

SHABBY  
SUMMER

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WARWICK DEEPING

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*Warwick Deeping*

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SHABBY SUMMER

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# SHABBY SUMMER

## I

**D**r. Bacchus of Loddon, driving his car from Badger's Farm, saw Peter Ghent's nursery lying below in the March sunshine. What an amazing spring was this, with the almond flowering in February, and the peach trees showing cerise buds! Dr. Bacchus stopped his car on the hill, and getting out, looked down upon those acres of young trees, hundreds upon hundreds of them like vines arow in a vineyard. Yes, young Ghent had brought Marplot up to concert pitch, and yet, as Dr. Bacchus knew, Marplot had an unhappy reputation in the valley. It had broken two men, but young Ghent seemed to have made good in his struggle with nature. Short of money he might be after seven years of construction and of planting, but Marplot was in great heart, and the sun was shining.

Yes, that March sun was marvellous and splendid, but Dr. Bacchus was a countryman, and he knew that when nature throws you a bag of gold she may be keeping some malicious mortgage up her sleeve. Young Ghent owed him a bill for attending his housekeeper during the winter. No, he was not going to press the lad. Dr. Bacchus was a magnanimous soul, who understood that the land must pay when it pleased.

He drove his car on down Badger's Lane, and at the white gate opening into the Marplot yard he saw young Ghent himself helping to load some baskets of trees on to a hired lorry. Dr. Bacchus pulled up, and Peter Ghent came across to him, a tall, dark lad in shorts and a green pullover.

"How's Mrs. Maintenance keeping, Peter?"

Ghent smiled at him.

"Quite fit again, Doctor. By the way, I'll——"

Bacchus knew what Ghent wanted to say, and he was first in the field.

"That's all right, Peter. I'm in no hurry, like the land. You look in pretty good shape here."

"Yes, I have a feeling, Doctor, that I'm just on the top of things, at last."

“Splendid. Well, don’t you worry.”

Dr. Bacchus drove on to the main road where the March sunshine was bringing the hedgerows into premature greenness. What a month! And what would follow after? And was Peter Ghent asking himself that question?

The Weir Bridge was Georgian. Its two red brick arches carried the Farley-Loddon road across the river, and standing there and leaning your arms upon the old stone coping you could listen to the thunder of the weir, and watch the water in a glassy curve break below into fretted foam. Always, it seemed cool on the Weir Bridge, even on a sultry August day, with the willows ashimmer, and the river swelling down Folly Reach, and making Folly Island appear like a green bubble floating in water that could be brown and green and grey. There were willows on the island, sometimes somnolent, sometimes whipped by the wind, and trailing green fingers in the water. Willow-herb and loosestrife purpled the banks in summer.

A loiterer on the bridge, looking northwards up the river valley, could command the whole of that English scene, though, unless he was country minded and sensitive to atmosphere, the human implications might have eluded him. Beautiful the valley was, with the sweeping silver of the river and its great green slopes of wood, parkland and meadow. Folly Island floated in the foreground, with Folly Farm glibly modernized on its western bank, and wearing a kind of succulent grin on its Edwardian Tudor face. On the right, a white notice-board topping a laurel hedge bore the inscription “Peter Ghent, Tree Specialist,” and beyond it the two old red chimneys and tiled roof of Peter’s cottage rose from a smother of fruit trees and flowering shrubs and ancient yews. Marplot was its name, and it carried the scent of an old English and puckish humour. Behind the cottage lay the Ghent nursery, row upon row of baby trees, beautiful in their order and their health, conifers of all sorts, pyrus, cherries, lilacs, philadelphus, azaleas, rhododendrons, young forest trees, and rare things known to the few. Westwards, in the middle distance, and planted on a little plateau, Farley village pricked its red ears behind a screen of elms. There were rooks here and busy bird noise, and a grey church spire, sometimes dim, sometimes brilliant in the sunlight. Meadows and woods rose to the park of Temple Manor, and against the northern sky the great white house of the Vandeleurs stood mysterious amid its beechwoods. Over against it and beyond the river on the east, the bastard French *tourelles* of Temple Towers smirked above the trees. A vulgar mansion this, blatant and bold-eyed, and glaring down the valley like some captain of industry claiming the old world to be newly his. *Veni, vidi, vici*, though old Crabtree had no Latin, and a

vocabulary that was crude and forceful.

Let the loiterer on the Weir Bridge face about, and he would be confronted with yet another notice-board inviting the world to hail whoopee and modern joys—"The Blue Lagoon," where the new world could bathe and bask and play tennis, and drink Mrs. Corah Prance's little drinks. It might be a source of wonder to Farley village why a large, rectangular bath should be needed when the river was available, but then Mrs. Prance's pool was supposed to be heated, and welcomed you when the river might make you shiver. The Roman touch! And almost reviving the spirit of history, far away, on the south-west slept the site of Roman Ebchester, where antiquarians had uncovered the dry bones of the Roman thermæ.

Two young wenches, one red of head, the other blonde, flashing over the Weir Bridge in a large, silver-blue American saloon, and turning at speed into Badger's Lane, were confronted by the snub nose of an ancient Morris Cowley. One young thing was saying to the other young thing, who had a cigarette stuck in a vacant face—"Oh, my dear, too much hair on a man's legs is sick-making. Light me a fag." Then brakes squealed. The Morris, crawling at five miles an hour, stopped dead, but the high-sprung American car, swinging over the crown of the road, and lifting its nose under the drag of the brakes, rammed its front buffer into the lamps and radiator of the Morris. The cigarette fell from the blonde young woman's face. Both cars stood interlocked rather like two beetles battling nose to nose. For a moment there was silence.

The young man got out of the Morris. He looked at the crushed nose of the good old veteran and at the smashed lamps, and then, addressing the girl with the red hair, he spoke just one word.

"Idiot."

The reaction was instant. Miss Redhead flared. She was in the act of putting her car into reverse gear to detach it from its victim.

"Why didn't you sound your ruddy horn?"

The young man had dignity. He looked her full in the face.

"Because I was stopping before taking the corner. Perhaps you will observe that you are well over the crown of the road. And you were doing twenty, and talking. No one but an idiot——"

She backed her car away, but he followed her, remaining close to her off-side window, and she tossed her hair at him.



“Cut it out. I don’t want any cheek from you. You know who I am.”

“Perfectly.”

“Well, bung your claim in to the insurance people, and push your old bag of bones home.”

He may have flushed faintly under the gibe, for his old car had served him well. Almost, it was like a good old dog. His eyes held hers and outstared them. She looked him over, saw his brown shorts and bare legs, and suddenly she began to giggle. She did not get out to examine her own car, but, putting it in first gear, revved up her engine, let in the clutch, and swung it out and clear of the Morris. There was a suggestion of scornful and ironic snortings in the way it rounded the next corner and disappeared up the green tunnel of the lane.

Miss Goldilocks, more thin of skin, had been badly scared. Moreover, the fallen cigarette had burned a hole in her new pleated skirt.

“Dash it, Rene, it was your fault, you know. Look at this hole.”

Miss Irene Crabtree let out a little squirl of laughter.

“Gosh, did you see his legs?”

“Legs?”

“All hairy. Cheeky cad! About time someone knocked the bottom out of his old tin pan. After all, what are we insured for?”

“But you did take that corner——”

“Of course. No use for the safety first brigade.”

“I thought he took it rather well.”

“Oh, did you?”

“Who is he?”

“The blighter who runs the nursery there. Name of Ghent. Light me a fag, Syb. Gosh, won’t the old man chuckle.”

Her friend’s face had become peevish.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me Syb. Hadn’t you better stop and have a look at the car?”

“She’s O.K. I’ve bumped things before. Besides, we’ll be home in two ticks.”

Ghent was contemplating the crumpled face of the Morris. The damage was obvious. A puddle of water was collecting on the roadway from the damaged radiator, and trickling towards the grass verge. Possibly he was a sentimentalist, but it seemed to him that the old car was weeping over the insult offered to it by brazen youth. Yes, in a way he understood such insults. Life could be full of strange discords when you were not commercially minded, and loved your job more than you loved money, and had neighbours like the Crabtrees. His blue eyes seemed to contain for a moment secret flares of anger, though a sensitive fastidiousness had taught him that anger was wasted on certain people. Life was too precious, and your stomach and your proud soul suffered.

Well, he would have to bike into Loddon. Poor old Oliver Cromwell would need his face lifting and a new pair of spectacles; and with the slow, deliberate stride of the countryman Ghent walked up the lane towards his cottage, opened the gate and shouted.

“George.”

The hail came back to him over a hedge.

“Hallo, sir.”

“Get Bob, will you? We’ve got to push the car in.”

George’s face and cap appeared over the hedge. He was a long, thin lad with very white teeth, a high colour, and a pleasantly cheeky smile.

“Had a smash, sir?”

“Miss Crabtree ran into me. Came round the corner at twenty without hooting or looking.”

“Thought I heard something. That young woman ought to be took off the road. Killed the baker’s dog last week. I’ll get Bob.”

Robert Fanshaw was a man of fifty, lean, round-shouldered, laconic. He had been hoeing weeds, and he came slouching out of the white gate, sleeves rolled up, his grizzled hair fitting him like a skull-cap. Unlike most countrymen he chose to work bare-headed.

“Miss Crabtree, her mark, Bob.”

With Ghent at the steering-wheel, the three of them man-handled the old car up the lane and into the yard beside the cottage. Oliver Cromwell lived in the little coach-house of the red brick stable that had housed the ponies and traps of the Victorians. A bicycle was leaning against the coach-house wall,

and Ghent wheeled it out and mounted.

“You might be about, Bob, in case anyone looks in. I shall be back for tea.”

“Very good, sir.”

Peter rode out into the lane leaving the two men together.

Said George to Bob: “What that young bitch wants is a damned good smacking.”

The older man rubbed the back of a hand across his chin.

“Ah, that might be easy. But what would you do with her ruddy old father? That’s where the rub comes, my lad.”

Ten yards or so beyond the junction of Badger’s Lane and the main road two wrought-iron gates, hung upon brick pillars capped with stone balls, broke the green wall of the laurel hedge. Within lay Peter Ghent’s “Show-Piece,” a grass path twelve feet wide kept closely mown, and on either side two broad borders thickly planted with young trees and shrubs. Even your untarnished enthusiast must be allowed his Shop Window, and Peter’s window, seen through the iron grille, was, even in winter, a thing of beauty. Much love and labour were spent upon this little vista, for, to keep it in flower through the year’s flowering season, Peter marshalled a little regiment of blossoming things in pots which were sunk in the soil, to bloom in succession. It was like a gorgeous missal in some monkish scriptorium, upon whose pages devoted hands impressed quaintness and colour. At the moment it was a mass of Azalea Mollis, and hybrid rhododendrons, with here and there a young standard wistaria pendant with mauve racemes. A yew hedge gave a dark backing to each border, and set in front of the hedge were rare and exquisite young conifers, Conica with its glaucous spires, Fletcherii, Allumii, the Blue Virginian Juniper, Cupressus Aurea, Irish and Japanese junipers, Thuyas. Even in winter the varied colours of these conifers made the place beautiful and strange. The vista was closed by a length of treillage upon which was blooming an old Clematis Montana Rubra, a cloud of rose-white stars.

Down one brick pillar hung a short length of chain, and on one leaf of the gate hung a notice.

“Visitors—please ring.”

Peter had had to shorten this chain, for mischievous children had amused themselves by ringing the bell which hung under a little pent-roof at the back of the pillar.

Said the lady in the dog-cart: "You had better ring the bell, Simmons."

Simmons rang it. His cockaded top-hat belonged to a previous generation. So did the mistress, Lady Vandeleur of Temple Manor. The dog-cart with its black and yellow wheels had come bowling through Farley village, my Lady Melissa holding the reins, but this archaic vehicle was as familiar to the villagers as was the lady, and in its way as well beloved. Mr. Roger Crabtree employed a Rolls Royce, and though Temple Manor did possess a car, Melissa Vandeleur somehow clung to the England of her youth.

The groom came to crook an arm for her, and to protect her skirt from the mudguard, an antique gesture. Melissa Vandeleur might be sixty-five, but she was slim, and light in her movements. Her white hair and lashes shaded a pair of jocund eyes; the lovely mischief of maturity had mellowed in her, but her gentle tongue could sting. Was it not she who, at some function, had cowed that impossible old brute, Roger Crabtree?

My Lady stood by the gate, looking through it at all that loveliness and loving it for what it was, without being vexed by the petty passion to possess. She too had azaleas, but she was obliged to grow them in a little dell of their own where the chalk ceased and the river had left its drift, with their faces in the sun and their roots in the moist loam.

Bob appeared through the arch in the treillage, a shambling, knock-kneed, gaunt figure, but somehow very much a person. He was notoriously without social grace, but in Lady Vandeleur's presence he touched a forehead with a work-worn first finger, and smiled. He was a different man when he smiled.

"Good day, m'lady."

"Good day, Bob. Mr. Ghent in?"

"He's gone to Loddon, m'lady, but he'll be back in half an hour."

He unlocked the gate, opened it and let her in.

"Perhaps you can help me, Bob."

"I hope so, m'lady."

"I want to see 'Mrs. J. Dykhuis.' Have you got her?"

Bob scratched his head.

"'Mrs. J. Dikkis.' We've got her."

"That's the lady, I think."

"She's over here."

Bob led her along the grass path, and with a proud finger pointed out the brilliant little bush with its salmon orange flowers.

“That’s she. Lovely thing, m’lady.”

“She is. Is she in a pot?”

“Yes.”

“How many of her have you?”

“As a matter o’ fact, m’lady, only three.”

“How sad! I can’t be so greedy as to ask for one.”

“Most people don’t think o’ that, m’lady.”

“No, I dare say not. Don’t let me keep you, Bob. I’ll just wander about and sit for a while.”

“Very good, m’lady. Mr. Ghent may be back any time.”

“Yes. I wish we could get some rain, Bob.”

“So do I, m’lady. The ground’s so cloddy you can’t use a hoe proper. I’ll leave the key in the lock.”

“Thank you, Bob.”

She was wearing black, and as she wandered up and down the grass way looking at the flowering shrubs, her black dress seemed to make the live colours more vivid. They were of every shade of rose and red and carmine and purple and mauve and orange and flame. Some of them were almost indescribable, and coming again to look at Mrs. J. Dykhuis, she smiled upon this burning bush and thanked some secret God that she had ceased from fussing over words. Life was not a catalogue, though catalogues might be necessary. If she abominated any particular pose, it was the he or she who paraded round a garden, exhibiting a pretentious knowledge and sesquipedalian Latin names. How the plants must chuckle and whisper “Prig!” Though, did such egotism matter, any more than these clashing contrasts in colour mattered? She had had her own Blue Border phase, and outgrown it and its too sophisticated languor.

She sat down on the oak seat under the clematis. She rather wanted to wait for the tree man’s return. He pleased her, like the life he lived and the live things he grew. So unusual in this age of crashing speed and noise. He was a happy person, though he did not make much money, and would have been even happier had the pound sterling ceased to be. She liked his young and rather silent dignity, his aloofness that smiled suddenly, his eyes, his teeth, his

sun-browned cleanness, his strength. Her own son had been killed in the Great War, and the memory made her more tender to lads like Ghent.

Peter, seeing that particular dog-cart outside the gate, dismounted, and leaning his bicycle against one of the gate-pillars, went in, in search of the lady. For the moment she was invisible to him, but he was visible to her, and she observed him as one watches some creature that is not conscious of being watched. He did not hurry. He paused more than once to look at one of his bushes, while she saw him as youth, somehow retaining its sense of mystery and a belief in the essential loveliness of things. Such youth was dear to her, and growing more dear now that she was becoming old.

She saw him as a young man caring for trees and country things, instead of setting out to save souls in some shabby semi-slum, though she could picture him in either part. He had serenity, poise. Belief of some sort and in something was inherent in his striding self. If he wore the halo of youth as she wished it to be worn, unselfconsciously and with a happy rightness, she blessed him for it. Might that halo remain about his dark young head.

