considered a disguise. Beaulieu in glass blinkers! His fat lips seemed to swell rotundly as they sucked at the cigar. But I was afraid to look too long or closely at him lest my stare should disturb him and cause him to glance round at me. What I had seen was sufficient. I walked along to the far end of the platform, exulting not a little over the fooling of my enemy. He might waste several days at St. Merrials in trying to find Sanchia, and even if he discovered No. 3 Prospect Terrace, I was sure that Mrs. Pengelley would give him no assistance, nor did she know that Sanchia had gone to Wales.

But that red vent sucking its cigar, and those owl-eyes and that turgid face! My enemy seemed to me an ugly beast, and I was glad of his ugliness.

I turned about, and saw my own train coming in, and the southward bound train steaming out.

Exit Bullstrode!

I had never felt so happy with my hatred.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



*M*AN proposes, but the Law disposes.

Pemberton's Hotel in Suffolk Street off the Strand.

Pemberton's has passed away, like the Lowther Arcade and Bookseller's Row, but in those days it was much patronized by litigants and their lawyers. It was a dim and shabby place, yet shabby with the respectability of old mahogany, Turkey carpets and red leather to which polish and much hard wear had added a patina of greasy blackness. I had come up to London for three nights, but I was not staying at Pemberton's. In fact, I was sitting in its stuffy smoking-room on sufferance, for old Gregson had warned me severely against playing the part of the too interested friend.

I had five hundred pounds in bank notes in my pocket.

And why?

Because I wished to be prepared against the mischances of social justice, and because her case was going none too well. That has been my experience of the Law. The more ethical your case may seem, the weaker is your chance of winning it. The Law seems to love a fat and colourful rogue.

Moreover, the Law is a snob.

The first day did not promise too badly. Old Gregson told me that Sanchia made a good impression in the witness box. She had kept her poise and her temper under a rather black-guardly cross-examination. But her witnesses did not do so well, and her leading counsel, Mr. Montague Barnby, proved himself something of an old woman. Bullstrode had briefed Carfax, and Carfax was a cunning devil who could cut the truth's throat with a knife of polished sharpness.

Sanchia's witnesses were too honest and ingenuous. Moreover, Bullstrode, through Carfax, seemed able to put witnesses of his own into the box who swore on oath that they had never witnessed any act of cruelty. Carfax

butchered our people like sheep. Old Barnby was a sheep trying to catch wild goats.

On the second day Barnby lost his temper with the judge, Mr. Justice Billing. There was a little scene in court, and Barnby flopped down snubbed and ruffled.

Mr. Gregson confessed to me that he suspected Mr. Justice Billing of being hostile. Yes, the bewigged autocrat might be a creature of prejudices and antipathies. I was sufficiently young to flash out at this.

“Good God, do you mean to say that a man in such a position is not impartial?”

Mr. Gregson smiled his dry, kind smile at me.

“O, yes, John, but impartiality can be tinged with personal feeling. I was not too pleased when I heard that Billing was to try the case.”

“What is he, a sacerdotalist?”

“No. Gossip has it that the judge’s lady is a veritable tartar in petticoats, though he may not have been conscious of the temptation to ease himself by being prejudiced against women litigants.”

The “Pemberton” smoking-room was a sufficiently dismal place on that winter day, suffused with the ghost fug of two generations of cigars. There was fog in the streets, and the fog had filtered in. I was feeling restless and chilly, and very much alone with the gloomy leather chairs and sofas, and a fire that appeared depressed. I both wanted Sanchia to lose her case and to win it. If she won it, what then? If she lost it?

The door opened. I was standing staring at the fire, and I swung round, and saw old Gregson’s lean face suspended in the shadows. His long body looked vague and black and unsubstantial. My mouth felt dry.

“Lost, John.”

“Judgment for Bullstrode?”

“Yes, restitution. Billing summed up against us.”

“What a damned scandal!”

He closed the door with a kind of meticulous carefulness, and came to warm his hands at the fire. He looked tired and old and distressed.

“Preposterous, John, of course. Billing read her a little lecture upon the

whimsies of neurotic young women who ignore the responsibilities of matrimony.”

“Damn him! Where is she?”

“Upstairs. I brought her back. I think she wants to be alone.”

I was conscious of laying my hand on the wad of notes in my pocket.

“How has she taken it?”

“I don’t think she was unprepared. After all, John, there are no legal means of enforcing such a decree.”

“But, social means. It gives Bullstrode the right to behave like a ravisher.”

He looked at me with a little, pained, flinching smile.

“Not exactly. It won’t help us—”

“To be bitter. But he can persecute her. Has she said anything?”

“Nothing, yet.”

“Do you think Bullstrode knows she is here?”

“Probably. I expect he has had her watched.”

I trod the coals down with the heel of a boot.

“I want to see her, Mr. Gregson. No, I’m not going to splurge sex over her tragedy. But I am going to help her, if she will accept help, and the Law can go to blazes.”

Shall I ever forget her face when she came to me in the private sitting-room that the management of the Pemberton Hotel had rented to me for a couple of hours. I had bribed a porter to coax a large fire into cheerfulness. Heavy red plush curtains were drawn across the windows; I had ordered tea, and a table stood garnished by the fire. My inspiration had been to make this conventional room appear somehow friendly and reassuring. She had had enough of tragedy, and crude publicity and legal squabbles and the traded impertinences of the gentlemen of the Bar.

Her face had a kind of frozen stillness. And then, suddenly, she smiled at me, and sitting down in the armchair I had pushed forward for her, held out her hands to the fire.

“Tea. How consoling, John.”

“Shall I ring?”

“Do you always think of everything? Almost, I could manage buttered toast.”

I said: “I have ordered it,” and went to ring the bell.

I was soon to realize that she was far more calm than I was. If she had been shocked by all that legal humbug, and the insincerities and sententious self-righteousness of the Law, she had passed beyond such emotion. When the tea arrived and the door had been shut, and I had gone and opened it to make sure that no one was eavesdropping in the corridor, she smiled up at me.

“I am a neurotic young woman, John, with no sense of duty or responsibility.”

She spoke without bitterness, but almost as though this travesty of the truth amused her.

I said: “The thing would be incredible if one did not realize that law is man-made and administered by men for men.”

She allowed me to wait on her. She sat very still, with her cup and saucer on her knee, looking at the fire.

“You men must retain power and property! But I have learnt my lesson, or some of it.”

“Are we men outcasts for ever?”

“No, but I am.”

“My dear!”

She gave a little laugh, and there was something inexorable in the sound of it.

“Even this buttered toast must have been made for men.”

I saw that she wanted a handkerchief, and I gave her mine.

“Thank you, John. The universal provider!”

She must have felt that she had hurt me.

“No, I take that back. I’m afraid I’m rather like a cat with my claws out. Be patient with me.”

What was in her mind? Her calmness seemed to possess an edge of recklessness. No, not quite recklessness. Rather it was the tempered edge of swift decision. I was a little frightened, challenged. Surely she—?

“Can you trust me?”

She gave me a quick look.

“You? With everything. I am no docile, chastened wife. I am going to flout your man’s world, John. I don’t mind how or when or where.”

I felt something in me draw a deep breath.

“Irrevocably?”

“Yes.”

There was silence between us for some moments, and then I took my courage in my hands.

“If you would let me help. No, not with interference, but—”

She seemed to go rigid, and I paused.

“John, let’s try and be completely honest. I don’t know yet, my dear, whether I want to love you or any man more than I love myself. I want escape. I want freedom. It isn’t that I love myself so very dearly, but somehow life is, how shall I put it—? Well, silly and squeamish. I—”

I could not let her go on like this. I wanted her to realize that I was not making of her tragedy a mounting-block for self.

“You want to go away, right away, and be alone.”

She gave me a sudden pleading look.

“Yes. Does that seem horribly selfish?”

“No. I think it is the most natural thing in the world. I want you to go.”

“I’d like to go at once, John.”

“When?”

“To-night.”

“Where?”

“Abroad. Paris to begin with. But, you see, I—”

Her hesitation gave me my chance.

“Do you remember talking, Sanchia, about money?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that settles it. Are you going to let me be your friend?”

She nodded, her eyes on the fire.

“I’m beyond shame, John.”

“No, my dear, above it. I’m not asking for a mortgage on the future. Where’s your bag?”

She had brought a little black bag with her into the room and had left it on a table by the door.

“Over there, John.”

I crossed the room, and keeping my back to her, slipped the notes from my pocket into her bag.

“So, that’s settled. Take care of that bag. Or, better still, carry the bulk of the stuff about with you.”

I snapped the catch of the bag and turned to smile at her.

“Do you mind if I leave you for an hour? I’m going to get your Paris tickets.”

I wondered for a moment whether her secret pride would rebel against me as a man, and I held my breath as I watched her. She sat very still with the firelight on her face, and then she said: “I don’t think I would take this from you, John, unless—I know that some things matter more than money.”

How right she was I realized when I walked back through the fog with her tickets in my pocket. She could leave Charing Cross soon after eight and catch the night-boat at Dover. I was full of admiration for her courage, and profoundly touched by her trust in me, but I was troubled by the thought of her going out into a foreign world alone. Strange, alien faces, and a strange tongue! But perhaps that was what she asked for, a new world and its freedom, the chance to be herself, and to begin again.

I found Mr. Gregson sitting very straight and stiff in one of the lounge chairs. He got up on his long legs like some lean austere secretary bird in black trousers.

“We have had a little trouble here, John.”

“Bullstrode?”

“Exactly. Luckily, I had expected some such invasion. The man has no feeling for the elemental decencies.”

“She did not see him?”

“No, I prevented that. I’ll confess to you that I was not in favour of her

plan, but two minutes with the husband have converted me.”

“Truculent as ever, I suppose?”

“Yes, elephas trumpeting. It has been my experience that little men are more self-swollen and arrogant than big men, but Bullstrode is an exception.”

“Did you have much trouble with him, sir?”

“Less than you would have had, John. You see, I am an old man whom people may find it difficult to quarrel with.”

I drove with her in an old four-wheeler to Charing Cross station. She had nothing with her but her black bag, and a little old portmanteau. I noticed that she was holding something white in her right hand, an envelope.

It was dark in the cab, and her face was dim to me.

“I want you to take this, John.”

She was holding out the envelope to me.

“You have given me too much, much too much. I want you to take back half the money.”

I did not touch the envelope.

“Are we to quarrel about this? I don’t need it, my dear. You may. So keep it. I don’t think I have ever asked you to do anything else.”

“It is too much, John.”

“You can have all I have, if you want it. I’m not buying the future. Money becomes beastly when it is a bribe.”

She let her left hand rest for a moment on my knee.

“You are not buying me, John? No, I believe it. I think I should hate you if you were.”

“I should hate myself, my dear.”

“If you understand that—”

“You have taught me to understand it.”

“O, no, it is something in yourself, John, something a woman asks for in a man. Our right to freedom, to be a creature who can think and choose without fear or favour.”

“There can be honour between us, dear.”

“Thank God for honour.”

I think her courage almost failed her when she found herself alone in that first-class carriage. I had seen the guard, and knowing that nothing enlists your plain man’s sympathy like the truth, especially if it be tinged with sentiment and nicely gilded, I gave him a sovereign and my confidence. Bullstrode might have had us shadowed, but I doubted whether he would be in time to intervene. Moreover, Mr. Gregson’s tongue might have caused him to eschew headlong interference.

“Is the lady travelling alone, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll lock her in, and keep an eye on her, sir.”

I thanked him.

Perhaps it was the locked door that made her decision seem so final. She was a prisoner to fate. She was to be an exile, for how long I did not know, nor could I tell what her ultimate wish might be. I was feeling torn and troubled. I wanted to give her so much more, and yet I knew that she asked to be spared more pangs. She stood at the window with her hands on the door.

“You will look after somebody for me, John?”

“Of course.”

“She will never understand, poor dear. I am afraid she will think me lost in selfishness.”

“I’ll try to make her understand.”

“Tell her I have only gone for a time.”

I covered one of her hands with mine.

“Even I do not know how long.”

“I do not know myself, John.”

“You’ll write.”

“Of course.”

“If you should want me, I mean, my help, I’ll start for China to-morrow if you call me.”

She turned one of her hands and clasped mine.

“Thank you. Please go now, John.”

“But, I—”

“Please.”

If she was feeling only half as desperate as I was feeling then I could understand. There was no one near her carriage. I raised one of her hands and kissed it. We said nothing. We looked into each other’s eyes for a moment, steadfastly. Then, she turned quickly, and hid her face from me.

I walked away feeling rather desperate, but I waited at the barrier until her train drew out. I wanted to be sure that Bullstrode would not arrive to play the legalized cad. I watched the train’s red light vanish into the mist like the glow dying out of the heart of an opal.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



I HAVE those letters of hers now, but they are not for the eyes of the casual reader. They came from Paris, Orleans, Poitiers, Pau. From Pau she wandered west, and discovering the pines and cliffs and sandhills of that tremendous coast, she loved it.

Those letters of hers had a queer, innocent tang to them, a quality that was virginal and fresh. They breathed peace; they spoke of the great green rollers of the Atlantic, and of spray flying cliff high, and of the mountains sometimes dim and diaphanous or coloured and burnished by the sun. She had settled herself in a little hotel in Biarritz, and under another name. I was to address letters to her as Mrs. Ransford. She said: "I am a young widow, John, but I do not wear the weeds." In those days the official world was less inquisitive, and international unrest and Lenin had not caused us to be pestered with passports, nor had Biarritz become a blotched abomination of *bourgeois* ostentation.