She rose and he saw her. He smiled. If she found the youth in him good to look upon, he found in her something that to him was indescribable. To say that she was a great lady was not adequate; great ladies can be devastatingly stupid. When near her he was conscious of being in another world, the world in which child and man can meet.

Had she been here long? Had he known that she was to have been expected, he would have been here to receive her. He had no hat to salute her with, but the bend of his head and his smile and his pleasure in seeing her were sufficient. She hated people who fawned on her, and all those who behaved like over-polite tradesmen.

“I wanted to see ‘Mrs. J. Dykhuis.’ At my age one is allowed to satisfy every whim.”

“Have you seen her?”

“Yes, Bob introduced me. But I could look again.”

He walked beside her down the green path, and if he was the young courtier to his queen, his courtliness was like his smile, natural and inevitable where she was concerned. He bent over the bush, and half kneeling, slipped a hand under one flowery truss with the almost tender reverence of the man who loved beauty for itself.

“Wonderful thing—colour. Would you like a specimen?”

“No.”

The upward lift of his head and his sudden smile challenged her.

“Did Bob tell you we had only three?”

“He did.”

“He shouldn’t have done.”

“I asked him. I am not a greedy old woman.”

He straightened and stood looking at the burning bush.

“I have one which is just coming into flower. Yes, it’s in a pot. I’m afraid I can’t send it. My car had an argument with Miss Crabtree’s machine. It’s a garage job.”

She was watching him with eyes that had lost some of their gentleness. Always—the Crabtrees, the type that tainted life with the breath of crude commerce! There were moments when the Crabtree philosophy enraged her, though she knew that it was foolish, at her age, to relapse into such anger.

“Dear child! Did she drive into you?”

“Yes. Complete disregard for anyone who might be round the corner. But that’s the Crabtree way.”

He laughed. He did not appear to be bitter about it, and his young poise with its head-in-air serenity made her smile at him with secret approval.

“That sort of thing doesn’t vex you?”

“Why should it? Why should one let it? After all——”

“Life’s too precious to be wasted on certain people?”

“Yes. Besides, it’s a Crabtree hobby, getting other people rattled.”

She wanted to lay a hand on his shoulder and say, “My dear, keep that spirit. And may you find somebody in life to help you keep it. Some woman, if she is wise, is going to be very lucky.”

## II

**M**rs. Maintenance saw him pass the kitchen window with a gun over his shoulder and Bunter at his heels.

Mrs. Maintenance's window, though she set her cap at nobody these days and wore her hat with a complete and complacent motherliness, looked out upon Marplot's nursery yard and old brick outbuildings. The stable, with its blue door, had become the office and laboratory, and its hayloft a place of storage. Its low-pitched roof, sagging with age, was capped with a little white louvre that carried a brass windvane. The yard was partly paved, and its grey stones lapped like water against the rust pink of the old brickwork whose mortar had become silvery, soft and friable. There was another building standing at right angles to the stable, a vast timber shed used for packing, which carried a mass of ivy and seemed both to support and be supported by it. The trees of Badger's Wood climbed into the further sky like a green cloud closing the horizon.

Mrs. Maintenance emptied the tea-leaves out of the pot, and remarked to herself and the kitchen clock that it was a pity that you could not empty out your troubles in that simple way. The clock ticked back loudly at her, and somewhere a wood-pigeon cooed consolingly. Mrs. Maintenance watched Bunter's little black stern disappearing from view behind his master's brown legs, and blessed them both. What a pity grocer's bills came in, and that bread had to be paid for, and that clothes could not be washed without soap! Yes, Mr. Peter had put everything into Marplot, and he had struggled through a tough seven years, buying in new stock and raising it, and getting the ground as it should be, but now the nursery was like a well-stocked shop, and times should be easier.

Peter carried a gun, not because he was moved to slaughter anything, but because there was one creature—the rabbit—which had to be dealt with ruthlessly when your land was a nursery for young trees. Let a doe trespass under the wire and bring forth her young in some secret "Stab," and you were in for a pocketful of trouble. Also, one youngster might wriggle through the wire and grow and prosper on succulent young shoots. Peter had had wire dug in all round the nursery, save where the river made the boundary safe.

Here, at the head of the Green Way, grew two splendid trees, a weeping



beech whose foliage seemed to fall like green water from a fountain, and a Camperdown elm trained like a vast leafy umbrella. These trees were the relics of a previous tenant, and though they occupied much ground, they were too singular and lovely to be touched. Next came the seed and propagating beds where the young trees stood for three years before being planted out, and these most precious beds were surrounded by an additional belt of wire. Scotch Bunter had disappeared into the shadowy interior of the weeping beech, for this mysterious tree had a fascination for the dog. Ghent paused and waited, for he knew Bunter's way and humoured it. The dog reappeared, to trot at his heels as he passed down the green alleyway between the young plantations. Each strip of ground had a white peg and a number, and scribbled on the peg in indelible pencil was the date when that particular piece had been planted. Paths broke off at right angles, and here and there a plot was lying fallow, to take the trees that had to be moved every two years. The evening sunlight slanted across the young plantations, and each little spire seemed to glow like the spire of a strange city. There were young flowering-trees in bloom, thorns, laburnum, magnolias, rhododendrons, lilacs, Judas trees, early viburnums, and many others. Hoes had been at work, and Ghent paused now and again to see how the weeds had wilted. His face had a young serenity, for the ordered beauty of his little world was sweet and good to him. It smelt and glowed and spread itself in greens and golds and reds and pinks and purples, against the varied greenness of the fields and woods. Each tree was a perfect specimen of its kind, clean and sleek and symmetrical, for Ghent was a young fanatic and could not suffer a misshapen tree. Blackbirds were singing in the green smother that was Badger's Lane. The water falling at the weir maintained a distant underchant.

Peter Ghent looked about him and found this green world good. For seven years he had laboured to make these acres what they were, and if the March weather that was past had been exceptional, he could dare to believe that the year would be a happy one. He was short of cash, yes, damned short of it, and the nights were being cold and none too kind, but he was not a grower of fruit, thank God! He had trees and shrubs to sell, thousands of them. Last year's orders had not been so bad and this year he hoped to double them. If he had more capital—but life on the land was full of ifs—he could afford to advertise more lavishly; he could run a light lorry of his own instead of hiring one from Loddon; also, a motor-cultivator would help him. But these things would come. His capital was in his precious trees, and as they grew they would increase in value provided they were not too big to move. Yes, it was a good world and a good life, though it had its worries; and was any job worth while unless it twisted your guts on occasions and kept you wakeful at night?

The Green Way ended in a little field of about five acres where Ghent kept ground in reserve for tree-moving, and where he grew a supply of the commoner stuff for shelter-belts or hedge planting. Here were rows and rows of thuyas and yews and Cupressus Lawsoniana and Macrocarpa, of all ages and sizes, also a few small plantations of thorn, privet, beech, hornbeam and holly. Ghent might be a specialist, but in the cause of commerce utility had to be served. Turning right towards the Badger's Lane hedge, he went to examine a field gate that opened into the lane. It was one of the weak spots in his defences, for though it was kept locked, and had an apron of wire netting attached to its lower bars, it was a favourite loitering place for local lovers, and often he would find the wire bulged in by a mischievous or thoughtless boot. He examined the wire and found it good, and passing on along the hedge, he cocked his gun and spoke warningly to the dog. He was approaching The Barbican, a playful name that had for him a particular significance. First came a great hedge of thorn and rhododendron ponticum. There was a tunnel cut in this hedge, and beyond it grew a row of young Lombardy poplars planted as a wind-break. The boundary was closed by a stout fence of chestnut posts, netting and barbed wire, with a grass space between it and the poplars. Ghent, with his gun at the ready, and the dog obediently at his heels, slipped through the green tunnel and peered right and left. Time after time he had caught a rabbit feeding on the strip of grass, and had discovered when he had bowled it over, a malicious hole in the protecting wire.

But there was no brown marauder here to-night, and he had taken a step towards the poplars when he saw something and stood still.

Beyond his boundary stretched a wilderness of rough grass, brambles, young birch trees, and bracken. Later in the year it would be a mass of thistles and of ragwort, and a perpetual menace to a man who kept his own ground clean. Mr. Roger Crabtree, deciding that Temple Towers should possess a park capable of confronting the Vandeleur dignity across the water, had grubbed up hedges and filled in ditches and thrown half a dozen fields together, and planted young trees, but since his affection for nature did not endure unless it produced profits, the Crabtree park had become a wilderness. Rabbits swarmed in it, and most of the young trees were dead, having had their bark nibbled by these furry pests when feed was short in winter. This derelict land had begun the feud between Ghent and Mr. Crabtree. Temple Towers had refused to deal with its forbidden weeds, and Ghent had reported old Crabtree to the proper authority. Temple Towers, having refused to move in the matter, had been taken to court and fined, but the weeds still multiplied.

Ghent had seen a figure moving up from the river and following the line of

the fence, old Crabtree himself on one of his prowls. Almost daily the old man would patrol his boundaries to see if his property had been interfered with. His was a singular figure, suggesting Neanderthal Man, the big bun-shaped head pushed forward, the shoulders rounded, the posterior thrust out, the knees bent. The jowl was that of a bulldog, perpetually straining forward, as though to seize something in its teeth. There was a suggestion of slaver and of heavy breathing. Mr. Crabtree wore no hat. He carried an ash stick, planting its point grimly on the ground with every step he took.

Ghent moved forward until he was close to the wire fence, and stood there with his gun on his shoulder. The dog growled, and being reproved, lay down close to his master's feet.

The old man came up the gentle slope from the river, keeping to the rough grass and avoiding patches of bramble and of young fern. Once or twice he diverged to strike at Ghent's fence with his stick, and the blow went singing along the wire. Peter stood so still beside the poplars that old Crabtree might have passed him by unseen, but suddenly Bunter let out another growl, and the squat figure swung round. With stick planted on the ground and gun on shoulder, age and youth confronted each other in the silence of that lonely place.

Crabtree had badger's brows. His little dark eyes glistened like pebbles.

"Ha, you, Ghent! I want a word with you."

Ghent stood quite still, staring straight at Mr. Crabtree. He did not speak, or smile, or show any emotion. The stick prodded the ground.

"Insulted my daughter. No manners. Anything to say?"

Ghent had nothing to say. He knew his man, and that to this truculent old devil who loved a storming row, nothing was so baffling as silence. He stood straight and still, staring across into the other's eyes.

Crabtree's stick struck the ground.

"Ha, nothing to say for yourself! Let me tell you, my lad, that my daughter isn't to be insulted by a fellow like you."

Not a flicker, not a word, not a movement, though Bunter was quivering at his master's feet. Old Crabtree glared. His mouth hung open for a moment, vacuous and arrogant. Then the lips snapped to. He made a gesture with his stick.

"Nothing to say? If I were a younger man I'd come across and give you a lesson."

And suddenly, Ghent smiled. Otherwise his stillness was utter. He did not speak, but his smiling eyes looked straight into old Crabtree's. They continued to stare at him until the old man seemed to feel the pressure of their young, unflinching scorn, and turned suddenly away.

"Ashamed of yourself, I see. Nothing to say? Well, you remember, young Ghent, to be polite to your betters."

It was as though this last piece of blasphemy was too much for Bunter. The dog made a rush for the wire and began barking at the retreating figure. Ghent spoke to him quietly. "Heel, Bunter, we must learn how to behave." Old Crabtree heard the words, swung round, glared and let out a growl.

"Don't think you can be facetious with me, my lad." Then he went on, puffing a little, for he was a heavy man and prone to shortness of breath. His big flat head seemed to sit down between his shoulders. His little thick legs straddled slightly as he picked his way over the rough ground. And Ghent, still immovable, watched him go, and knew that he had got the better of his neighbour.

Some irreverent person had, in Melissa Vandeleur's hearing, described the Temple Towers drive as Monkey Puzzle Parade, and the eyes of Temple Manor had flashed at the sally, for in an attempt to be singular the original owner of Temple Towers had planted araucarias on either side of the private road. They had grown into considerable trees, and stood black and forbidding like great funeral plumes, but untouchable by those who valued their skins. There was no such avenue like it in the whole county, and Roger Crabtree was proud of his Chile pines. It did not occur to him that these grim, stiff, noli-metangere trees symbolized him to his neighbours.

Stodging along in the rough grass beside the hedge of Badger's Lane he arrived at the red brick lodge at the lower end of the avenue. He was feeling the heat, both within and without. He faced about, and leaning on his stick, pulled out a green silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Damned young pup!"

He wanted to convince himself that he had told the fellow off, and done it properly, but the conviction was not here. Old Crabtree was no fool, far from it, and inwardly he was seething with the knowledge that young Ghent had had rather the best of it. That motionless and ironic figure had seemed to express the exasperating aloofness of a community that marshalled itself round secret standards and refused to flinch, though you shot your arrows of gold at it, and swaggered and shouted ever so stoutly. Infernal snobs! Even the damned hirelings were snobs, and looked towards Temple Manor and not towards

bastard Gothic.

From where he stood Roger Crabtree looked down upon Ghent's nursery, a miserable twenty acres or so, and worth at most as a commercial venture two or three hundred pounds a year. It had become, in a sense, Roger Crabtree's Naboth's Vineyard, just because he had been baulked by it and its owner. He had come to consider it as inevitably and rightly his, not only because it would round off his property and cease from thrusting itself like a hostile salient into his estate. Beyond the river Temple Manor was inviolable, serenely mysterious amid its beechwoods, and as old Crabtree swung round it confronted him like some maiden fortress that would surrender to no siege. Lady Vandeleur—bah! A woman who had been christened Melissa, and looked it. A damned cool customer that old woman! A pillar of salt that could both walk and talk. How Temple Towers had waited for Temple Manor to leave those pieces of pasteboard on the Crabtree salver. And it had not happened. Damned, stuck up old bitch, for Temple Towers spoke and thought coarsely, save on certain occasions when it took the stage. Roger Crabtree, glowering at the house across the river, and stepping back, made contact with one of the Chile pines. A razor-edged leaf cut his cheek, and the old man flared like a truculent child. He struck savagely at the tree with his stick, but the offending bough merely swung to and fro with rigid unconcern. After all, it was his tree. It could give and take.

Crabtree dabbed his cheek with his green handkerchief, and found a spot of blood on it. The assault tickled him somehow, and he grinned. That was the sort of tree to own. Rather like himself, what! "No nonsense. I'll show you." Yes, he was showing the world what manner of man he was. Temple Manor might flout him, but he had got a foot in Farley village; he owned a dozen or so cottages there. Badgers Farm and Millbourne Farm were his. Even Mrs. Prance of The Blue Lagoon was responsible to him for a mortgage. As for that pup Ghent, ruddy young Bolshie, he had him and his nursery shut in and surrounded on every side save on that of the river. He would find ways and means to deal with the fellow.

Voices, laughter, the trumpeting of motor-horns, a flurry of stones down by the red lodge. Old Crabtree had almost reached the vast, gravelly space in which Temple Towers stood like a complicated piece of iced confectionery, when the sound of the uproar reached him. He faced about to see his daughter's blue-grey car coming at speed up the drive. A young thing with a raincoat over a green bathing-dress was leaning out of the near window, and waving a towel mockingly at the pursuers. Five more cars were following his daughter's. In passing, the young thing at the window waved her towel at Mr.

Crabtree.

The old man grinned at her, and waved his stick. The six cars swung up and parked themselves on the gravelled space. Men and girls spilled out of them, noisy and jocund. Damage to gravel might be one thing, but it was not damage to pride. Six cars, a crowd of smart young things, bare legs and arms, colour, noise, that was life and a salute to life, as Crabtree understood it. His daughter was waving a towel and mocking a sallow young man with side-whiskers who had pursued her up the drive in a red sport's model.

“Oy, what about it? I said you couldn't pass me.”