I was having trouble with Mrs. Cherrill, for she, poor thing, had become querulous and emotional under the stress of things. She missed her husband; she was one of those women, who, having allowed themselves to be dotingly dependent on the household god in trousers, become hard and sentimental and tearful in isolation. Sanchia's tragedy had shocked her. Having clung all her life to Captain Cherrill and the conventions, she was ready to rush hither and thither, seeking her rock of ages.

Matrimony, a sacrament.

I found the old lady petulant and in a mood to criticize her daughter. Had not the courts given a decision? Reconciliation, with dignity and social credit, appeared to her to be the nice and proper solution. A wife ought to remain with her husband. One should feel responsible for one's position. As Lady Bullstrode one should set an example. She whimpered at life, and cast pathetic eyes upon the past.

She insisted that it was her duty to join her daughter.

It was most improper for a young woman whom a High Court judge had

lectured, to go trapesing rebelliously about Europe. If Sanchia would not return to her mother and her husband, her mother should go to Sanchia.

She pestered the life out of poor old Gregson.

She demanded information like a little Queen Victoria.

Really, it was disgraceful that a mother should not be allowed to know the whereabouts of her daughter.

Sanchia's unaddressed letters to Mrs. Cherrill were posted under cover to Mr. Gregson. The old lady resented this, and her resentment was understandable. Poor Gregson became her Mr. Gladstone. She said that she was grieved and hurt and humiliated by the suggestion that she, a mother, was not to be trusted.

She wasn't to be trusted, just because she was a mother.

As for the legal representatives they were palavering and writing each other polite and earnest letters. Sir Beverley Bullstrode was insisting upon his wife's honouring the ruling of the court. Let her obey the court, and return, and he would be ready to resume marital relations. The Law had upheld his rights as a husband, and he was determined to insist upon them.

Marital relations!

I believe that Mr. Gregson replied with bluntness, stating that Lady Bullstrode had no intention of obeying the decree.

Then, they would take steps to enforce it.

Mr. Gregson replied by asking: "How?"

He went on to ventilate the question of alimony.

Bullstrode's people replied that their client refused to consider the question of alimony. Let them sue him for it. Lady Bullstrode had flouted the court's decree. They could fight and be damned to them. But he made one stipulation. If his wife's address was revealed to him, he might consider the question of an allowance.

He must have known that she was without resources, and I suppose he thought that by keeping his purse closed and by dangling a bait, he might get his way. He would starve her out. This was hunting of a different sort, and that inexorable and brutal neck of his was not merciful. She had caused a scandal, and she should pay for it. She had dared to wash the Bullstrode linen in public.

Let her come back like a proper penitent, and settle the bill.

That was the Bullstrode tradition, the cult of an implacable egoism, the sign of the male rampart. No compassion, no compromise, no pardon without the licking of boots. He was an arrogant beast, and his dominance had been challenged. The new world might be flouting the old, but, damn it, a man could still hector his wife.

I was having Bullstrode watched, but I could get no evidence of any romantic display, but what I did discover was his sudden filialness to Mrs. Cherrill. His carriage called for her. They were even seen driving together along the Sandbourn front.

So that was Bullstrode's game.

I was wondering how wise he was as to my partisanship. I was not sure how much Mrs. Cherrill knew, or how much she might have told him. I thought it wise to keep away from Thorn Cottage now that the old lady appeared reconciled to her son-in-law, and in a mood to uphold the conventions. I could picture her writing to her daughter: "Dear Beverley is being so kind to me. I do pray that this terrible misunderstanding can be healed. I am sure Beverley deeply regrets all that has happened. I think it is a woman's duty to stand by her husband." Old Gregson and I were the only two people who knew Sanchia's whereabouts. It was his custom to enclose Mrs. Cherrill's letters in a legal envelope, address it himself and post it personally. I sometimes wondered whether he was tempted to open and read Mrs. Cherrill's letters.

Yes, how much did Bullstrode know?

Did he realize that Jack Sans Culottes was dreaming of snatching the most precious trophy from him?

During all those months we ignored each other, and if he suspected anything he kept it to himself. I suppose his idea was that of an ambushade.

Materially, things were going well for me. More and more houses, more and more money.

It was in January that the chance of that most significant gesture came to me.

Maskell's Manor!

That most notable and historic house was to come upon the market. The

new world was proving no place for the Rudyards. Gossip had it that the place was mortgaged up to its dormer windows, and when I heard that the Rudyards were selling Maskell's, I went to see old Gregson. I told him that I meant to have Maskell's, and that he must move heaven and earth to buy it for me. He need not divulge the name of his client, but I asked him to get into touch immediately with the Rudyard representatives, and to convince them that he had a purchaser who was likely to give them a better price than any possible competitor.

"What is your idea, John? To live there?"

"It is."

"And to become county?"

There was a tinge of irony in the question.

"No, sir, a man may covet beauty. You'll grant Maskell's beauty, I suppose?"

He twitched a smile at me.

"English and lovely, John. And will you improve it?"

"I wouldn't touch a brick of it. The place is perfect."

Perfect it was with its blurred, rose red brick, stone quoins and leadwork, its period late Queen Anne or early George 1st. Perfect in detail, perfect in poise, it stood half way down the shoulder of a hill and above a shallow valley. There was a brook in the valley that had been dammed to form a pool, and from the garden terrace you could look down upon this pool shining in the moonlight with scrolls of shadow round it, the foliage of old yews and oaks. The house was sheltered from the north by a belt of beech trees and Scotch firs. Its gardens lay in terraces and plateaux and secret corners, shut in by old brick walls and hedges of yew and box. The smell of box has always associated itself with the profound loveliness and mystery of this most English house. There were lead statues too, and a little temple backed with cypresses, and a fountain in the centre of a small Dutch garden. Lilies and gold fish lived together in the fountain's pool.

I think Maskell's must have been the inevitable world into which I dreamed romance. If she whom I loved was so exquisite, let the setting of the precious stone be as exquisite as she was. No doubt my enemies thought me a snob for buying Maskell's, whereas the texture of my dream was all moonlight and mystery. A stately house for the love of my lady. Maybe I did dream that

some day she might enter it, and find all its silence and its secrecy sweet and good. It was not John Lancaster the snob who bought Maskell's, but John Lancaster the lover.

I met the last of the Rudyards, who was selling me the place. He was a long, thin, whimsical creature with a sallow, peaky face, and the most unhappy eyes I have ever seen in a man. He drank. Rumour had it that he had been compelled to make his choice, and that his crave had asked to be satisfied at the expense of the old house.

He was quite friendly to me, though he looked at me a little curiously with those wounded eyes of his. So, this was John Lancaster, the upstart! As a matter of fact I was learning the tricks of the gentleman's world, wearing my tweeds and my brown boots, and was no longer afraid of my hands.