The sallow young man, his name was Danglish, Rudolph Danglish, saw the father beyond the daughter, and walked across the gravel to salute the Squire. He addressed him as Squire, and Mr. Crabtree was pleased. He could show another face and a bustling geniality when the show was his, and he felt like owning Boulters Lock on a Sunday, or the Drury Lane stage when a full chorus was in action. Hadn't he the money? Besides, young Danglish was not only a man about town but a fellow with brains and very active in the City.

“Your daughter's hot stuff, Squire.”

“Been racing, what?”

“Just crashed up from Madame Prance's. Afraid we scattered your gravel a bit, sir.”

“You young things must have your game. No safety first, hey?”

“Not your motto, Squire, what!”

Old Crabtree winked at him, and began to bustle and take the stage. He was the impresario and he had his show. He waggled his stick and collected the crowd. Chairs on the terrace, for anybody and for everybody, and little drinks, and cigars if the lads would only smoke them. Mr. Rudolph Danglish might think him a vulgar old cad, but Mr. Danglish did not let such prejudices appear when a man had property and might be productive. Irene, snuggling up to her father, and having her arm cuddled, flicked her towel at young Danglish.

“Come on, whoopee. Where's Bounds?”

Bounds was the Temple Towers butler, a silent and depressed little man who shuffled about the place and became more and more servile when he was shouted at.

Mr. Crabtree went in to ring a bell and shout.

“Hi, Bounds, drinks on the terrace.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cocktails, and whisky. And bring cigars. The silver tray, mind you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where’s your mistress?”

“I think she’s in the rose-garden, sir.”

“Tell her there’s company. Tell her to change her frock, if she’s gardening.”

“Yes, sir.”

### III

**F**rost. Ghent, going to look at his azalea beds, saw all the brilliant blossom hanging limp and pulped in the deceitful April sunlight. There had been three nights of such frost, with a coldly malicious breeze blowing from the north-east, but the azaleas were not the only live things that had suffered from the vagaries of a temperamental spring. Young rhododendrons had had their young blooms frozen; wistaria had been cut back, the blossom browned on the flowering cherries. Succulent young shoots, fooled by the March sunshine, were looking flaccid and discoloured.

In the Green Way Ghent met Bob Fanshaw. Bob might be a taciturn soul, but on occasions his language could be picturesque and forceful. Yes, this was one of those sanguinary years when the weather went mad, and played every sort of devilish trick on you. Evil spirits were abroad. The ruddy spring was bewitched. And, no doubt, in the old days, Fanshaw would have been able to point a damning finger at some poor old hag who had cast a spell upon the weather.

“There ain’t no sense in it. A March like June, and an April like January. And dry at that,” and Bob spat to show his opinion of the weather.

Peter was looking a little sad.

“Well, we don’t grow fruit, Bob.”

“Fruit! There won’t be a plum or a pear in the valley. And as for apples! Silly, I call it. What’s more, these bloody cold nights aren’t doing our young stuff any good.”

“A pity we can’t put it all down to old Crabtree, Bob.”

“Him! The old blighter. That’s what gets one, sir, these days. There ain’t anyone to curse.”

“No God, Bob?”

“Exactly. I’ve been on the land thirty years, and things just happen. It looks like spite, and of course it ain’t nothing of the kind. Things just happen without our being able to do a damn about it. Seen those big thuyas we moved last autumn?”



“No.”

“Well, they’re looking a bit dicky.”

“They can’t be, Bob, as early as all this.”

“I tell ’ee they are, sir. My meaning is that anything can happen in a year like this. Everything’s upside down. Them thuyas, if they were going sick, wouldn’t have shown it, in a decent God-abiding year, till June. Well, some of ’em are sick now.”

Peter made himself smile.

“Let’s go and have a look, Bob.”

They went together to the five-acre plot south of the boundary hedge, where a group of Thuya Lobii stood, seven foot trees that had been moved the previous autumn. Ghent saw that Bob was right. Some of the trees had lost their green gloss, and were dry and brittle to the touch. Ghent let some of the foliage run through his fingers, and from the feel of it he knew that the trees were sick. The root-balls were drying out in this cold, windy, rainless year. His young face became very grave. He hated losing trees, and in this case the financial loss might be considerable, for these conifers were worth perhaps ten shillings apiece on a private order, and five or six shillings to the trade, and there were two hundred of them.

“Yes, Bob, I’m afraid you’re right. They’ve been hoed, too.”

“Been through them twice with the hoe, sir.”

“Seems funny, doesn’t it, with the river so near, that trees should be short of water! Rather a joke against us.”

“We’re on a bit of gravel here. All right in a decent season. But you know, sir.”

“Yes, I know, Bob. Nothing to be done about it. We can’t hand-water a whole plantation.”

“It’s all along with the damned dry February and March, and not a shower yet in April. The subsoil’s dried out.”

Ghent found two letters on his breakfast table, and directly he glanced at them he had a feeling that both letters were carriers of trouble. Mr. Peter Ghent, Marplot, Farley, Loddon. Marplot? Had the old country folk been mordantly wise in their choice of names, and had this piece of ground held a hint of tragedy in the title that it bore? The old people had been cunning and observant in their christening of plants and places. Coldharbour, Burntheath,

Clayhanger, Deadly Nightshade, Foxglove, Coltsfoot, Devil'sbit Scabious!

Peter opened his letters, and one of them in particular left him feeling a little sore. Dr. Bacchus had sent in his account, though Peter did not know that Dr. Bacchus had a new assistant to whom had been delegated the task of going through the ledgers. The other letter was from a firm of seed and artificial manure merchants, enclosing an account that was overdue and a curt request for the debt to be settled.

Peter finished his breakfast, lit a pipe, and pushed the two communications into a drawer of his oak bureau. How much had he in the bank? Oh, about fifty-three-odd pounds, money that was being cherished for the first claim Marplot made on him, the paying of wages. Four pounds a week. Then, there was Mrs. Maintenance and the housekeeping, and the extra men he had to engage during the lifting season. Very little money would be coming in until the autumn sales. Well, perhaps he could just manage. Once or twice before the manager of his Loddon bank had allowed him to overdraw.

But that bill of Bacchus's? He felt a little hurt about it, and sensitive as to its challenge. Nine pounds ten. Well, couldn't he borrow the money, and from whom? Lady Vandeleur? Oh, quite impossible. John Lynwood? John was not quite down on the rocks like he was, and John understood the way the land held you in fee.

Since his old car was in dock, and the front tyre of his bike happened to be punctured, Ghent set out to walk to Chesters Farm. The evening was fair, provokingly so, and Peter paused on the bridge to watch the water tumbling over the weir, and Folly Island floating like a green-sailed ship in the evening sunlight. Yes, plenty of water in the river, and hardly a cloud in the sky, and the fruitful earth praying for rain. Was Bob Fanshaw's prophecy likely to prove true, that anything might happen on a freak year such as this?

Some fifty yards beyond the bridge two trackways left the main road, the one on the right going to Folly Farm, the other a black cinder road to Mrs. Prance's Blue Lagoon. Ghent noticed that the white gate of Folly Farm hung open, and in the distance he could see the red rump of a pantehnicon parked beside the white garden fence. Folly Farm had been empty for a year, the gentleman who had been responsible for its "Jacobethan" renovations having suffered losses in speculative finance. Ghent had no particular interest in Folly Farm, nor did The Blue Lagoon promise to satisfy the restlessness of his particular temperament, for, if the youth in him sometimes suffered from divine discontent, it was not a mood that could be ministered to by chatterings

and splashings.

Chesters was the place for him, Chesters with its great fields and its crumbling fragments of Roman wall, and big John Lynwood with his quiet, stubborn yet gentle face, his country mind, and his feeling for the way life vexed you when your world was a world of live things. Chesters had courage, even in a drought; it endured; it confronted Nature's whimsies with steady eyes and a jaw that did not quiver.

Half-way between the Weir Bridge and Farley village a lane which was the ghost of a Roman road ran straight as a spear-shaft to Ebchester. The Roman town had stood on a little plateau, and its main road going towards Londinium had crossed the river above Folly Island and passed across what was now Peter's nursery, and followed the upper course of Badger's Lane. Some of the Chesters Farm fields lay outside the line of the old walls, the rest within the circuit, and every ploughing turned over fragments of potsherd, tile and brick, or the little chalk coloured or red tesserae of Romano-Celtic floors. He could see a strip of grey flint wall, and the roofs of the farm and its outbuildings half hidden by the young foliage of a group of beech trees. To the right and outside the wall rose what looked like a low green mound covered with a smother of old white-thorns which were in flower, Ebchester's amphitheatre.

He paused and turned right towards this mound, following a grass track between ditches full of chervil. The place had a particular fascination for him, for it seemed to smell of that strange, old other world before the Saxon terror.

The amphitheatre was like a great green bowl, its banks lined with short sweet turf and shaded by the thorn trees. There had been two gateways, one on the east, and the other on the west, where the green vallum was broken. Its roof was the sky, grey or cloudless or filled with white cloud masses, and Ghent had spent many an hour here, lying on his back, reading or dreaming.

It so happened that Peter did not enter the grassy hollow by one of the old gateways. He climbed the bank between two thorn trees, and suddenly stood still. For he was not alone here. Someone else had found this secret place, a girl whose face was strange to him.

She was sitting on the southern bank and in the full evening sunlight, her knees drawn up, her elbows resting on them, and her chin cupped in her two hands. Her frock was a cheap, flowery thing that could be bought for seven and sixpence, but almost, to Ghent, it made it appear as though the green bank had broken into flower. She had very dark hair, a crisp, insurgent mop of it that shaded her forehead and clouded over ears and neck.

She had not heard his footsteps in the grass and for perhaps ten seconds she

sat there wholly unconscious of his presence, absorbed in a mood, or in her own thoughts, whatever they might be. Ghent stood very still, feeling half ashamed of watching her, and ready to slip down the green bank and away. Then, her hands fell and her head turned sharply. He was aware of eyes that looked black in a wide, pale face. She was startled and not pleased. He thought her rather plain at that first, full glance, her nose too broad, the black eyebrows somewhat heavy. Moreover, he got the impression that he had seen her before, but where or when he could not say.

He felt challenged, an interloper who had broken in upon her aloofness. He smiled, and stepped back and down.

“Sorry.”

She saw him sink back and disappear below the bank’s green rim, and suddenly her face lost its unfriendliness. Her strong white teeth showed; her eyes lit up. His sensitive flinching from the confrontation had amused her. She gave her vigorous hair a shake, and glanced at the watch on her wrist. This was an unusual Adam who came and looked and fled.

Peter might know his flowers and be fooled by a face, but at the moment he was puzzled by one. He was walking towards the beech trees of Chesters, and seeing them, yet not seeing them, like green clouds upon which the evening sunlight glowed. Everything was very brilliant, the dormers and chimneys of the house, its casements and old bricks, the white slats of the garden fence, two beds of Cottage tulips in the garden. Ghent stood in the red brick porch and put his hand to the brass knocker. There were oak seats in the porch, and he sat down on one of them, to wait and listen, with the evening landscape spread before him. No one answered the knock, and the house was very silent with a silence that suggested that it smiled and said: “Waste no time. I am empty.” Ghent got up and wandered through the garden into the farmyard. The sunlight was shining into the long, open shed with its oak posts and tiled roof in which carts and wagons and farm machinery lived, and a man was standing there, bending over a reaper, a spanner in one hand, the light playing upon his brown head and face and forearms.

John Lynwood overhauling his reaper, though in this dry year the hay crop might not be worth the reaping, but that was John Lynwood all over. He was like some symbolical figure with a scythe, playing Time to the earth’s seasons, and Ghent, looking at that tawny head and those great strong hands, felt accused of cowardice. He had come to beg and now he knew that such a thing was impossible. Friendship failed when favours were asked for or granted.

You could go to your banker, but not to your friend.

“Hallo, Peter.”

Lynwood had one of those slow, sure smiles.

“Been knocking?”

“I thought I might find you out here.”

“Think I’m an incurable optimist?”

“Not quite that.”

“Well, one has to be on the land, you know, or one might go potty.”

Ghent sat down on the shaft of a tumbrel, and watched Lynwood’s big hands at work. Here was a man with the courage and endurance which alone could carry him through bad seasons.

“Like to see to things yourself, John.”

Lynwood straightened his back, and wiped his hands on some cotton-waste.

“That’s it. Machinery plays tricks on you, like a woman, if you don’t flatter it with attention. By the way, Mary is here.”

“Mary?”

“Yes, taking a country breather. Stay and have supper. I’m knocking off in a minute.”

Ghent was looking out upon the broad fields lying lovely and spacious in the evening sunlight.

“That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“It must have been Mary I saw in the amphitheatre. It always pulls me, that old place. Is she dark?”

“Yes, not like me. And here she is.”

Mary Lynwood came striding across the yard with her quick, swinging walk, and a vigour that was self-evident. Hair, throat, shoulders, her firm young breasts, were flawless. Her smile was almost her brother’s smile, save that it lacked John’s profound and inherent sensitiveness. She was a purposeful and successful young woman, was Mary, a junior partner in a London secretarial agency, but though second in command she ran the show.

Her brother threw the wad of cotton-waste aside, and smiled at them both.

“I hear you two have met.”

“Not exactly,” said Peter, with his eyes on the girl’s face.

“He ran away,” said Mary.

She was so full of life and vigour that it spilled over into mischief. Also, she was ready with her tongue, and her eyes, which were more the eyes of a child than of a woman, were rather merciless in their candour. She would see if your tie was out of order and tell you so; she was like a Black Eyed Susan, and no violet or wood anemone.

“This is Peter,” said her brother. “He keeps a nursery, but not for babes.”

Her dark eyes were teasing.

“Good evening, Peter. Supper’s ready, Jack.”

“Peter’s joining us. Can you manage?”

She could, and said so with an abruptness that left Ghent wondering whether she was pleased or not. She was quicker in her reactions than her brother, but not so deep.

The parlour at Chesters was panelled with old oak, and it could be a somewhat gloomy room, save on an evening such as this when the sun was shining in, for the window faced west. Its furniture betrayed the improvisations of a man without too much money.

Mary had gone off to collect more plates and cutlery and an additional glass, and Lynwood, taking a tobacco tin from the mantelshelf, filled the pipe he would smoke when supper was over.

“Mary’s here to help me out. Things are a bit tight.”

Ghent nodded. He understood. John had had two indifferent years, and this dry spring was adding to his problems. With rain-starved meadows he was having to feed hay and cake to his stock. Also, like Ghent himself, the bulk of his money came in once a year, and all through the other months he had to pay wages, and meet the other outgoings of the farm. Yes, things were a bit difficult.

Ghent asked a question.

“I thought Mary was working?”

“So she is,” and Lynwood smiled, “mothering my overdraft for a month. She volunteered. Wanted a change too. She’s——”

The passage from kitchen to parlour was floored with flagstones, and they heard her sharp footsteps, and became silent. Peter was sitting on the hard black sofa, and facing the door, and when John's sister entered with the tray, his eyes met hers. She smiled at him.

"I'm afraid it's all cold."

He made some banal reply about the coldness of the meal not mattering, while thinking that her firm, full face had a chilliness of its own. Yes, rather like a cold April day with elusive sunlight coming and going. He watched her lay his place at the table, and even the movements of her hands suggested a harsh, capable confidence.

They sat down. The joint was a cold leg of mutton, and it had served on several occasions. Lynwood carved. And suddenly a cloud covered the setting sun, and the room grew dark.

Mary gave a toss of her vigorous hair.

"You ought to have all that old wood painted."

She looked across at Peter as though challenging him to agree with her.

"Too damned dark."

Ghent was watching the brother's big hands at work. They were as capable as his sister's, but differently so.

"I think John likes it."

"He would. I'd like to take him into my new office."

Her brother smiled his slow, deliberate smile.

"Easier carving, Mary, what? I'm rather fond of the old wood. It's warm and deep in winter, when the fire's alight."

She was cutting bread. She passed Ghent a slice on the blade of the knife.

"Give me light, and plenty of it."

She looked at Peter, and her strong white teeth showed.

"Know anything about wireless?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"Jack's old set's not functioning, and I like the nine o'clock news."

Ghent laughed gently.

"Like my car."

“You’ve got a car?”

“I have and I haven’t. It’s in a nursing-home at Loddon being doctored.”

“Oh, Loddon, yes. I have to shop there. Farley’s hopeless. The ham tastes of boots, and I suppose the boots smell of cheese. Do you shop in Loddon?”

“Sometimes.”

“I might cadge a lift on occasions.”

Lynwood passed Peter his plate, and a whimsical look. It said: “There’s nothing concealed about Mary. If she wants a thing, she’ll ask for it. But she’d do the same for you, my lad.” And Peter accepted the plate. He was not quite sure whether he wanted to drive Mary Lynwood into Loddon.

There was still a little light in the sky when Ghent took the road home, and as he turned out of the Chesters’ gate he saw the Roman amphitheatre and its crown of thorns very black against the fading afterglow. Yes, its Crown of Thorns!

The hedges had turned black when he came to the gate of Folly Farm and heard the thunder of the weir. He heard other sounds, voices, the shuffling of feet. Four dim figures were moving towards the gate.

Said a voice: “One of them beerless jobs, brother, what! Gosh, I’ve got a thirst.”

“You’ll go to bed with it, Bill. Pub’s shut.”

“And I’ve sweated a pint carrying furniture up those bloody stairs.”

“Another van load tomorrer, my lad.”

Someone spat with a suggestion of grieved disgust.

“Nice little bit o’ goods, but that sort o’ lady don’t think. You can be as polite as yer please, but she won’t see yer tongue ’anging out.”

“Ladies don’t, brother. They’re brought up refined.”

Ghent walked on and over the bridge and the voices of the furniture-men were lost in the moist music of the weir. So, his *vis-à-vis* across the river was to be a woman. He thought no more about it at the moment, and coming to the lane, heard Bunter give tongue. The dog knew his footsteps, and would lie by the garden gate, listening and watching, to get on his legs and utter half a dozen sharp barks when the god of his world returned.



Bunter had his forepaws against the slats of the gate. The whole of him seemed to be wagging.

“Hallo, old man.”

Peter picked him up, and the dog licked his face. He felt very tender towards this warm, furry thing, and consciously so, for, somehow, dog’s love, wonderful though it might be, was not sufficient.

## IV

**A**t Marplot the alleys running at right angles from the Green Way ended on the river, and each alley had a vista of its own, a fragment of the landscape hanging like a backcloth behind a stage. One alley, pillared with young cypresses, gave you a glimpse of Farley church and its towering elms; another had as its terminal the green bank and willows of Folly Island. Yet another alley, running west from Marplot cottage between ranks of blue-coated piceas and cedars, commanded Folly Farm and its garden, and the thatched boat-house with its faded blue doors. The men had been hoeing between the rows of trees, and Ghent, who had been working with them and had stayed behind to examine one or two trees that were looking sick, noticed that the doors of the boat-house were open, and that the nose of a punt caught the sunlight above the blackness of the water.

His new neighbour! The voices of the furniture-men had announced her as a woman, but Ghent's curiosity had not been piqued. A place such as Folly Farm would postulate maturity, someone who was middle-aged and mildly interested in a garden, and who kept dogs, and would comfortably fill the hammock that could be slung under the two lime trees near the boat-house. Folly Farm did not promise romance. Its garden was completely the riverside garden, a stretch of grass, rambler roses climbing up larch poles and along looped ropes, four formal beds that would be spread in summer with floral carpets, a flight of steps going down to the river, and flanking them two very white pots on cement pedestals, and predestined to contain pink ivy-leaved geraniums.

Peter Ghent stood leaning on his hoe, idly gazing across the river. Folly Farm was neither Temple Manor nor Temple Towers, but the property of a Mr. Lightfoot who lived in Farley village. The late tenant, a Mr. Tate, had been a florid and noisy person with a superabundant wife. Yes, superabundant, not surplus was the word. He had owned a small motor-boat that had chugged up and down the river. He had filled the valley with music and back-chat from a super-wireless set which had been carried out into the garden. Mr. Tate had loved the music of dance bands, and especially the cacophony of the crooner. Fat voices had sung of love, and the willows had shivered in the wind, and sometimes Bunter had run down to the river bank and barked in protest. Peter had agreed very much with the dog. Fat men who sat in their shirt-sleeves and

sunned globular tummies while the voice of the crooner was heard in the valley, were not figures to be dreamed of on life's mystic frieze.

Ghent was remembering that he had other work to do when the woman appeared in the garden across the river. His two hands were folded over the end of the hoe-handle, and his chin was resting on them. He saw a figure in a wheat-coloured frock come floating out of the pseudo-Tudor porch. Actually, it seemed to float. It had honey-coloured hair. It drifted down across the grass towards the water, and stood poised there. The face looked very small and delicate in the distance, and Ghent, gazing at it, remembered that he must be equally visible to the woman over the water, and becoming a little self-conscious in his scrutiny, let his hands slide down the handle of the hoe, and turned his face towards Folly Island.

Yes, one should not stare even at the unexpectedness of a new neighbour. And then as he was about to turn away, he heard a voice, and looking across the water, saw an arm raised. She was signalling to him!

“Please, will you wait a moment.”

Shouldering his hoe he walked down to the river bank, to see her slim, aery figure making for the boat-house. He heard the rattle of a chain, and saw the nose of the punt come gliding out. She was using the pole and handling it with grace and skill. Yet, she had given him the impression of distress. What was the trouble? Had some undesirable visitor, a tramp appeared at the back door? But then, surely, she could not be alone in the house?

As the punt glided across she became more real to him. In the distance she had looked a mere girl, but now he saw her as woman. She had an exquisite small head set on a perfect neck, and her honey-coloured hair was gathered in a little knot. She was beautifully slim with a sensitive slightness that suggested both insect and flower. Yes, a yellow dragon-fly. Her face, or rather, the quality of its expression, puzzled him. Her eyes were blue, and made him think of the eyes of some rather timid animal, like a hare, slightly prominent and oblique as though life and its possible menaces were not straight before her, but might come stealing up from behind. They were quick, sensitive, frightened eyes. But why fear?

He found himself wondering what she would say to him.

She stood poised, the pole trailing in the water, as the punt neared the bank.

“I'm so sorry to trouble you, but could you lend me some matches?”

Matches! Her voice sounded a little breathless. But what an anti-climax when he had expected her to appeal to him to intervene in some adequate crisis

such as that created by an impudent beggar or a lost dog!

“Of course.”

But almost before he had answered her she seemed eager to explain away the seeming triviality of the thing.

“It must sound so silly. I only moved in two days ago. I had ordered in a supply of stores, and they forgot the matches. I found I had only one box.”

She looked at him anxiously, and smiled. She had a pretty, whimsical mouth, but her smile had the effect of making her eyes look more frightened. There were certain things she could not tell him.

Ghent smiled back at her.

“That’s all right. If you’ll wait a moment.”

He had left his jacket lying on a grass path, but when he went to feel in the pockets he found that there were no matches there. He had disappeared from her view, for the river bank rose seven feet above the water level. She saw his head reappear.

“Sorry, I shall have to go to the house. It won’t take me half a minute.”

She had brought the punt to the bank, and was holding it there with the pole pressed against the gunwale. Her figure seemed to droop and lose height, though her slimness made her look taller than she was. The lower part of her was motionless, but her head kept turning towards the house across the river and the red arches of the Weir Bridge. Almost, this movement was birdlike and anxious, as though something menaced her. Her forehead, which should have been serene, showed lines of strain.

She saw Ghent’s head reappear. He was smiling, but there was reflective seriousness behind the smile.

“I’ve brought you two boxes.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll return them, when——”

“Oh, there’s no need.”

She was looking up at him, and suddenly she appeared to realize that he was no mere labourer, but the little lord of this domain. How silly of her! But she had been so absorbed in her own affairs, the little, exasperating happenings, like rain and wind, when you have given hours to the planning of a particular festa.

“Are you Mr. Ghent?”

“Yes.”

He climbed down the bank, and held out the matches to her. She did not tell him her name. With her right hand holding the punt-pole, she reached out with her left hand for the boxes of matches. She had small, delicate hands, and as her fingers closed over the boxes he saw that her finger-nails were faintly tinted.

“Thank you so much. I’ll let you have two back.”

He was smiling, but his young man’s eyes were observing her with particular intentness, and she appeared conscious of the scrutiny and troubled by it. She did not look at him again, but dropping the match boxes on to a cushion, swung the pole over and pushed off, and Ghent, reclimbing the bank, picked up his hoe and stood to watch her pole the punt back to the boat-house. It disappeared into the shadows under the thatch. He heard the rattle of the chain, and saw her reappear and go running across the lawn towards the house. She did not turn her head in his direction, and he found himself wondering why her eyes were frightened and why she seemed in such a hurry to get back to the house.

Folly Farm might have been modernized as neo-Jacobethan, but it possessed neither company gas nor electric light. Water it had, and a petrol-gas plant of its own, but the wretched affair appeared to be out of action.

Perhaps He would be able to persuade it to function.

He—was expected at half-past four.

She always thought of him now as He, just as she had come to think of herself as the woman who brought bad luck.

She had rushed upstairs to slip a flowered overall over her frock. She felt flustered, frightened. She had fallen asleep in a deck-chair after lunch, and going into the house at three o’clock, had found an envelope on the oak chest in the hall. The scrawl within had announced the fact that her newly-engaged married couple had walked out on her, secretly and without warning. The note had accused her of having deceived them as to the conveniences of the place. Its amenities and domestic details had been misrepresented. She was alone in the house confronted with problems to which her sensitive and sophisticated self was a stranger. And—He—was on the horizon, a man who hated improvisations and any activity that did not include hitting or shooting something. He was so superfine and exacting in his demands upon the material subtleties of life. He expected so much, his cocktail iced, a five-course dinner,

and a woman whose face, frock and hands suggested Molyneux and Bond Street. And after all, he paid for it, charm, cushions, perfume.

Then—no matches! The defaulting couple had taken the only box of matches. But now that that nice lad across the river had supplied her, she confronted the choice of the kitchen grate and an oil-stove which she had bought for use in the punt. Paraffin? Yes. She hunted for it, to find the can left most inconsiderately in the larder between a bowl of eggs and a Fortnum & Mason pie. Well, really! And she had had such good references with those two defaulters. Would eggs and pie taste of paraffin? She proceeded to fill the stove, and in doing so spilt the oil over the kitchen table and her fingers. Tea in the garden. If she could accomplish tea she would have gained some respite, and time to consider the disaster that could be christened dinner. She was no cook. She would have to give him a cold meal. Or perhaps he would take the car out and they would dine at the Crossed Keys in Loddon? She decided that the crisis should be treated with irony and laughter.

She got the stove alight, put the kettle on, collected tea things on a tray, and proceeded to cut bread and butter. He liked it very thin and buttery. And she remembered the paraffin on her fingers. She put her right hand to her pretty, blunt nose, and with an air of almost childish insouciance sniffed it. Oh, bother! She ran to the sink and washed, but the smell lingered. Flustered, and with a glance at the kitchen clock, she dashed upstairs to her bedroom and seizing a scent-bottle from the dressing-table, sprinkled her hands and her frock. It was the perfume He approved of. And being upstairs she sat down at her table and attended to her face. Were there shadows under the eyes? There were. He hated any sort of shadow. Everything in life had to be debonair and chic and provocative. Downstairs in the kitchen the kettle had a label of vapour attached to its spout, and its lid was chattering. She removed it, turned down the stove, and clutching the tray, carried it out into the garden, and placed it on a rustic table under the limes. She collected two chairs. Back in the kitchen she completed the cutting of fresh bread and butter, and filling a dish with *pâtisserie*, carried the food out into the garden. She sat down, feeling breathless; she patted her hair and gave her frock little tweaks. It was twenty minutes to five, and He was late.

She sat there for twenty minutes, alert, on edge, listening. Voices drifted to her across the river. She saw a figure come down to the water and fill two watering-cans; another figure followed it, also with cans. So still was the valley that she could hear what one of the voices said.

“We’re going to lose those trees, Bob.”

The other voice was a tired grumble, and she could not distinguish the words it articulated. Actually it accused the weather of being completely cussed.

“If I could afford to pipe the place and put in a pump, we could draw from the river. Save time and labour, and trees.”

They came and went with their cans, and gazing across the water at all the floweriness of Marplot, she could suppose that her dark lad had troubles of his own. Did trees die for lack of water, as some people died for lack of love? But trees did not suffer like humans, and she had suffered too much. Life could make such fierce demands upon you; it was so inconsistent and fickle and ruthless in its exactions and its favours.

Then she heard a car travelling on the main road towards the Weir Bridge, and she drew her feet up and sat forward in her chair. Was it His car? And why was she so strung up and conscious of her heart-beats during those minutes of waiting for him to reappear upon her stage? Was it fear or love, or both? Did she fear him more than she loved him, and if so, what was it that she feared? Yet another crisis in her life, one more shabby and humiliating adaptation to the casual malevolence of circumstances?

It was his car. She saw it cross the bridge, a long, low, black machine with a buff-coloured hood. Her hands clenched themselves. She stood up, sat down again, put a hand to her heart, and looked anguished. Her lips moved, as though she were admonishing herself. “Don’t be silly. You know he hates tension. Try to be casual and easy.” She rose, and walked slowly across the grass, with a smile on her face, but though her lips smiled, her eyes were anxious. Heavens, had she remembered to open the gate at the end of the lane? He hated to have to get out and open gates.

She had forgotten to open the gate. He had to halt his car in the throat of the lane, and he swore.

“Damn! Why the devil——?”

He opened the off-side door and extended a pair of long legs in fawn-coloured trousers. Their creases were precise and perfect. He was one of those dark men with tenuous black hair, a high and rounded forehead, a nose that was slightly beaked, and a long, thin-lipped mouth. It was not a pleasant mouth, being both sensual, and capable of saying smart things, and smart things are usually cruel. His eyes had a kind of sleepy insolence. That he was a

handsome person was known not merely to his tailor, nor to the reflection he observed so carefully in his mirror. It was a quality more considerable and superfine than his name, which was Broster, Max Broster. Less ornamental males might call him a cad about town, but the male is a jealous beast, especially when a man can carry his clothes well, impress women, and make money.

He swung the white gate open, pushed the retaining catch to with the toe of a brown suède shoe, and returned to the car. The garage had been the farm stable, and its doors were open. He drove the car in, switched off the engine, picked up a black “anarchist” hat that lay on the seat, and glanced at himself in the car’s mirror after donning the hat. The consulting of mirrors had become a habit with him; almost, he lived in front of one like an actor.

She stood on the lawn, waiting for him to appear at the garden gate. A year ago she would have met him in the lane but now such impulses were restrained. She had to take her cue. She did not lift a slim arm in a Roman salute and hail him as “Hallo Man,” and master! His was a face to be watched, and its mood met and instantly propitiated. She stood there reproaching herself for the closed gate, and hoping that it had not peevd him.

“Hallo, my dear.”

“Hallo. Where the devil is everybody?”

Her smile came wincingly.

“I’m here.”

He seemed to look at her and yet not at her, and she had come to know so well that evasive glance. He had his hands in his pockets. He was casual, flippant, ready to shrug off any attempt at playfulness.

She said: “I’m so sorry about the gate.”

He looked at her starkly for a moment, and smiled, a kind of frosty glitter seen through smeared glass.

“Where’s Best? Having a rest cure?”

She stood confronting him and the occasion.

“Sorry, there is no Best. Not even a better.”

“How?”

“They walked out and vanished. The place didn’t——”

“What? Bolted?”



“Yes.”

“The damned swine!”

She made herself laugh. Would he have to carry his own luggage up, or would she do it? No, he was not going to kiss her. Nor did she desire it. Such casual stabs hurt.