"Contemplating changes, Mr. Lancaster, I suppose?"

I told him that I should not touch the place. It was too precious to be tampered with, and my restraint seemed to surprise and to appease him.

"Is that so? Well, you have more soul than some of my neighbours. Change and decay. But the poor old place needs paint."

He took me over the house, and I could see that nothing had been spent on it for many years. Some of the rooms were panelled with pine, and the paint had been powder blue, the mouldings touched with old gold. Some of the curtains were of green taffeta, others of old rose velvet, faded and pearly in places, and I wondered whether Rudyard would sell me the curtains.

I said: "It seems a pity to touch that paint, sir. One ought to refresh it while trying to keep its faded look."

He had a trick of rubbing a forefinger across a thin, badger grey moustache. It was a rather ineffectual gesture. His eyes were the only convincing thing about him.

"My mother schemed those colours. Like them?"

"They are the house. And the curtains, sir."

"You can have the curtains. I'm afraid they are a little moth. Dust and decay. Such is life!"

His face expressed a wincing, whimsical tenderness.

"Still fond of the old place, rather. Can't be helped. Glad somebody's got a

soul.”

I felt that he was wondering how it was that the son of a Sandbourn lodging-house keeper could appreciate the exquisite texture of Maskell’s Manor.

“Ha, that reminds me. Something that might interest you. Better leave it with you.”

We were in the library, and he went to an oak bureau and took a little thin old book bound in brown calf from a pigeonhole.

“An ancestral day-book, Mr. Lancaster. Full of funny old records. How much one paid for a coffin or a bundle of wax candles. Account of the building of this house in it. Rather intriguing. Took seven years. Might interest you. Keep it.”

I thanked him and accepted the book.

Seven years! So it had taken seven years of craftsmanship to bring this house to perfection. The bricks were Dutch, and had come by sea from Holland. The timber was Sussex oak, the iron-work the product of Sussex forges. The stone had been shipped from Bristol. I read that day-book from cover to cover and pondered it.

Seven years to build a house! How different from Stuccoville and my own middle-class villas. But, if one could give seven loving years to a house like Maskell’s Manor, surely one should be able to spend seven years on the building of a beautiful comradeship. Yes, without the scrambling haste and the passionate impatience of some little sexmonger in a hurry.

I told myself that I would be patient.

She wrote me a letter once a month. I should have been happy with a letter a day, but I was to realize that she was practising the delicate art of not suffering your rose to become overblown. The art of life. She was to teach it to me as no one else could, with its delicate restraints, and its sensitive silences, its fastidiousness and its insistence upon one’s secret dignity and on those moments of mysterious aloofness. I understood her when she wished to be apart, and when she stepped back into my world it was with a freshness and vivid texture that were unfading. As for this brave new world of ours, it seems to have lost the art of living. It is like a cad in a car trying to hustle the other fellow, or like a greedy child with its common little face bloodied over with red jam.

She had rented a little villa at Biarritz, the Villa Stella Maris. She called it a little white box in a smother of camellias. She had a Basque maid, a great, kind, swarthy creature with huge black eyes. She had hired a piano. No, she was not lonely. She was enjoying being so completely and luxuriously and irresponsibly herself.

“An orgy of egoism, John. But the sea here chastens one’s little, strutting self.”

“I have been bathing. I go early, with Marie in attendance, before the place becomes too cosmopolitan and crowded. You will see it in the photo I send you. Also, for contrast I send you a picture of my white box, and another of poor Nap’s great red palace-villa. So French and Second Empirish. It is now a hotel, and houses the rich of all countries.”

“I do not feel at all like a Dame aux Camélias. No, the happy celibate in retreat.”

“So you have bought Maskell’s, to live in. That moves me to many reflections. I’ll confess that there are few houses in England which I would choose to live in now. But Maskell’s Manor! Some houses learn to be serene.”

Sanchia did not tell me that Bullstrode had been writing to her through her mother. That is to say he had persuaded Mrs. Cherrill to enclose his letters in hers, and to have them smuggled through Mr. Gregson’s office. It was Gregson himself who told me, though I imagine he was flouting professional etiquette in doing so. She returned him the letters, asking him to deal with the matter and to warn her husband that she wanted no letters from him.

Old Gregson was angry. In common parlance Mrs. Cherrill was not playing the game, or rather she was playing it as so many women play it, assigning to themselves the right to be sly in what they assume to be a good cause. She did not regard it as a subterfuge. It was a mother’s privilege. She was concerned with the ultimate happiness and the social wellbeing of her daughter.

Mr. Gregson went up and tackled her. He told me that she was highly indignant, and accused him of attempting to prolong this unhappy separation. She said that dear Beverley deeply regretted the past, and that she claimed it to be her duty and prerogative as a mother to bring about a reconciliation.

Gregson was firm with her. He reminded her that her daughter was a responsible person, and that Sanchia had the right to resent interference. No

more letters must be smuggled to her through his office.

“Unless you promise this, I must ask you to leave your letters unsealed in the future, or I shall not forward them.”

I can imagine her chirruping: “I think it is simply disgraceful. I am her mother.”

I believe Mr. Gregson told her that the privilege of parental authority was not granted in perpetuity, and that unwise interference defeated its own ends. She refused to give him any promise, and he left her with the assurance that unless her letters were left unsealed, he would not forward them.

She tried him with two sealed letters. He returned them both to her, and after that she protested but conformed.

None the less I distrusted Bullstrode in the part of Agag. I preferred him as the bravo. My feeling about it was that he was trying to ambuscade us, to allow his victim to accept a false sense of security before attempting the final seduction. The Bullstrodes were not patient people, and I disliked this appearance of patience. I did not credit Bullstrode with any chivalrous feelings. He wanted to possess that which was his; he wanted his revenge upon the woman who had flouted him. It seemed to me it might be a very sinister business. He could be a violent and ruthless beast, as I knew. There would be no velvet gloves on his hands if he ever got those paws of his on Sanchia's body.

I felt that I should want to kill him if he ever attempted such a thing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



*H*ow right were my suspicions!

I realize now how kind fate was to me.

It happened in February. Her letters had come to me regularly; happy, intimate letters. Letter-writing has become a dead art in these telephonic days, but her letters were alive. They were not the outpourings of a self-centred woman who had found her sympathetic victim, but conversation-pieces in which, somehow, I felt I was more than echo. If she wrote of herself, it was with a glimmer of amused self-analysis that challenged me to an answering candour. "When you trap the mean little animal in yourself, John, what do you do with it? Drown it in a bucket, or go out and lose it in the woods?" I had questions to answer, secret confessions to make, and I felt that I had to display an inexorable sincerity. She was both child and woman, with eyes wide open to the world. She would take nothing on trust, but where she trusted the faith was final. She asked me all sorts of questions about Maskell's Manor. How had I furnished it? In period? Oh, that was splendid. And the garden? She knew the Maskell's garden. No red geranium and blue lobelia? It was a garden for greens and greys and lavenders and smoky blues.