“Afraid we shall have to picnic. Tea’s ready.”

“Improvisations, what? Anything to eat, or shall we——?”

“Cold supper, my dear.”

He gave her an oblique glance and strolled across to the chairs and table under the limes. Some days were all crooked, crooked at every turn. A year ago her person would have made even cold mutton seem desirable, and he supposed, being a very vain person, that she expected him to find her desirable. But he was not feeling like that. He sat down in the shade while she went into the house to make the tea. He pushed out his long legs and lounged and stared at nothing in particular. No, he was not in a pup’s mood. He had no wish to scamper all over the new house with her, and blurt out the obvious and nice thing in every room. He happened to know the house; he had known it in old Tate’s days. In the shade of the trees his face looked sallow and liverish and supercilious. Would she ask him that eternal question? If so he would have to tell her that Irene was as implacable and as virtuous as ever, and insisting upon cherishing the prerogatives of the wife. Irene and Renata. Didn’t they mean the same thing? He wasn’t quite sure. But could two women have been more different? He supposed it was the difference that had piqued him.

In the kitchen she had put the kettle back on the stove. She sat down on a hard chair and watched it. Her little face looked crumpled and plaintive. So, after all, he was in one of his difficult moods, and she would have to accept it as such. But he was becoming more difficult, and reserved about it. A year ago he had told her things, talked about himself and his projects, but now he seemed to regard her only as a man regards a hectic evening, as a sensational interlude, a physical and occasional distraction. He enjoyed her body, but he had become a stranger to the thing she called her soul.

She made the tea and carried it out. He was lounging deep in the chair, and he did not turn his head to look at her. She sat down and poured out her tea. She saw him put out a casual hand and take a slice of bread and butter from the dish. She was watching his face. It expressed sudden disgust.

“Faugh, what’s wrong with the butter?”

“Is there anything wrong, Max?”

He sniffed at the slice.

“Paraffin. Village shop, I suppose!”

It did not promise to be a happy week-end.

Temple Manor and its mistress held that no man can be interesting unless he has a temper. As to the controlling of that temper, it should be like a sheathed sword, drawn only on particular and human occasions, and then used as a gentleman’s weapon.

That one could lose one’s temper with impersonal things, and rage against Nature and her inconsistencies was the prerogative of natural man, and perhaps more impressive than the cold negations of the philosophers. Be that as it may, Peter Ghent fell into one of those elemental rages against Nature which the pure countryman will understand and condone.

It was on the Saturday morning that Ghent realized that the wind had changed with a suddenness that appeared to characterize this wayward year. He and George Garland were watering the young trees in the propagating frames when Ghent felt the wind on his left cheek. It was blowing across the river.

“The wind’s changed, George.”

Garland put down his can, and looked at the sky.

“So it has, sir. Clouds going t’other way.”

“By God, I hope it means rain.”

Listening-in to the news that night Ghent heard that a depression sited over the Atlantic was moving slowly east. The anticyclone was breaking up. The announcer had nothing to say about the drought, nor did the B.B.C. ever appear to understand that thousands of its listeners were more interested in the absence of rain than in the blood bath in China. Ghent was ready to grant the B.B.C. China and Spain, but much of the bathotic and fragmentary stuff they dished out to their listeners irritated him. He would get up and turn the thing off. Somebody’s quadruplets were doing finely!

He woke to an overcast sky, and a wind that was warmer; yet that smirched sky would not rain. It did produce about eight o’clock a very few casual drops that spotted the dust, and then ceased. The canopy of cloud grew thin. The sun came out and shone intermittently.

Ghent cursed the weather. He would take the day off and let work and his worries go to hell. He went to unlock the garage, and in the yard met the unexpected shape of Bob Fanshaw in his Sunday clothes.

“Hallo, Bob! What are you doing here?”

“Just lookin’ round. Seen those young rhodos and azaleas, sir?”

“Which, Bob?”

“The stuff we moved last autumn. Tongues hanging out. This ruddy year gets one cursing on a Sunday.”

Ghent’s face seemed to go thin.

“Let’s look, Bob. That’s our best bit of ground. I thought we were safe there.”

To Ghent, Bob’s description of the bushes was distressfully adequate. Many of the azaleas were showing leaves that had turned from green to grey, and were hanging down like furred and thirsty tongues. The young rhododendron bushes made a less dramatic confession of their lack of faith in the soil’s blessedness, but their leaves drooped and looked leathery and starved.

Peter looked at them sadly. These young azaleas and rhododendrons were, perhaps, his most valuable trees, some of them new varieties and worth two guineas apiece, and as luxury trees he had given them loam and leaf-mould. He could not afford peat.

“Something has got to be done about it, Bob.”

Fanshaw was ready to take off his coat. There was nothing for it but hand-watering with cans carried from the river. Two stout planks supported on oak posts projected from the bank, and formed a dipping stool.

“You can put in an hour, Bob, not more. It’s my job to-day.”

Fanshaw was not a young man, nor was he a fellow who spared himself on six days of the week, and Ghent knew that he needed his rest on Sunday.

“Pity we haven’t a pump and hose, sir.”

“We’ll have them, Bob, even if I can’t afford it.”

“You can get half-inch hose at threepence a foot. And one of them little rotary pumps don’t cost much.”

“I’ll go into Loddon to-morrow. I don’t know whether we have a right to pump from the river.”

“Who’s going to make trouble? Try it and see.”

They set to with cans, and at the end of the hour Ghent sent Bob home and carried on alone. It was a hundred yards walk from the river bank to this particular plantation, with the soil cloddy and loose under his feet, and the insect world showing an increasing interest in him as he sweated. The heavy cans tugged at his arms and slopped some of their water over his boots. He gave each tree half a canful, and even while he was giving them drink he wondered whether he would save them. He was feeling fierce and cursed about it. Oh, damn Nature! This might be an Ajax gesture, but there was a savage satisfaction in being man and in slapping Nature’s face and calling her a jade. Why cause the seed to germinate, and then kill it with a drought? But, then, of course, Nature, according to the scientists, was incoherent and incalculable and planless. Only that fool man persisted in believing that things mattered, and that the urge he worshipped had a purpose. Well, he did believe it, somehow, and in spite of the very clever people! Things mattered to man. When they ceased to matter came decadence and madness. If it was a mad world, let the plain man insist upon sanity.

His strong young body endured. He did not count the number of cans he filled and carried. Now and again he stopped and set down the cans to slap and squash a mosquito that had settled on arm or hand. His face had a sultry grimness. He would water all those hundred trees, and the drought could damn itself, but as he tramped to and fro on that June day, his brain was busy, bitterly busy. He knew if that plantation failed, he would lose a couple of hundred pounds or so. His bank balance was sick. That was its normal state in summer, until the autumn sales and their cheques arrived. He had had no luck during the last year with his garden planning and making. There was money in garden architecting, especially when you supplied your own trees. The spring had been damnable, frost and drought together. And here he was, humping cans. Had he been blessed with more capital, he could have put in a force-pump and irrigation pipes. Yes, the fellow with capital always had the advantage, a man like old Crabtree, for instance. To hell with old Crabtree!

The man in the deck-chair was amused. Here was an oaf’s show, a poor donkey-business that made him forget some of the frustrations of the commercial world, or to regard them as dramatic and adventurous when compared with the carrying of cans.

She, approaching him, after busying herself in a conspiracy to make a cold supper appear delicate and chic, saw that supercilious smirk upon his face. She

had put flowers on the table, and a bottle of Hock. She was afraid it was not very good Hock, and he could be so superior about wines.

But he was smiling, and that was consoling.

“Supper’s ready, Max.”

He was lighting a cigarette.

“Say, look at that laborious boob over there.”

“Which?”

“The can slave. How many cans do you think he has lugged out of the river?”

She stood with a hand to her cheek.

“I don’t know.”

“A hundred and fourteen. At least, I’ve counted up to that. He started before I began. Why the blazes doesn’t the fool put in a pump?”

So, that can-carrying amused him. Perhaps, it made him feel intelligent and superior.

She said: “I suppose he can’t help it. He grows trees and the weather has been so dry.”

He sniggered, and the sound was a dry one.

“The country mind is a strange product. The fellow’s got the river at his feet, and he has no more brains than an ant.”

She felt challenged, and moved to flout his infallibility.

“Perhaps he has to do it like that.”

He was sententious.

“Too damned poor to be able to buy the oil of efficiency. All jobs that are under-capitalized deserve to go broke. *Verb. sap.* You see, I know, my dear. I don’t function in a can-shop. By the way, what about a little drink?”

She stood looking down at him obliquely.

“Will Gin and It do?”

“In a crisis.”

“I have them mixed. Like them here?”

“Yes. I’d like to see how many more cans that human ass carries.”

She went to fetch the drinks. Max was a man who never fetched or carried anything.

Sunset and aching shoulders, even though they were young shoulders! Ghent put down his cans, and looking across the river saw his Lady of the Matches sitting under the lime shade with a man. A garden table stood between them; the woman was sitting upright, the man lounging with his legs crossed. It was not Ghent's first glimpse of them, and he could remember registering a little twinge of bitterness over the sentimental suggestiveness of the scene. Her impetuosity in punting across to borrow matches was explained; she had been expecting that fellow who was so much at his ease over there. Her husband, probably. But was a woman so stimulated by the advent of the marital male? Well, anyhow, it was no concern of his.

He was tired, but not with a tiredness that could relax and go easily to bed, and leaving his cans on the grass-way above the river, he strolled up past Folly Island. He could see Temple Manor white among its beeches, and the mock *tourelles* of Temple Towers. He felt that he wanted to walk for a while in the cool of the evening without two loaded cans dragging at his shoulders. At Marplot Mrs. Maintenance's cold salmon and a gooseberry fool were waiting for him, but Folly Island, green and afloat in the still water, seemed to accuse him gently of playing the implacable fool.

Well, while he was about it he might as well look over the outlying parts of the nursery, and discover whether nature was playing him scurvy tricks elsewhere. He had a look at the big thuyas, only to realize that he might lose half of them. Passing on to the Badger's Lane boundary he came to a plantation of *Cupressus Allumii*, four-foot trees that had been moved the previous autumn, and here he found more trouble. Some of these cypresses were looking grey and starved.

He was examining the trees when he had a sudden feeling that he was not alone. Someone was watching him. He glanced at the hedge, but, for the moment, he could see nothing. About twenty yards from the Badger's Lane gate a tree that had been felled had left a thin place in the thorn hedge; it had been closed with wire and planted up, but the hedge was no more than a tenuous green curtain. Ghent saw a face here, close to the hedge, a face that was unpleasantly familiar.

He walked towards the hedge, but the face did not move. It seemed to hang there, challenging and confronting him.

Old Crabtree!

Ghent paused about three yards from the hedge. He could see the old man's two hands holding some dark object against his chest. The object puzzled him, until he realized that Mr. Roger Crabtree had brought out a pair of field-glasses. And why? Temple Towers was not likely to be interested in bird-life.

Had his dear neighbour been studying his sick trees?

"Evening, Mr. Crabtree."

His voice sounded casual, and he meant it to be casual. The stocky, ominous figure did not move.

"Evening, Ghent. Finding the weather a bit trying, what?"

Peter turned away.

"Might be worse. We're used to it. We don't grow thistles."

But his ears and the back of his neck felt hot. Was his dear neighbour interested in his small disasters and gloating over them? Oh, probably! The old beast's passion for acquiring property might have caused him to cast covetous eyes upon Marplot. And a bankrupt concern might promise to be a cheap and easy acquisition.

## V

Ghent was forever looking at the sky.

During this disastrous spring it was cold and grey and sinister. The wind hung in the north-east. Every night brought its frost. It was amazing the way that grey sky refused to rain. Sometimes a few drops would fall, and hope would leap into the countryman's heart.

“We've got it at last, Bob.”

Fanshaw would grunt and look malevolently at the clouds.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“That sky must rain, Bob.”

But it didn't.

Every night at nine Peter would turn on the wireless, and listen to the weather report. Not that he had much faith in it, but the experts might promise you something. “An anticyclone extends——” Oh, damn that anticyclone! If only the wind would veer into the west, and bring those blessed rain-clouds from the Atlantic. He would lie awake at night, listening, and sometimes he would fancy that he heard the rustle of rain, and he would get up and go to the window, only to find that it was the wind playing with the leaves.

Riding down through the Barham beeches that morning Ghent saw Loddon's grey bridge and broad red High Street sunk in the greenness of ancient elms. A cold wind met him from the north. A flag was flying from the church tower and it slanted towards the south. Here and there a cold blue rent showed in the heavy sky. He saw the north wind blowing the willows all one way along the steely curve of the river.

He was riding into Loddon to collect his car from Roper's Garage, and to interview the manager of his bank for permission to overdraw his account, should he find it necessary. Loddon was still Georgian. The market-house, closing the broad vista of the High Street, flashed its white cupola and gilded windvane in a sudden scattering of sunlight. Loddon might have taken to itself certain modern indiscretions, but its temper was still stately and aloof. It had high walls that hid old gardens, and its Georgian houses with their red faces



and their long white windows and classic doorways were solid and serene.

Roper's Garage shared with the Crossed Keys Inn a narrow lane which gave access to the Crossed Keys yard. Ghent dismounted, and wheeling his bicycle up the lane, saw the familiar snout of his old car protruding from the workshop doorway. A large man in dirty blue overalls was lying on his back, with his head and shoulders under the car.

"Hallo, George. Not quite ready for me yet?"

George was Mr. Roper's chief mechanic. The legs in the blue overalls made a squirming movement, and a friendly red face appeared.

"That you, sir? Shan't be ten minutes. One of the water joints was giving trouble. We've cured it, but I wanted to be sure. I've had the engine running."

Ghent smiled down at the big red face. He liked George, and respected him as one of those who possessed a craftsman's conscience, and cunning hands.

"That's all right, George. I've got to buy some tobacco and go to the bank. I'll be back in half an hour."

"Heard from your insurance people, sir?"

"Yes. It's all right. They'll want your account. I lose my rebate, of course. By the way, had Miss Crabtree's car in here?"

"They don't come to us."

"I thought everybody did."

"Used to, sir, but the boss had a row with the old man."

"Nothing unusual in that, George."

"I should say not, sir. Bully or bribe, that's his idea of getting things done. And—mean!"

Ghent laughed.

"That's rather good, George. Bully or bribe. Well, I'll leave you to it."

Ghent walked back down the lane, and its entry was like a picture frame outlining the façade of the red brick house on the other side of Loddon High Street. It was a stately and serene old house over whose façade a magnificent wistaria draped itself. The great climber was in flower, and the mauve trusses hung round the white window-frames and clustered under the cornice. The house was occupied by Messrs. Snape & Sowerby, Loddon's principal firm of solicitors, a vintage firm, and as well established as the great glycine. Young Snape lived in the house. Old Snape was dead, and Sowerby had built himself

a house on the Barham hills. But Ghent saw more than the house. A big, canary-coloured Rolls with a black upper works and wings was stationary outside Messrs. Snape & Sowerby's, the Crabtree car, and Ghent stood and surveyed it.

In a witty moment Temple Manor had referred to this machine as "Assyria's Gold Chariot," and if, in Byronic language, Assyria descended like a wolf on the fold, that yellow limousine was somehow a car of ill omen, especially so when it was parked outside the offices of Messrs. Snape & Sowerby or of Mr. Tom Smith & Son, Estate Agents. Mr. Crabtree loved litigation. It was a hobby of his. Where other men collected postage-stamps or prize dahlias, he cultivated quarrels with his neighbours. When that yellow car appeared anywhere, the question would be asked: "What's the old devil up to now?" for as often as not it heralded trouble for somebody.