In the September I had sent her three hundred pounds in notes by registered post. I had been on edge for days about it. Would she accept the money? If she did her consent would have for me a supreme significance.

She returned me half the money.

"I would take as little of this as is possible from you, John. But, of yourself, I take much. More than I deserve, perhaps. My dear, be patient with me. If you understand, you understand."

I had been abroad only once in my life, and I had long wished to visit Italy. Let me confess at once that I had no intention of diverging towards the Pyrenees. A cynical world may not believe me, but this is the truth. I had made up my mind that I would not go near her until she beckoned or spoke some

word. Moreover, I had told Mr. Gregson that I was going abroad, and he had looked at me sharply.

“Not Biarritz, John? Forgive me, but—”

I assured him that I was not going to Biarritz, and that I had very good reasons of my own for not indulging in interference. It was a question of chivalry and restraint.

“You are a wise man, John. Here’s a platitude for you. He who can wait, wins that which is worth winning.”

I had my tickets and my reservations. I was leaving Thomas in charge. He had become a married man, and had taken over my old quarters at Pink Farm. Also, I had raised his salary to £500 a year.

On the day before I left for Italy her letter came to me.

“John,

He is in Biarritz. I have seen him, but I believe and hope he has not seen me. There must be a reason for his being here. God knows, but I think I am sufficiently strong to meet any possible crisis. This is for you alone, dear. Tell nobody.”

Bullstrode in Biarritz!

She did not ask me to go to her, but I knew that no power on earth could keep me away. Nor should she know, nor should any one know, that I was to be near her. But how had Bullstrode discovered her hiding place, if his visit was not fortuitous? That was to puzzle us for many a long day, until Gregson discovered that a junior clerk of his was in financial trouble. Horses and wenchies. When the wretched fellow unburdened himself he confessed among other things to having sold Lady Bullstrode’s address to her husband. I suppose Mr. Gregson had left a letter on his desk, and the clerk had had a chance to see the envelope, but even so he was not the complete pimp. He gave Bullstrode the name of Biarritz, but swore that he had withheld the name of her villa.

If ever in my life I had a flair, or rather, a succession of flairs, it was now. I sat up half the night with maps and a continental time-table. I would go to Italy, and give the world good evidence that I was in Italy. I had meant to stop a night in Paris, but I caught a night train in Paris for the Italian frontier. I had nothing but hand-luggage with me. I passed through Turin to Genoa. I put up

at an hotel in Genoa. From the hotel I sent Thomas a picture postcard with the news that it was raining, and that the Mediterranean was as grey as the English Channel. Leaving my luggage at the Hotel Byron, I took a ticket to one of the little towns on the Riviera de Levante, Rapallo. I had lunch at a local hotel, and from there I wrote and posted another postcard, this time to Mr. Gregson. I said that the weather was quite English and that I was going on to Florence and Rome. I was back at the Hotel Byron by six o'clock. I dined, paid my bill, and was driven to the station, but I did not travel Romewards. The train I took ran towards the French frontier at Ventimeglia. I had a first-class carriage to myself, and a basket of food purchased at Genoa station. Some time during a grey winter morning I found myself at Marseilles.

I managed a shave and a meal at Marseilles, before setting out upon a journey that seemed as though it would never end. I passed through Montpellier. I had to change twice, and in the middle of the night I found myself at Toulouse. I was tired and irritable and on edge. I spent some hours at Toulouse station in a miserable and unheated waiting-room, thinking of all the damnable things that might have happened, or might yet happen. I could not keep still. I must have walked miles in that dreary room with one solitary, flaring gas-jet to mock me. I suppose one of our modern authors could have filled three pages with a complete analysis of all that I thought and felt during those hours, but *cui bono*? I was both furiously sane, and a little mad.

On again towards the west. It was crumpled, green country with patches of furze coming into flower. The sky was a tumbled grey, letting down scuds of rain. I began to be aware of the wind, and no ordinary wind at that. It smacked at the carriage windows and set them rattling. There were gusts that seemed to shake the train. I saw bare trees with their hair blown all one way, and pines whose polls were like bowed green hoods.

Bayonne, grey and old and dim. I had managed to buy a guide-book, and I had picked out a hotel at Biarritz, one of the smaller hotels, the Hotel de Paris in the Place Ste. Eugénie off the Rue Mazagran. I was to be incognito in Biarritz, or rather a Mr. Charles Jones, of London, on holiday in France. I became more and more aware of the wildness of the wind. Biarritz and the Basque coast were *en tempête*. How little did I realize that this Atlantic wind was to prove a ruthless friend and co-conspirator.

I was driven to the Hotel de Paris through cascades of rain. I have never seen such rain. It bubbled and spluttered through the windows of the cab. Every chimney in Biarritz must have been an organ-pipe to the wind. The streets were deserted. The hotel was somewhat sheltered, but I was hustled across the pavement by the wind and a fat and polite little porter who shouted

something at me in French. I did not understand him, and then I gathered that if I gave him the money he would pay the cabman for me. I found a five franc piece, and that sufficed.

A melancholy person with much hair wherever hair could be, met me in the vestibule. All of him seemed black save two patches of skin between eyes and whiskers. He spoke a little English, and I was glad.

“Did monsieur desire a room?”

I did, and a shave and a bath, and some food, and ten hours in bed. I was tired and irritable, and in no state to go upon adventure in such a storm. I remarked upon the weather, and he shrugged at me, and bowed me towards the stairs.

“It is *tempête*, monsieur.”

“And to-morrow?”

Again he shrugged. He did not tell me that this was the first day of an Atlantic brain-storm, and that the average duration of such a tempest was five days. That would have been too discouraging, and bad for business.

The room he showed me was less dismal than I had expected. It had two high windows looking out upon the Place Ste. Eugénie, and if it was just an hotel bedroom and French at that I was glad of it after those days in the train. At the moment I felt incapable of tackling any problem, and more especially so, a romantic one. I was dirty and tired, and I had a headache.

“*Déjeuner* will be served in half an hour, monsieur.”

I had a bath, tepid at that. I shaved. I went below into a depressing *salle à manger* and fed. There were only three other people in the room, and to my relief none of them was English. Then I went up to my room, locked the door, lay down on the bed and slept. I slept for three hours.

Let all the facts be recorded, ruthlessly and without fear or favour.

I woke to find a blur of sunlight in the room. There was a transient break in the sky, and though the wind was bellowing, it had ceased to rain. I felt clear headed and rested. I decided to go out and explore, cautiously and with the knowledge that I did not wish to be recognized. I put on a black mackintosh which I had with me, and went out, and in the Rue Mazagran I lost my hat. A gust of wind took it and bowled it into the doorway of a shop, and that gust of wind might have been an accessory. I found a plump little woman with a

jocund face, holding my hat. She smiled at me.

“Monsieur needs a beret.”

Actually, it was a shop that sold hats and the coincidence challenged me. I was introduced to the Basque beret, and buying one I crammed it on my head, and paying and thanking madame I returned my hat to the hotel.

I explored. I followed the main street which had become sprinkled with people. The wind was broken by the houses, but as I followed the street westwards I came to an open space, and saw that tremendous sea, green-grey and turgid and tempestuous. I went on, stooping against the wind, sighting a great red brick palace of a place set on a low green knoll. I took it to be Sanchia's “Poor Nap's imperial villa.” I passed it, and climbing the hill, sighted a slim white lighthouse on a headland beyond cliffs covered with heather and wind-cut pines.

I did not get as far as the lighthouse. The sky had sealed itself up again, and rain was sweeping over the sea. I turned back, and was skirting the railings of the Palais Hotel when I saw a figure in white emerge from the entrance court and turn right along a path leading to the sea-gate. It was a figure in a white mackintosh, with a check cap pulled down over its big head, and instantly and even at a distance I knew my man. Bullstrode! I felt my heart quicken, and my stomach grow tight.

I followed Bullstrode. He skirted the Grand Plage where the Atlantic rollers were coming in turbid with sand. Once or twice he paused, and I saw the wind belly out his loose white mackintosh. I paused when he paused. Had he turned and looked in my direction I don't suppose he would have attached any importance to a black figure wearing a beret. He led me on under a great cliff of an hotel most of whose windows were shuttered, round a headland and past a little port where a few fishing-boats were lying sheltered in queer little high walled docks. The rain and the wind were furious, and the light was beginning to fail. We seemed utterly alone in this wild world, two mad Englishmen insisting upon exercise before dinner.

The road plunged through a mass of rock in a dark, damp tunnel. There was some shelter here, but at the end of the tunnel I saw Bullstrode's figure momentarily staggered by the wind. I found myself leaning against the storm and following him towards that tremendous and terrifying sea. Mountainous waves, spray, a rain-drenched horizon, tumbling clouds. Rocks lay like spouting sea-monsters. The solid world ended in a queer rock-mass topped by a statue, with a stone jetty beyond it. There was an archway in the statue-rock, and rock and mainland were connected by an iron-pillared causeway.

I saw Bullstrode go down to this causeway and walk along it. The waves were smashing over the stone jetty beyond the rock, and it seemed to me dangerous to venture there. Dangerous! I took a quick look round me, and in the failing light I could not see a living soul. I followed. I saw Bullstrode disappear through the hole in that rock which I came to know as the Rocher de la Vierge.

There was no premeditation in what I did. All I know is that my heart was beating hard, and my belly felt tight and twisted. I crossed the iron causeway, with its timber planking, holding to one rail, and conscious of the heaving tumult below me. It was a murderous sea. Bullstrode had disappeared beyond the rock. I followed him. I came out and found myself within two yards of him. He was leaning against the rock, and suddenly he turned.

His blue eyes bulged at me.

I saw his lips move, and his voice seemed very small in the rush of the wind and sea.

“What, you here, you swine!”

Instantly we became like two wild men savaging each other in that wet and slippery place. I suspect that he knew how intimately I had become his enemy. He struck at me, but I dodged the blow, and his big fist went over my shoulder. I remembered a trick that a gipsy boxer had once taught me, a little man who had fought in a show-booth. If you struck a man hard and cleanly with the bare knuckles or the edge of the hand over the voice-box you had him staggered. I got in that blow and saw Bullstrode’s eyes go blind for a moment. He swayed forward and clutched at me, and we struggled together. He must have been two stone heavier than I was, but the bulk of him was fat and flabby. Moreover the hate of years was raging in me, and this was the thing I had dreamed of doing. So it was he, not I, who went over the stone wall into the sea.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



I DID not look at the sea.

I stood leaning against the rock, with the wind blowing into my open mouth and the rain into my eyes. I was not shocked by the thing I had done. I was conscious of a ruthless exultation.

Nothing could live in that sea. A man in a heavy mackintosh! Even if he tried to swim those great rollers would smash him against the rocks, and suck him back to repeat the blow.

She was free!

Suddenly, I became calm. I felt my beret, and the buttons on my mackintosh. Nothing was missing; he had not marked me. Also, I realized how dim the light had become, and that in a few minutes it would be dark. I did not think out what I had to do. The whole plan seemed to unfurl itself like a moving picture. My enemy and I had fought it out, man to man, and he had lost, and in the old duelling days that would have been the end of it, save that I might have had to disappear abroad. But who was to know? I realized that I had my chance, and I meant to take it, not only for my own sake, but for hers.

I remained leaning against that rock with the sea boiling on either side of me, until the western horizon was a mere grey smirch, and the daylight had faded. Then I made my way back across the iron causeway, holding my beret on my head. I saw lights in the town windows. I reached the headland, and facing about, looked seawards, and then it was that I realized that Bullstrode and I had been hidden by the Rocher de la Vierge. It was more than probable that no one had witnessed our struggle and its ending, though I could not be sure of this, for with this jutting coast someone at a window might have been watching, and seen that white figure topple into the sea. I followed the road round the Port Vieux. I did not meet anybody. A steep and narrow street took me back into the town, and it was empty, yet full of the wet flicker of wind-blown lights. One or two people passed me, but I do not suppose I was more than a vague shape to them.

I reached my hotel. The fat little porter was reading a paper in the vestibule. He raised his eyebrows at me. I laughed, and gave myself a shake. I

was just a mad Englishman who had been taking exercise.

“What bad weather.”

He offered to help me off with my wet mackintosh, but I smiled, shook my head, and made for the stairs.

I turned on the lights and locked myself in my room. The wardrobe had a long mirror, and I stood in front of it, and examined my reflection. There was nothing to show that I had been fighting. I looked rather like a drowned rat, that was all.

I will admit that I did not sleep much that night. It was not remorse that kept me awake, but a patient and ruthless sifting of all the components of the crisis. I considered every possibility. I did not believe that Bullstrode had escaped from the sea alive. His body would be washed up, or be found drifting by some fishermen. Or it might never be found; it might become wedged in some cleft in the rocks.

Accident or suicide?

If no one had seen our struggle, then, the affair would remain a mystery.

“English Baronet drowned at Biarritz.”

I could forecast the headlines in the daily papers. In these days of penny progress I can imagine what use the cheap Picture Press would have made of it. Photographs on the front page. But if our struggle had remained unseen, the social formulæ did not concern me. It would be my business to leave Biarritz without anybody knowing that a certain John Lancaster had been within five hundred miles of the place. The elucidation of the mystery could be left to the English consul and the French police.