Ghent bought his tobacco and walked on up the High Street to his bank. As he pushed open one of the swing doors he saw Dr. Bacchus at the counter, and knowing himself to be in the doctor's debt, he felt shy of meeting him. He hesitated, turned away, and strolling up the street, loitered outside a shop window until he had seen Bacchus come out of the bank and walk away. Peter could suppose that it was absurd to be so sensitive about meeting a man to whom he owed money, but he was feeling a little sore over the arrival of that bill. Dr. Bacchus knew quite well that a man like Ghent who lived off the land might be able to make his payments only once a year when his produce was sold, and cash was coming in.

Peter returned to the bank. Perhaps because he was feeling somewhat of a suppliant, his manner to the cashier behind the counter was brusque and casual.

"Mr. Andrews in?"

"Yes, Mr. Ghent."

"I want to see him if he is disengaged."

The cashier disappeared into the manager's private room, to return with the news that Mr. Andrews would see Mr. Ghent immediately. Peter was shown in, and asked to sit down. He laid his hat on the manager's desk, and realizing that the gesture might be considered discourteous, recovered his hat, and nursed it on his knees.

"Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Ghent?"

Mr. Andrews was a rather dry and dusty little man who had been trained to temper kindness with caution. He had to know his clients and their affairs, and

he had succeeded a rather too easy and bibulous gentleman who had handed out credits as an expansive soul stands drinks.

“I may want you to let me overdraw.”

Mr. Andrews put his fingers together and looked bland.

“An overdraft, Mr. Ghent. Let me see, I think your account is——”

“Oh, all right at present. The point is, I have payments to make during the next three or four months, and in my business trees are sold mostly once a year.”

“Quite so, Mr. Ghent. As a matter of fact I was passing your place only the other day. Plenty of stock, I think.”

“Yes. It has taken me seven years to build the place up. As to orders——”

Mr. Andrews smiled at him.

“Any security to offer us, Mr. Ghent?”

“Yes, if necessary. But my trees are my principal asset.”

“Quite so. And what would the overdraft amount to?”

“Oh, about fifty pounds, perhaps a hundred. I could clear it in the autumn.”

“We should have to charge you interest.”

“How much?”

“Say eight per cent.”

“All right. You see, you can’t hurry the land, sir. I’m not a market gardener or a fruit grower, and going to market every week.”

Inwardly, Mr. Andrews was amused. Integrity, what! Oh, certainly. This dark lad had a touchy conscience. It bristled.

“I think we can meet you, Mr. Ghent. I quite understand the position. I think I may say that if you overdraw on us only for a small sum, we will forego the interest.”

Ghent’s face softened.

“Thank you. I shan’t let you down.”

When Peter walked back to Roper’s Garage the Crabtree car was still waiting outside Messrs. Snape & Sowerby’s. Scattergood, Mr. Crabtree’s chauffeur, was smoking a surreptitious cigarette, and watching the door of No. 10. For, it could not be said that those who laboured for Roger Crabtree, loved

him. Fear him they might, as a petulant little potentate who could and did discharge them on the slightest provocation. Meanwhile, old Crabtree was sitting in the Sowerby armchair, and smoking a Sowerby cigarette, and giving the lawyer his instructions. Mr. Crabtree had in Farley a tenant who had paid no rent for three months and was refusing to quit. He lived in a senile collection of cottages known as "The Rookery," cottages that leaned up against each other like old fellows who needed material support after a noisy night at the pub. Mr. Crabtree had purchased The Rookery, and this particular tenant was a tough customer, with views upon the rights of man and the duties of landlords. He was withholding his rent as a protest, and demanding a new kitchen-range and some attention to the communal cesspool which was spilling itself over the back gardens. Also, he had put in a complaint to the Loddon U.D.C.

"Take the fellow to court and have him put out, Sowerby."

Mr. Sowerby was a pin-faced man, long and thin of nose, and long and thin of chin. He had a tight little mouth, and pin-head eyes. His drab-coloured hair looked as though it had been rolled and watered.

"You think it wise to ignore the complaint, sir?"

"If the fellow's out for trouble, he shall have it. I won't have a Bolshie of that sort on my property. You can write a letter to the U.D.C., if you like, and say that I am prepared to do anything in reason for a decent tenant. But I won't compromise with that scallywag."

Mr. Sowerby moistened thin lips.

"Very good, sir. A man like that can be nothing but a nuisance. Upsets other people."

"Yes, get him out. And there's another matter. Do you know anything about that fellow Ghent who owns the nursery by the Weir Bridge?"

"Not much, sir. Only in a small way of business, I think? Place called Marplot."

"That's it."

"Previous owner went bankrupt. Let me see, it was Temple Manor property originally. Do you happen to be interested?"

"I am. The chap's a bad neighbour, a bit of a pup. I could do with that bit of land."

"Would you like us to make him an offer, Mr. Crabtree, without, of course,

disclosing——?”

“Wait a bit. As a matter of fact, I don’t think the fellow has much bottom. Hanging on by his eyelashes. And this doesn’t look like being a bumper season. You might try and find out, Sowerby, if you can, what the fellow’s position is. It might be easy to push him out.”

“And get the land at a knock-down figure.”

“Yep. It would round off my property. Well, I must be getting on. Running over to my latest estate. Might start one down here some day, Sowerby. Good for the town, what!”

Mr. Sowerby rose to open the door for his client, for Mr. Crabtree’s happiness in squabbling with his neighbours and his love of litigation was of considerable value to the firm of Snape & Sowerby, but though Mr. Crabtree might be a valuable client, Sowerby did not desire to live cheek by jowl with a collection of Crabtree houses.

Scattergood, the Crabtree chauffeur, seeing the cream-coloured door of No. 10 in movement, dropped a cigarette end into the gutter and stepped forward to open the limousine door. It was his duty in winter to tuck a fur rug round his master’s common little legs, and to slip a foot-warmer under his feet, ministrations that were not inspired by affection.

“Will you have the rug, sir?”

“No. Better push along. I’m late.”

Scattergood closed the door, took his place, pulled on his gloves, and started the engine. He wore a plum-coloured livery that did not match the colour of the car. An irreverent friend had referred to it as stewed plums and custard. Scattergood hated that livery as he hated most things connected with The Towers. But chauffeurs’ places were not easy to get, and Scattergood had a wife and family, and after all, the devil you knew was better than the devil you did not know. During his service hours he lived with his tongue in his cheek. He would like to have loved his car, if it hadn’t been too much like a ruddy circus show or a luxury van that delivered capitalistic scent and soap. Also, on this particular morning the old devil was not in the best of tempers, and on such days Scattergood was very conscious of the tyrant who sat behind him. You had to drive both fast and inconsiderately. You must give way to nobody, or you might be cursed, while remaining mute and longing to curse back. The Crabtree chariot held the centre of the road, and the old man did not like other people to pass him. If his car had cost him three thousand guineas, damn it, was he to be outpaced by some cheap little cad in a tinpot Ford?

These irritable and highly competitive drives were trying to Scattergood's nerves.

The yellow Rolls travelled Londonwards, and Mr. Roger Crabtree looked out upon a world that was still unsmirched by the new pilgrim's progress. Scattergood drove fast, and at the end of an hour the new England manifested itself. The Rolls arrived upon one of the new concrete highways. Factories appeared, and derelict fields, and scraps of old orchard where the fruit trees were giving way to contractors' sheds, and all manner of constructive chaos. Here a new bridge was being built, and two huge ramps of raw soil cut across what had been a market-garden. The shell of a cottage still stood, windowless and doorless and waiting for the house-breaker. A row of glasshouses were rotting. Upon the skyline glowed a red smudge, hundreds upon hundreds of little roofs like some aphid blight sucking the greenness out of the landscape. The Rolls left the arterial road and ran up a concrete track towards this new estate. Notice-boards multiplied "The Crabtree Estate." "Buy a Crabtree House." "No Road Charges. We pay the Lawyers." "Parquet Floors." "Why Pay Rent When 17/9 a Week will Buy Your Own House?" "Three Bedrooms—Of Course." "Ladies, Visit our Labour Saving Kitchens." The boards shouted at you as you passed. They were vociferous, blatant.

The Rolls came to rest outside an estate-office, a timber building painted pink and roofed with green tiles. Someone had observed the yellow car's approach, and a man with a baldish head stood waiting on the doorstep. He wore a black coat and vest and striped trousers, and a smile that was a little anxious and wholly ingratiating. He hurried to open the Rolls' door, and his haste was unseemly.

"Good morning, sir."

Crabtree grunted at him.

"Morning, Vowles."

"Lovely spring weather, sir."

Old Crabtree descended and stumped into the office. There are some people to whom you can be rude with impunity, and poor Vowles belonged to that class. He was growing bald and knew it, and in knowing it realized that he might hold his job by the breadth of a hair. His smile was becoming more and more propitiatory, and his eagerness to please both pathetic and a little nauseating. Old Crabtree treated him with contempt. The fellow was so tame that he was not worth kicking.

"How's the job?"

Vowles had pulled a chair back from the desk, and stood bent and ingratiating.

“Won’t you sit down, sir?”

Ass! Mr. Crabtree did not need the suggestion. He could sit down in his own office, and he sat down.

“Where’s the week’s report?”

Mr. Vowles grabbed a typed sheet.

“Here, sir. We haven’t done so badly. Three houses sold in Balmoral Avenue, two in Victoria Drive, and one in Osborne Crescent. I’m meeting two possible purchasers to-day for Nos. 51 and 52 in Jubilee Road.”

Old Crabtree glanced at the report.

“Settled that business with Claytons?”

“About the bricks, sir?”

“Of course.”

“They have apologized, sir.”

“I don’t care a damn about their apologies. Have they made up that delivery?”

“They have promised them for to-day, sir.”

“Promised! Are they here, man?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Get Claytons on the phone for me. If those bricks aren’t here by one o’clock, I’ll cut ’em out of all future contracts.”

Mr. Vowles hurried to the office phone, but as he reached for the receiver the sound of a lorry stopping outside the office drew him to the window. He peered out, smiled, drew a breath of relief.

“Clayton’s lorries, sir.”

“One?”

“No, a fleet of them, sir.”

“Just saved their bacon. Never mind the phone. Go out and see that they’ve got the full order.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Vowles——”

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell those damned lorry drivers not to bark any more of our young trees.”

“I will, sir.”

When Vowles returned Mr. Crabtree dealt with other business matters before setting out on a tour of inspection. “Better come with me, Vowles.” There were two junior clerks in the office’s back room, and the senior member was left in charge. It was Crabtree’s custom to walk through the estate, followed by his chauffeur in the Rolls, so that when Mr. Crabtree had seen all that he wished to see, he could be picked up by the car. Already he had put up more than a hundred houses and bungalows on the Crabtree Estate, and to himself he described them as bright and breezy little places. That he did not realize the horror of the place, its tricky and garish cheapness was not remarkable. He could flatter himself that he knew what people wanted and that he had given them their heart’s desire. Actually, he considered himself a public benefactor, a good citizen who gave employment and spread money around. As for the Crabtree horrors, they were built for him by contract, and their like can be seen in most suburban areas. They had flat faces of brick, plaster, or roughcast, steel-framed windows, cheap stained-glass in the front doors, fantastic front gates with ranged slats painted green and red and blue. Some had gables with deal facings to simulate Tudor work. Some gardens had posts and chains, others flimsy brick walls in which the bricks were arranged in every way but the normal. In fact, some of these walls were fantastically conceived to use up bricklayers’ rubbish. Mr. Crabtree had purchased from a firm of architects the designs and plans for six small houses, and he rang the changes on this sextet, and flattered himself that he had cheated uniformity.

“Crabtree” was Mr. Roger Crabtree’s third estate. He had gone into the business of mass-produced houses soon after the War, and he knew all the tricks of the trade. You put out the work on contract, and having cut your figure to the bone the loss would lie with the contracting firms unless they cut their costs and used the cheapest materials, but that was not Mr. Crabtree’s concern. Business is business. If the people who built his houses chose to use poor bricks and slob them over with plaster or roughcast, and put in unseasoned timber that would warp or crack, the sin was theirs. As for the official world he knew how to deal with it. Sometimes he bullied, sometimes he bribed. Bribery had to be conducted with discretion. Bullying could be more open. They wanted a row, did they? Very well, he was a rich man. He would take ’em to court. He would appeal to the Ministry of Health and demand an inquiry. He was not going to be obstructed by a lot of Jacks-in-



Office.

As to the fundamentals, Roger Crabtree could not be blamed for his reactions to them. He was topical, big business, a totalitarian in commerce. He had an urban mind. He catered for the urban-minded masses, or thought he did. The country mind was ceasing to matter, with all its feeling for a beauty that was free and individual and lovely. The old craftsmen were dying or dead. The exquisite rightness of a domestic architecture that grew out of the soil had given place to the urban splurge, a nasty niceness that is the product of the factory and the machine. For the urban mind is blind to so many things, and does not know it. Mr. Crabtree was blind and did not know it. The people who came to live in his houses thought them lovely, and so they were to the eyes of those who hardly could distinguish one tree from another. That they were Humbug Houses was just part of the modern tragi-comedy.

Mr. Crabtree and Vowles walked towards that part of the estate where houses were being erected. Erected, so aptly described the procedure, and suggested the scenery in a cinema-studio. The yellow Rolls followed them, and so announced to sundry foremen and their workers the approach of the great man. "Look out, lads, the bloody old beggar's bullion-box is coming down the road." The man who had coined that phrase "Bullion Box" might claim a touch of genius. The concrete road ended in a kind of ordered chaos, and a rutted trackway where lorries were unloading bricks. A concrete-mixer, mounds of ballast and of sand, drain-pipes, stacks of tiles, piles of timber left exposed to the weather, decorated what had once been a grass field. Six houses were in various stages of erection. One was being tiled. On two others the bricklayers were working on the upper story, using the cheapest of bricks, whole or in broken oddments. The work was a disgrace, but it would be covered with plaster, and the contractors could argue that the rough surface gave a good key to the plaster. Old Crabtree stumped about, speaking to nobody. He inspected the concrete floats of the last two houses. The material looked more like mud than concrete, but if the official who inspected it had passed the work, well, that was all that was needed. Some of these officials were sympathetic souls.

A foreman approached and saluted the great man.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Had this stuff passed?"

"Yes, sir. The inspector was down yesterday."

Mr. Crabtree grunted.

"Well, if he has O.K.'d it, it's O.K."

After a twenty minutes' inspection Mr. Crabtree re-entered his Rolls, and leaving Vowles to walk back to the office, gave Scattergood his orders.

“Opposition Show. Don't drive in. Park on the railway bridge. After that, Porters Grange for lunch.”

Scattergood was wise as to the procedure to be followed. The Opposition Show was situated less than half a mile from the Crabtree Estate. The Rolls came to rest on the crown of the railway bridge, a most reprehensible parking-place for a car, and Mr. Crabtree was able to survey Canaan. The Opposition Show was not prospering. Most of the houses were neither sold nor let, and work appeared to be at a standstill. Mr. Crabtree gloated. He was somewhat wise as to how competition should be crushed. You out-advertised and undersold the other fellow until you had put him out of business. Then, perhaps, you bought him up as a bankrupt concern, and found yourself in the happy position of being able to control a monopoly.

Old Crabtree rapped on the glass partition, and Scattergood drove on, knowing that his master had seen all that he wished to see. Temple Towers lay back and cogitated. Yes, free competition was the sap of life, provided you were able to drain the other fellow's juices. Cunning and cash. And Mr. Crabtree's thoughts travelled homewards and hovered menacingly over that parcel of ground that he coveted. Yes, that was an idea. If young Ghent wouldn't sell and get out, the obvious thing to do was to establish an opposition show next door to him, and squelch the young gentleman with some healthy competition.

“Damn it, I'll do it,” thought Mr. Crabtree. “If he won't sell, I'll start a nursery next door. I've got the land, and a frontage. Yes, that's the idea. I'm a man of ideas.”