And Sanchia? Was she known by anybody in Biarritz as Lady Bullstrode? Could official curiosity involve her even indirectly in the tragedy? Suicide of a despairing husband! Had they met? Had Bullstrode discovered the Villa Stella Maris?

I could not answer these questions. All that I knew was that she was untouchable and free, and during those tense hours with the wind rattling my windows I lay and exulted over her freedom. I was not thinking too carefully of myself. I meant to try and slip away and leave the affair a mystery, but if fate took me by the shoulder, well, I would look into its face, unafraid.

But I did realize that on no account must I see her or be seen by her. She must never know that I had been here, or how her freedom had been secured.

In the small hours I fell asleep. I woke to hear the wind storming at the windows, and the rain splashing on them. So the *tempête* still held. That was good.

What a stark, tense day that was! It seemed to last for ever. The storm was more furious, and I sat about, and smoked and read. I had a good excuse for not going out, and one day like this would give me a good excuse for shrugging my shoulders at Biarritz and its weather, and a reason for going elsewhere. I played a game of billiards with the melancholy proprietor, and while I knocked the balls about and listened to his broken English, I was on edge to hear him tell me of the tragedy. Had I heard the news? That a distinguished English gentleman had been drowned, and his body washed up on the Grand Plage? Obviously, Bullstrode must have been missed from his hotel, and possibly his disappearance had become local gossip, but the mouth of this melancholy Frenchman breathed no ominous words at me.

About seven o'clock the wind seemed to tire for a while of its furious efforts, and the rain ceased from pelting. I had my dinner, but I felt myself more hungry for movement and fresh air after those long hours in a stuffy building. Dinner over, I lit a pipe and went up and put on my beret and mackintosh, and meeting my friend the proprietor on the stairs, I told him that I was going out for exercise.

And what would the weather be to-morrow?

He shrugged. Perhaps the sun would shine, perhaps not. I laughed and said that if the sun was not shining I should feel urged to try my luck elsewhere. Again, he shrugged, and refused to play the prophet in his own favour.

The night seemed very sweet to me. I found that the moon was shining between the pale fringes of drifting clouds. An interlude, peace, and quiet breathing. I turned inland, just wandering fortuitously in a world of shadows. Maybe I was astonished at my own tranquil mood, and that the killing of a man should affect me so little. I remember asking myself whether in the days that were to come I should discover horror and remorse in the death of my enemy. That, I know, is the conventional reaction, but let the world believe me or not, I never regretted the climax of my struggle with Bullstrode.

The thing we call fate must have spun a thread for me that night. I went strolling up nameless streets, until I reached the outskirts of the town. There were trees here, sonorous cypresses and pines, and secret walls, and a sky that

was patterned with a flying fleece of clouds and of moonlight. I remember coming to a gate in a white wall, a little wooden gate with a dark lattice, and on one of the gate-pillars a name was painted. The moon shone out, and I could read the name.

“Villa Stella Maris.”

I caught my breath. What an extraordinary thing was this that some invisible thread should have led me to the very place. I opened the gate and looked in. I could see a smother of foliage, a grass plot, and a little white villa with its shutters closed, but behind these jalousies lights shone. So, she was there, the one and most exquisite creature in the world who made life matter to me. Did she know? Had the news come to her? I was shaken by a great longing. If only I could see her, without being seen!

But that would be fatal. I stepped back and was drawing the gate to when the door of the villa opened, and a woman appeared. She came straight down the little path to the gate, and in the moonlight she must have seen me. She was a very large creature, with a deep and sonorous voice. She said something in a language I did not understand. I gather it was Basque. But her challenge was obvious. Who was I, and what was I doing there, and let me take myself off.

She came down and locked the gate, and flung more truculent words over the wall. I was to get out, whoever I was, and I took the hint and retreated.

I could suppose that this large and masterful person was Marie.

I blessed God for Marie.

Perhaps she believed that she had given Bullstrode a clout with her big, Basque voice, and sent him about his business.

I walked back to the hotel, and before I reached it the sky closed over the moon, and the rain came down again. I lay awake for a long while, thinking of Sanchia, and listening to the wind resuming its bluster. Would this man's death prove an emotional shock to her? Would she become the poetic penitent, somehow assuming herself to be the tragic shadow-woman in the piece? I did not think so. The Victorians, good people though they were, liked to indulge in such reactions in sentiment. Ours may be a less restrained world, but undoubtedly it is more honest, and women are not expected to drape themselves in crêpe when some blackguard has blessed them by dying. We may be more enslaved by our political theories, but our morals are more willed from within us than willed upon us from without.

The morning brought wild weather. Here was my justification and my excuse. I went down to find my melancholy friend, and discovered him in his office, with a paper spread, one of those cheaply printed French rags that look too flimsy even for the lighting of fires. I could see that he was absorbed in some piece of news, but I wanted to break my own piece of news to him.

“Good morning, monsieur. Have you a time-table? I’m afraid I have decided to try my luck elsewhere.”

“Ah, good morning, Meester Jones. You leave us, then?”

“I’m sorry, but, yes. Have you a time-table? I am thinking of going to Pau.”

He rummaged around, and finding what I wanted, remarked that it always rained at Pau. I said that I could tolerate mere rain; we got it in England, but that a seventy miles an hour gale that seemed to regard itself as a permanency, was too much for me. He shrugged, and poked his hairy face again into the paper, and I wondered whether it was the Bullstrode affair that was biting him. I was not to know, for he did not tell me, nor did he offer me his paper. I reminded him that I should like my bill, and went off to study the time-table.

I had done my packing. I found that a train left Biarritz at ten-fifteen, and I caught that train. I left Biarritz not knowing whether Bullstrode’s body had been washed ashore. I remember feeling very restless and on edge while waiting for the train. I bought a paper, and sitting on a bench, I pretended to read it while observing the people who were to travel with me. It would be pretty damnable if fate were to play me a malicious trick, but I could pick out only two people who were obviously English, two women, and they were strangers to me.

I managed to get a first-class carriage to myself, and when the train had started, I applied myself in earnest to that French paper. Not that I was sufficiently a linguist to make much of it, but I was searching for names, Bullstrode and Biarritz, and some rather obvious words which I could translate. I found nothing. I threw the paper under the seat, and gave myself up to other thoughts and my own particular world of emotion. Wind, rain and a grey sky, tortured trees, tempest and tragedy. But her tragedy was over. I found myself trembling with an exultant tenderness. I really believe that if I had had to pay the penalty, I should have gone to my death gladly. She was free. The exquisite sweet texture of her would no more be ravaged by that gentlemanly brute. She was free, and the spring was coming, and it was I who had set her free.