## VI

Ghent's bedroom window overlooked the river, and being both an early riser and a good sleeper he did not trouble greatly about blind or curtains, nor would anyone in the outer world be likely to show interest in the cut or colour of his pyjamas. But Mrs. Maintenance had a passion for the closing of windows. She said that a shut window kept the moths out, which no doubt was true, and Peter, feeling the room airless, went to the casement to find it closed. He was naked to the waist, and as he opened the casement, and let the fresh breath of the night in, he was moved to stay for a moment, leaning on the sill. He could hear the river tumbling over the weir, and see stars pricking the sky over Farley village, and the dark outlines of Folly Farm. The clock of Farley church struck ten, and Ghent, with his eyes on Folly Farm, remembered that it was no longer an empty house. But the place was dark, as dark as it had been during the last year, which struck him as strange. Had the lady with the frightened eyes and the honey-coloured hair borrowed his matches to no purpose? Or was it a case of love and early to bed?

He was about to turn away when he saw a single point of light blink out in the dark house. It appeared to come from one of the upper rooms. It was in movement, like a candle being carried, and flickeringly in a draught. Suddenly it grew still. It had found a resting place on table or bureau, but no blind was drawn, and the tiny flame was like a pin-prick in a dark surface. A few seconds later he saw a second little flame shining in the window of another room; it moved and became still. So, not only had she been minus matches, but Folly Farm was living on candles. Its home-produced gas installation had always been temperamental.

He stood watching the two lights, and perhaps wondering about them. And who were his new neighbours? My lady with the honey-coloured hair did not look like an Arcadian. Rather an attractive little person, and with her slimness and her hare's eyes, and her quick, birdlike movements, mysterious and appealing. Yes, he asked for mystery in a woman. Then, one of the candle flames went out, but the other remained alight. Did that mean——? But Ghent found such conjectures leading him into troubled waters. He, too, wanted——

His own candle was burning beside his bed. He left the window, put on his jacket, and slipping into bed, blew out the candle. The uncurtained window

was a pale oblong, and in it he seemed to see, not the face of a woman, but old Crabtree's ominous mug. Damn the old bandit! He turned on his side and willed himself to fall asleep.

Ghent woke with a stiff back and shoulders and a headache, for though a young man may flout Nature, the lady will have the last word. Peter took two aspirins and no bacon for breakfast, and running out the old Morris set forth for Loddon in quest of a pump and a hose. It was not a romantic quest, and he was not feeling romantic, but he had not driven a hundred yards along the highroad before he saw ahead of him a figure in a flowery frock. For the moment he thought it was Mary Lynwood, and he was in no mood for such strong medicine, but as he overtook the figure he realized that it did not move as Mary moved, and that its hair was the colour of ripe corn.

Should he stop and offer her a lift? He knew that casual fellows who offered lifts on a country road were regarded as gay gentlemen who preferred blondes, but it seemed churlish not to dare the courtesy, nor was he feeling gay.

She was walking on the path by the left hand hedge, and as the car slowed up beside her, he saw her head turn with a startled quickness.

"Excuse me, can I be of any use?"

She looked troubled.

"Oh, I am only going into Loddon."

"But Loddon is three miles."

"I know, but——"

He was wondering why that lazy fellow who owned a superfine car was letting her walk to Loddon. Had he departed early on Mondayish affairs? And should he press this courtesy upon her?

"I'm driving into Loddon. You can get a bus back. There's a bus from Loddon to Farley."

She stood hesitant.

"Thank you so much. Yes, it will save me time."

He leaned over and opened the near door for her. She seemed in too serious a mood to smile at him, and he wondered why. Was marriage so solemn a state? Meanwhile, he had to watch the road with care, for the Loddon road was

joined by a number of country lanes out of which cattle and farm-carts and unimaginative rustics on bicycles had a way of emerging without warning. Moreover, his old car's brakes were not what they had been.

There was silence between them. She sat with her hands in her lap, but once or twice she glanced at him with eyes that seemed to ask what manner of man he was. She had to confess that she had been rather a fool about men in estimating their inward values, but this lad who grew trees seemed to be different. His silence interested her. It was not the silence of an uncouth and clumsy self-consciousness. She felt that he was sad and worried about something; just as she was.

She asked him a sudden question.

“Do you always work on Sundays?”

The question startled him. He glanced at her gravely.

“No, not as a rule. Special circumstances.”

“Such as——?”

“Oh, it's very dry, you know, been terribly dry ever since January. And if one's trees die on one——”

She had met his eyes for a moment, and something in them had touched her.

“Yes, it must be rather tragic. One hates things dying.”

“Yes, when you have grown them. Besides——”

“It means—a loss.”

“Very much so.”

He glanced at her hands. They were beautiful hands, slim and long fingered, but they were not the hands of a worker. He was supposing so many things about her, that she was married, that she was well off, that even the clothes she wore came from Paris or London. Yes, she was somewhat exotic, and yet, she suggested innocence. She was not like Mary Lynwood, full of a kind of crass, vigorous splendour. She looked fragile, sensitive, bothered about life. She appealed.

She said: “I hope you will have rain.”

She too was looking at his hands, big and brown, resting on the wheel.

“It's on the knees of the gods.”

Her eyes widened.

“You don’t believe it isn’t just chance?”

“No, somehow not. Life seems rather too miraculous for such a preposterous, blind, blundering theory.”

And then he smiled.

“God or no God, I’m buying a pump and a hose.”

They were silent again, and each was thinking that it was rather strange that in five minutes they should have met at those cross-roads where the sign-post points nowhere. You just groped intuitively. And for months her gropings had led her into blind country where you saw no sign of that other, mysterious presence. He attracted her. She seemed to divine other strengths in him, the compassionate vision which, as a woman, she craved for.

Her voice came suddenly.

“One does want to believe that there is some sort of meaning——”

Her voice died away. She felt him looking at her in a way that was different.

“Yes, I know. Otherwise, there’s bitterness. One feels that a nasty sort of joke is being played on us.”

“Yes, one does.”

So, they came through the Barham beeches to Loddon bridge, and crossing it he asked her where she would like to be put down. Oh, anywhere in the main street. And where could she catch the Farley bus? Just by the market-hall. When the car stopped, he got out quickly and opened the door for her. They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment.

“Thank you so much.”

He smiled.

Peter bought his pump and his hose at the local ironmonger’s, and putting them in the back-seat, drove home, and on the way he found himself thinking more of the woman who had sat beside him than of the drought. Strange how close they had come to each other in so short a time! But her eyes and her hands and her hair were, what was the word? Rather exquisite! Yes, she was not a Mary Lynwood. Her delicate texture appealed to him as did the shape, colour and perfume of a flower. She was mysterious. Her eyes had a fey look, as though they looked both back and into the future, and were troubled by what they saw.

Ghent and the men spent the rest of the morning driving an old oak post into the river bed close to the bank, and attaching the pump to it, and Peter, who had taken his turn with the beetle, found that a headache can be more bothersome than heartache.

Said George, who was given to splurging into engaging candour:

“You look a bit yaller, sir.”

Ghent felt it. He grinned at George.

“Not hang-over, my lad. Too many cans of water yesterday, not beer.”

“No such luck,” said Garland. “Fancy azaleas given a bucket of beer. Get up, dance, would they?”

“No, go off bloom, more like,” said Bob.

Ghent could not do justice to Mrs. Maintenance’s dinner. He took two more aspirins, and the afternoon off, retreating to the shade of the Camperdown elm and a deck-chair. It was here that he spent the lazy hours of his Sunday afternoon, and the only difference was that his Sunday had become Monday.

Instead of going to sleep he found himself lazily regarding the garden of Folly Farm across the river, and suddenly his two problem people appeared there as on a stage. They were bound for the hammock under the shade of the limes, the man walked ahead, like the king beast, the woman following, carrying cushions and a rug. The man got into the hammock, and had the cushions arranged for him, and was covered with the rug. The hammock oscillated gently. Ghent saw the woman place a garden table close to the hammock. She returned to the house and reappeared with a glass which she set on the table so that the man could reach it.

Their voices came to him faintly in the summer stillness, but he could not distinguish the words.

“Do try that, Max.”

“I don’t want the damned stuff.”

A meal that should have been romantic had, apparently, given him acute dyspepsia. Her cooking, of course! Or had those confounded people poisoned the pie before leaving? He had been sick in the night, and had eaten no breakfast, and a glass of gin before lunch had not acted as a charm. He was

peevish and irritable and talking about ptomaine poisoning. Everything had tasted of paraffin! He had told her to throw that damned pie away, though it was quite a good pie, and she had eaten of it without disaster.

“Feel warmer now?”

“Yes, just a bit.”

She tucked him up, and Ghent was of the opinion that she was spoiling the fellow. Gross egoist.

“Would you like a doctor?”

“No. It wouldn’t be very good policy, would it, when we had decided against social complications?”

She stood observing him, one hand to her cheek. Poor dear, he did look very yellow, and the little baldish patch on the crown of his head which he took such trouble to camouflage showed beneath streaks of thin black hair. And suddenly, she found herself considering him dispassionately, and with a ruthlessness that shocked her when she realized its significance.

She gave the hammock a gentle push, and he snapped at her.

“Don’t do that. Makes me feel more squeamish.”

“Sorry, Max.”

“I’ll try a nap.”

“Yes, darling, do.”

She left him, and taking a chair, sat down at a little distance from him, with her head in the shade and her feet in the sun. If the river suggested anything to her, it symbolized the way life drifted on and past you, inevitably and with a fallacious tranquillity that lured you into hoping that your storms and floods had ceased. But life, like the river, had its change of levels and its weirs, some crisis in its course over which the water tumbled. Life, as she knew it, had been a series of crises, of shipwrecks from which she had escaped, wet and dishevelled and exhausted. She was very tired. Married at twenty she had become a widow at three and twenty, and tragically so. With the little money that had been left her she had opened a hat-shop in Kensington, and facing disaster, had found a sympathetic friend. He had taught her that she should remain the mistress of her shop, provided—— But confronted by that elderly sensualist, she had let both shop and intrigue go. Yes, it had all been very shabby and sordid, and she happened to be fastidious, and if that was adventure she had prayed for, she preferred clean dullness.



But placid and eventless days had eluded her. She had become a secretary, only to find that her looks did not allow such a relationship to remain unemotional. Then, she had met Max, a man who went about complaining that his wife did not understand him, and who had been comforted by half a dozen successive sympathetic women. That she had come somewhere about the seventh in the list had not been revealed to her, for, in spite of her experience, life had left her surprisingly innocent. She wanted to give. She wanted to sit down in a comfortable chair and stay put, and not to have to play the amateur pretty lady to the promiscuous male. Max had talked sententiously of divorce. He had dangled the apple of divorce before a number of women. She had not suspected it. But now, she was beginning to understand that when the sense magic pales, and a man becomes petulant and rude—— Yes, her stretch of tranquil water had proved elusive. She was sliding inevitably towards one of those wet crises from which she might again emerge breathless and dishevelled. A poor, pretty jade's progress!

Max was asleep in the hammock. She heard him snoring. No man is impressive when he snores, and Max Broster, brilliant worldling though he was, was ceasing to be impressive. Was this flaccid-mouthed, stertorous male one of the city Olympians who set companies afloat, and backed plays, and was a golden noise in the cinematograph world? She left her chair and went to stand beside the hammock, and realizing that she could look upon this sleeping babe without compassion, was shocked and nauseated. If you loved a man adequately and completely, you could love him when he snored, and when he had a boil on his poor neck, and when his ridiculous trouser-buttons were being temperamental. You loved him in any sort of trouble. He whimpered, and you ran to comfort him as you rushed to console your own small child that had fallen down and bloodied its little knees.

She hated herself, despised herself.

She accused herself of bearing with Max Broster, not because she loved him, but for the material things he represented. Yes, she was just a kept woman who sold her smiles and a suborned sympathy for frocks and a house and servants and a bank account. Hers was a business concern, a sex-shop, a relationship that was as old as time, and yet, somehow, strangely and flagrantly new to her. She, who had always been so fastidious about her hair and her face and her finger-nails, felt soiled.

Ghent, who was watching her instead of going to sleep, and who, being a creature of sentiment, was misconstruing her hoverings about the sleeping

figure in the hammock, saw her wander away towards the boat-house. The punt emerged from its kennel of shadow and slid out into the sunlight. She poled it into mid-stream, and then stood with the pole trailing in the water. She looked about her, and saw a green and empty world, nor was she aware of the man concealed under the drooping elm. She had left the paddles in the boat-house. Three hundred yards or so away the weir maintained a rolling underchant. The stream was flowing sluggishly but with inevitableness towards that curve of water and the turbulent weir pool above the bridge.

She could not swim. Strange but true in these days when the whole world takes to the water.

Ghent sat up sharply in his chair.

She had dropped the punt-pole into the river.

He stood up. Surely there were paddles in the boat?

He saw her kneel down, and fold her hands, almost like a figure surrendering to fate.

He was up and running. He reached the bank.

“I say, the weir. Haven’t you a paddle?”

He was aware of her face turned towards him. It had a kind of vacancy. She did not move or answer.

He had his shoes off in five seconds. He was in shorts and shirt. He waded in and swam to where the pole was floating, and recovering it, turned downstream in pursuit of the punt. It was drifting broadside across the river. She was kneeling there, facing him as though paralysed by life’s interventions.

She saw his head drawing nearer. It seemed to her that his face had a young fierceness, and she wanted to weep.

He reached the punt, gripped the gunwale with his free hand, stared.

“I say, you know, the weir’s only just down there.”

She stared back at him.

“Yes, I know.”

“Can you manage? I might climb in, but I’m rather wet.”

“Yes, I can manage. Thank you, so much.”

She leaned over and took the pole from him, and again their eyes met.

“How did you manage to drop it?”

Her eyes fell.

“Oh, I just dropped it. Thank you so much.”

## VII

**M**ax Broster was still snoring, when, having put the punt away, she sneaked back to her chair. Yes, sneak was the word. She was conscious of an inward numbness, as though she had been beaten, yet with no physical ache to assure her of its reality. She could not say why, but she felt profoundly humiliated, as though the last shred of virtue had gone out of her. Virtue! Detestable word! Her poor, silly tussle with fate had ended in frustration and futility.

“How did you manage to drop the pole?”

“Oh, I just dropped it.”

What did he think? That she was just the complete and fumbling fool? But what did it matter what he thought? The sun had moved in the heavens, and her chair was in the full shade. She shivered slightly, and moved it into the sunlight. The essential, throbbing I in her seemed to flinch at the thought of its narrow escape from that damp and smothering darkness. By now, she would have been on the weir pool or drifting beyond it, pale and submerged, or floating under the willows. She put a finger to her mouth and bit it as a protest against picturesque self-pity. And Max was snoring like the last trump blown by some anthropomorphic angel whose baby face had never been scorched by the terrors that afflict poor mortals.

Ghent, trotting back to the cottage to change, had been barked at protestingly by Bunter, a Bunter who, for strange canine, ethical reasons, gave his afternoons to Mrs. Maintenance. “What’s this, my master?”—and Mrs. Maintenance, bobbing out to see what the pother was about, caught Ghent at the foot of the stairs.

“Lorks, Mr. Peter, what have you been doing?”

Ghent had a strange face upon him, the face of a young man who could not tell whether he had looked upon the mask of Tragedy or Comedy.

“Oh, just been in the river.”

“And in those clothes!”

“Yes, someone lost a punt-pole, and I had to swim for it.”

Mrs. Maintenance took that piece of news back with her into the kitchen, knowing somehow that it would spoil the nap she indulged in after her washing-up. She would pull down the blind, settle herself in the armchair, put her feet up on another, fold her red comfortable hands over her tummy, and feel that all was well with the world. But, a punt-pole dropped into the river! Only some silly wench would do such a thing. Besides, Mr. Peter would not be likely to take a ducking to recover a male pole. Moreover, the wench, whoever she was, might not be so silly. Mrs. Maintenance suspected all young women of having designs upon her Mr. Peter, especially young women who wore trousers or practically nothing at all, those bits who bathed down at The Blue Lagoon. Bold-faced gigs, that's what they were, and Mr. Peter was in Mrs. Maintenance's eyes the brave, lovely and defenceless hero. Hadn't she caught young women ringing the bell and asking to see the nursery? Nursery indeed! They were after her handsome lad, and adventures that did not end in christenings. Which goes to prove that Mrs. Maintenance had no high opinion of the modern young woman. Bits, that's what they were, with powder and paint and other useful etceteras concealed like serpents in their vanity-bags.