I travelled back to the Italian frontier much as I had travelled from it, catching every train with which I could make connection, buying my food at stations, and sleeping in my carriage. But the temper of the sky was as different as my mood, for along this southern coast the sun was shining, and the spring was in the air, and I, who three days ago had been tense and fierce and full of savage thoughts, found myself like a dreamer of dreams. This other journey did not tire me, for I was at peace with my own passions, a strange confession for a man whom the law might condemn as a murderer, but to me it had not been murder, but good and wholesome slaying. I sat and watched this southern land and the sea. I saw almond trees in blossom, and mimosa, and oxen ploughing, and a blueness of sea and sky. The sun was hot on my carriage window, and the country roads were dusty.

At the frontier I felt my exultation bubbling up in me. I was out of France, and who was to know that John Lancaster had passed through that country, save along the iron road to Rome. I went into the station buffet, and bought a bottle of wine. It was Asti Spumante. It went to my head and sang there, and though I did not sing in that Italian train, the old song sang itself within me.

I reached Rome about sunset, and what a sunset and what a city! I had chosen my hotel and I was driven to the Angleterre not far from the Piazza di Spagna. The first thing I did was to sit down and write two letters, one to Mr. Gregson, the other to Thomas. I said that I was finding Rome fascinating, and that my hotel was excellent. Had Thomas any news for me? My letter to Mr. Gregson was a friendly affair, three pages of traveller's gossip. I said that I thought of staying in Rome for another week before going on to Naples.

Then I asked the concierge for an English paper. Had they a copy of *The Times*? He produced one for me, but it was three days old, and I found in it no news of an English baronet's mysterious disappearance.

I was rather worried that night, and my bed felt hard.

Surely it wasn't possible for Bullstrode to have escaped from that murderous sea?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



*H*E HAD not escaped.

Two days later my English paper gave the news to the world. I took my paper upon the Spanish Stairs, and along past the Villa Medici to the Pincio, and there, looking over Rome I reread the short paragraph.

“The body of Sir Beverley Bullstrode has been washed up on the shore at Biarritz in France. Sir Beverley Bullstrode had been only a few days in Biarritz and was staying alone at the Palais Hotel. The body had been much bruised and disfigured by being dashed against the rocks. An Atlantic gale had been blowing. There is no explanation of how the baronet came to meet his death. He had gone out for a walk, and was expected back to dinner. The only explanation offered is that Sir Beverley Bullstrode climbed on the rocks to watch the sea and was caught by a wave. The Basque coast is very dangerous in stormy weather.

We understand that Lady Bullstrode has been living in Biarritz for some months.

Sir Beverley Bullstrode’s home was at Beaulieu in Sussex. He was the fifth baronet. The heir is Sir Gavin Bullstrode, whom, we understand, is with his regiment in India.”

Just that! So, by now the news must have come to her. And Gavin was the heir, Gavin with his handsome, sleepy, insolent face, but I was not concerned with Gavin. I knew that the Beaulieu estate was entailed, and that Sanchia might inherit just what her gentlemanly blackguard of a husband had chosen to leave her, which, I suspected, would be nothing. But how had she taken the news? Had she had to suffer the impertinences of official curiosity? I would have given much to have been with her, if only for one minute, but my aloofness was utterly essential, also my silence until such a time as she might choose to send me some message.

I waited four days.

I heard from Thomas. He posted me a cutting from *The Times*, and some

gossip. What did I think of the news? Apparently, Bullstrode had tried to play Canute, and the Atlantic had not respected the English aristocracy. "I can't say that I have heard any regrets expressed. Personally, I have none. Nor you, I expect." Mr. Gregson's letter was much less colloquial. It made a dry announcement of the event, but at the end of the letter my old friend allowed himself one unguarded and human sentence. "So, providence has solved our problem for us, and has transcended the law."

It had. But what would my old friend have thought had he known that I had played the part of providence in a play cast only for elemental forces, wild man, the wind and the sea?

Her letter came to me on the fifth day, forwarded by Mr. Gregson. He sent it on to me without comment, and I accepted it as an act of grace.

It was one of Rome's golden days, spring before the spring, and I too passed through the Golden Gate in the Aurelian wall, with her letter in my pocket. The stone pines of the Villa Borghese were sunning themselves against a sky of limpid blue. The grass had an almost English greenness. I could see the black cypresses and the ilexes of the Villa Medici like trees in the background of some old Italian picture. Nursemaids were here, and children, and officers in their blue cloaks, and idlers gossiping and sunning themselves. I sat down on a seat under a stone pine, and read her letter, but that which she had written is too sacred and too much hers and mine to be recorded.

I watched those Roman children playing.

I remember that one of the first things I did when I returned to Maskell's Manor was to burn that Basque beret in the library fire.

Does one have to conclude with an explicit, and flatter one-self even in perpetrating an anticlimax?

I understand that there were people in Sandbourn who professed to be scandalized when she married me, but they were not shocked in my presence. I was too rich and too potent, and too much Sandbourn's little autocrat to be offended to my face.

I believe there were people who were still more scandalized when I rounded off my feud with the Bullstrode world by buying a bankrupt property. Gavin's sleepy insolence did not last more than five years.

I asked her what she wished me to do with the house before I touched it.

We were standing by the Maskell pool, and she was feeding the goldfish who came gliding among the lily leaves. She seemed to hesitate for a long while before answering me. She appeared to be watching the fish, and their sinuous swift movements as they darted hither and thither.

“My dears, you are very greedy to-day.”

I waited. And then she said: “I think I would like it pulled down, John.” She did not say that it was an evil house, but I understood her, and pulled down it was. I built a country hotel on the site, and had a golf course laid out in the park, and so preserved its grassy ways and belts of woodland, and even the little white temple on the hill. It stood there guarding the seventh green, a monument to a family and the seventh commandment, and a memory of a lost pair of trousers. A part of the park became residential property, and the Sandbourn Municipal trams clanged through it, and the motor-garage became modernity’s lazarium.

On five different occasions after the town had become a borough I was invited to be Sandbourn’s mayor. I refused each offer. I could not bring myself to think of my wife as Sandbourn’s lady mayoress.

A rich old man, but how poor now in my loneliness. If I have shed some of my wealth, and can live with a gentle and serene tiredness on my memories, it is perhaps because I can afford to be benign. I think that I have said somewhere else in this record that only those who have attained to power, can, from the high seat of their security, bend benignly over the scuffling crowd. Money ceases to be dear only to those who have procured a surfeit of it and played with it in a pageant of self-expression. When I turn in my chair and look at her portrait, I can smile at my fierce years and at the spread of my peacock tail. She taught me so much, the essence of the stardust that glitters through the golden web, tenderness, compassion, the sweet sanity that transcends the mere sentimental shell of those abstractions which we call ideals.

The characters and situations in this work are wholly fictional and imaginary, and do not portray and are not intended to portray any actual persons or parties.

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.

Book name and author have been added to original cover.

[The end of *Malice of Men* by Warwick Deeping]