Peter was in the bathroom, towelling himself, after dropping his wet clothes on the floor. Bunter, sniffing at them inquisitively, cocked an eye and one ear at his master. Why this thusness? He watched his master knot the towel round him like a loin-cloth and march into his bedroom. Bunter followed, and sat down in the middle of the floor with his long nose drooping and his hairy forehead black with profound, doggy thought. His master opened a drawer and took out a clean shirt, and slipping it over his head, walked to the window. Bunter's head cocked itself with a characteristic and interested obliqueness. Peter's fingers were doing up shirt-buttons, but his eyes were looking across the river at the group under the lime trees. The man was still asleep in the hammock. The girl was sitting in the sunlight, with her throat showing, and her face turned towards the sky.

Ghent's fingers fastened the last shirt-button.

Had she dropped that pole on purpose?

If so——

But why?

And if she had chosen to go drifting to the weir while the man was asleep in the hammock, then assuredly he, Peter Ghent, had misread the whole meaning of the sentimental scene. Problem people! Yes, and the first impression she had made upon him, that of a sensitive creature with frightened eyes?

He turned about, and going to the hanging-cupboard in a corner of the room, took down a pair of grey flannel trousers, and stepped into them. More buttons demanded attention, but while his fingers functioned, his face was turned again to the window. He became aware of the strip of sunlight between the figure in the chair and the man asleep in the hammock. Did that little stretch of sunlit sward mean anything? He wondered.

Max Broster woke with a gulp and a grievance against life that had its origin in a disordered stomach. He lay and looked at the green canopy above him, and was confronted, as a man in his state often is on waking, by the recollection of certain exasperating and untoward circumstances that had happened in the City. Who would have expected a firm like Gunter & Rosentein to founder at the very moment when he was involved in a new flotation? It was most damnably awkward just when the particular picture company in which he was interested was undergoing what the financial euphemists describe as reconstruction. He had had a run of bad luck, and as he lay there very conscious of inward disharmonies, he was moved to reflect that his luck had changed since he had been associated with Renata Strangeways. Yes, Irene might be a bit of a bitch, but he had always managed to pull off his deals in her company. Rows, yes, but they had been stimulating rows. And Irene could be damned good fun when she was not in a temper, and even her temper was stimulating. It had a kick. She could mix a cocktail better than any woman he knew. Pah, why did everything taste of paraffin? Besides, Irene had two thousand a year of her own.

He felt peevish. He wanted to be made much of, petted. If you put a pretty friend into a house and opened a banking account for her, surely she should exercise all her feminine functions in your favour? And where was Rena? He twisted over in the hammock, and craned his head round the cushions. He saw an empty chair, and a stretch of sunlit grass going down to the river, but no blonde angel waiting to minister to his moods. Confound it, she ought to be about when he was feeling seedy. Women were so damned selfish!

He swung his legs out of the hammock and sat up.

“Hallo, Rena.”

But the swaying movement of the hammock seemed to exaggerate his feeling of squeamishness, and lying sideways, he put his head back on the cushions. Where was the woman? Attending to her face or something? And what was the time? He pulled out his watch. Nine and a half minutes past four. Perhaps she was getting tea ready. Tea! More butter that tasted of paraffin! He

could manage a cup of tea with a slice of lemon in it.

And then he saw her. She was coming from the direction of the Folly Farm orchard, and beyond the circle of shadow thrown by the limes. She moved with a kind of languor, and her face was turned towards the river. Sauntering about and dreaming when he was in pain! Yes, most certainly he was in pain. He could feel one of his sick headaches developing.

He called to her sharply “Rena,” and saw her head turn with a little jerk. She stood still, staring. Her eyes looked big and strange.

“Rena.”

She moved slowly into the shadow of the limes.

“What about some tea?”

“Tea?”

She repeated the word vaguely, and her vagueness annoyed him. Hang it all, he did expect some active sympathy!

“Yes, I could manage a cup with some lemon in it, and no sugar.”

She appeared strangely uninterested in his needs. She turned and stood looking over the river.

“I’m afraid we haven’t any lemons.”

“What! No lemons!”

“No.”

Well, really! How futile and inefficient of her! And she had not asked him whether he had slept, and whether his poor stomach felt less queasy. Almost he blurted: “What the devil do I pay you for?”

He sat up, and clasped his forehead.

“Got any aspirin?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve a cracking head coming on. Get me a cup of tea, no milk or sugar, and a couple of aspirins, there’s a good girl.”

She looked at him again with those strange, wide eyes of hers, and then, without one comforting word, walked past the hammock towards the house. He was annoyed. Sulky, was she! What the devil had she to be sulky about? Good lord, hadn’t he given her——? But women were all alike. Selfish, temperamental, unintelligible creatures. The he-man stuff was the only

treatment that worked with most of them.

Headache and heartache! It did not occur to him that a woman might be feeling desperate after her failure to give expression to her despair, that something in her was crying out for comradeship and comfort. She wanted to be loved, not for her finger-nails and her frocks, but for that which was in her, that which was so desperately lonely.

Ghent felt restless, for the aspirin and that ducking in the river seemed to have cured his headache, and being a man of his hands, was moved to use them when the spirit vexed the flesh. There were jobs ready to his hand, though he did not belong to a generation that spoke of the deed being the better for the day. Life on the land allows you no interludes save those you impose upon yourself. Propagation, soft wood cuttings, why not? He had meant to check for himself some of the latest experiments that had been conducted at Wisley on the effects of certain chemicals in solution upon root production. He had the stuff ready in his little lab, which was no more than an old kitchen table under one of the windows in his office. He collected his vasculum and a knife, and going out wandered about among the young shrubs, taking the green wood slips from them. He selected specimens of cistus, ceanothus, daphne, caryopteris, lycesteria, and a succulent salvia with a pink flower that was only half hardy. In a shady place by an old tree trunk grew the Alpine clematis, *Atragene Alpina*, though its exquisite pale blue flowers had become balls of white fluff. He took some slips from it, and carried his collection to the old red brick building beyond the weeping elm.

Sitting down at the table with an assortment of little glass jars, cuttings, labels and his bottle of solution, he got to work, but though his fingers were busy, his thoughts were elsewhere. Even the texture of the young leaves which he stripped from the twigs provoked in him other sense impressions. Being what he was, he was sensitive to the varying textures of the live things among which he lived. The cistus leaves in particular, with their soft downiness, were more than leaves. Epidermis, skin, the delicate, creamy bloom of a particular skin, a woman's skin, neither velvet nor vellum, for both were dead surfaces. Yes, she had one of those perfect skins that seem to light up from within, and are associated with certain types of fairness, very delicately coloured with a tinge of gold in it, warm and blemishless. And her hair! It waved back from forehead and temples with a liquid gentleness. It had for him a strange, innocent chastity. Even that little honey-coloured bob over the nape of her neck seemed virginal.



Chastity!

He upset one of his bottles and frowned over it. Clumsy ass! What was the matter with his hands? Chastity indeed, with that fellow loafing in the hammock under the lime trees! But why had she dropped the punt-pole into the river? Frightened eyes. Oh, damn, he was getting sloppy.

Science describes, but does not explain, and having sacrificed to science and planted his little cuttings in their bottles, he suffered nature to have her way. He took his gun and the dog, and following the river bank, saw that the man had left the hammock for a chair, and was smoking a cigarette. Did the fellow never use his legs, but only sit or lie? His partner in the problem play was not to be seen. Ghent strolled on past Folly Island, and on this summer evening the river seemed to swell exultantly between its green banks. Here were the lushness and the wetness that he coveted for his trees. God, for one of those glittering days when drenching showers poured from the passing clouds, and the sun shone out between the showers, and the dry and thirsty land steamed! He walked on as far as the wire fence to discover whether Temple Towers had made another attack upon his wire netting.

On the other side of the boundary fence Mr. Roger Crabtree's park was producing a magnificent weed-crop, docks, thistles and ragwort. They would be left uncut to go to seed, and birds and the wind would carry the seeds to Peter's land. But then, old Crabtree and the commercialists catered for the urban crowd. Foul land did not matter to the city. Mr. Crabtree was a successful person who developed estates, and made much money out of his hideous little houses. What were a few weeds, after all, especially if they were a nuisance to a hostile neighbour? And was Lady Melissa right about the Crabtree world? Did nature prefer the competitive people, the ruthless exploiters of every opportunity? Yes, Ghent could suppose that humanitarianism was a disease of the hypersensitive moderns, a form of senility, and that England had been made by its Crabtrees and might be saved by them, Iron men, who kept sentiment like a tame beast in a back garden.

Well, whatever nature's plan might be, if she had a plan, he would choose to stand with Temple Manor rather than with Temple Towers. He preferred pity to property and beauty to a scheme of things that was brutal and bathotic. Possibly he was wrong in thinking that man might find other menaces to struggle against than the menace of brother man. What of disease and the insect world and the catastrophic whimsies of the weather? Even the house-fly and the mosquito and the aphid were doughty enemies. So, indeed were docks!

Should he report old Crabtree to the proper official for allowing forbidden weeds to flourish?

When Ghent had beaten his boundaries and assured himself that there were no other breaches in the fence, he came back by the Green Way, making a leisurely stroll of it as he looked over his plantations. Coming to one of the alleys that commanded the Folly Farm garden he saw that Max Broster had deserted the hammock, and was taking a little gentle exercise on the lawn, with a mashie and a little ball of white fluff. Ghent stood to watch him. Mr. Problem Man across the river appeared to be a little bit off his game. Sometimes the white ball soared in the air, but more often it dribbled feebly across the grass. An occasional sod went flying and suddenly, the man over yonder lost his temper like a fractious child. He took three ineffectual sashes at the woolly white ball, and failing to gather it cleanly on the club-face, sent the mashie whirling into the lime trees, where, apparently, it stuck. But that was not the end of his display. He kicked the white ball into the river, and watching it float away, took out a cigarette-case and lit a cigarette.

Ghent was amused, but there was grimness in the mood. What absurd kids men were, both with watering-cans and golf clubs! Even the most philosophic souls could grow petulant over a billiard-table. Human vanity would not be conjured.

But Mr. Problem Man was calling to his mate.

“Rena, Rena.”

She did not appear, and Ghent saw Max Broster walk irritably towards the house.

“Rena. Damn the woman! Where the——?”

He disappeared into the house, and Ghent strolled on, wondering whether the day’s most significant happening might not have been inspired by a sensitive protest against a man’s bad temper. Disillusionment and sleep, the long, blessed sleep? But surely, the reaction was too violent, unless she was more vividly sensitive and unhappy than most women.

The virile States will have it that young men are made for love and war, and historically they may be right in their realism, but life on the land breeds a rhythm of its own, and your grower of corn or of trees is a somewhat static person.

Ghent was undressing when he heard voices and another sound coming from across the river. The night was profoundly still, and going to the bedroom window, he listened.

The woman's voice said: "Don't, Max. Please go away. I'm not feeling like that."

"Damn it, don't be silly. Come on. Open."

"I won't."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"I tell you I won't."

He hammered at her door, and hurting his knuckles, used the toe of a slipper.

"Come on, open up. What the devil do you think I came down here for?"

"My dear, haven't you any pity? I'm a person, not a——"

"What the devil's the matter with you to-day?"

"I'm feeling dead. Please leave me alone, Max."

There was silence, and Ghent, leaning against the window-sill, waited and watched and listened. He could see the two windows lit up, and presently one grew dark, but in the other room the candle remained alight.

He guessed that the light was in her room. She was keeping the little flame burning, as though she was afraid of the dark.

## VIII

The morning turned out grey, a gloomy day, but when Ghent looked at the sky he knew it would not rain. This year tantalized you with clouds that were udderless and from which no milk of kindness poured. It gave you winds at gale force, and shrivelled leaves and tortured trees.

Ghent and Bob Fanshaw met in the yard.

“Think it will rain, Bob?”

“Might give us a mizzle, sir, not more.”

“Well, we had better get busy.”

Ghent had bought a hundred yards of cheap hose at six pounds, fifteen shillings, and the pump had cost him thirty shillings, another bite from his bank balance. It seemed rather a futile business this pumping. The hose would reach only a small portion of the nursery, and the water had to be pumped into a galvanized tank into which cans could be dipped. It was like trying to water the Sahara with an ear-syringe. They might be able to save some of the smaller and more precious trees, and the young rhododendrons and azaleas, but the rest of the nursery would have to take its chance. Nothing but rain, and heavy rain would count.

Ghent took first turn at the pump. He was filling the tank for the men’s cans, but the pump did not throw water sufficiently fast to keep the tank at dipping-level. Every now and again the men came down to fill their cans at the river. Chug, chug, chug, chug. Ghent changed hands at every thirty strokes or so of the semi-rotary pump. It was a monotonous business. He looked at the sky, at Folly Farm, at the river. How tantalizing was all that water! If only he could spill a few tons of it on to the thirsty soil!

He saw the problem man’s car parked just outside the white garden-railings of Folly Farm. The man himself appeared in the porch, carrying a brown leather suit-case. Ghent saw him bundle the case into the car’s interior, and go back to the house. He reappeared in a few seconds with a golf bag and an attaché-case, and this time he was wearing his black, operatic hat. A departure obviously, and an early one, and was the lady going too? There seemed to be no signs of her, and Ghent, suddenly moved by an impulse that was not wholly

personal, left the pump and walked round the cottage and down the lane to the main road. He heard the engine of the car come to life, and the rough and impatient meshing of the first gear. Max Broster was making for the high road. The car swung out and turned to take the bridge and was baulked there by somebody's cows that were being driven to new pastures.

The Broster car had no time to gather speed before it reached the lane, and Ghent, standing there, had a good look at the driver. His natural prejudices were piqued by what he saw, for prejudices can be so much more satisfying and valid than principles. Sallow and supercilious! The Broster profile provoked all that was insurgent in Peter Ghent. Yes, a supercilious, superfine, selfish-looking devil. The particular car, too, was priced at fifteen hundred guineas. A cad's car! We like to think what we wish to think, and antipathy is more than a virtue, for virtue can be so negative.

Ghent returned to the pump, but while he swung the handle to and fro, his thoughts were elsewhere, trespassing. What was the relationship between his two problem people? And was it any concern of his? He could suppose that they were married, though Peter did not belong to a generation that assumed cohabitation and holy wedlock to be synonymous. Certainly, that supercilious fellow's easy-osy selfishness suggested matrimony. And suddenly he felt angry with himself. Was he not poking his fingers into other people's private affairs like a boy exploring a honey-pot? He did not want to think of her in that sort of way.

He grew restless. He felt bored with swinging the pump-handle to and fro. He shouted to Garland.

“George, come and take a turn.”

Garland relieved him, and Ghent changed to carrying cans over the dry, cloddy soil. It seemed to hiss when you poured water on it; but there was satisfaction in giving drink to these live and thirsty things. He and Bob passed and repassed each other in the rows. The chug-chug of the pump kept up a rhythmic sing-song.

“How long is this sort of thing going on, Bob?”

Fanshaw was gloomy.

“Might be till Doomsday. Wonder how much we shall have left to shift this autumn?”

Ghent rallied him.

“No use being a Jeremiah, Bob.”

Bob's face suggested that the prophet had not been compelled to carry cans hither and thither while some fat and sententious god sat up above on a cloud and watched him.

About ten o'clock Ghent heard the bell ring at the iron gates of his Show Piece. He put down his can, went for his coat.

"All right. I'll go, Bob."

Ghent heard Bunter barking, and Mrs. Maintenance's please-step-inside voice. Mrs. Maintenance had gone to the gate, and provided that she did not find an adventurous "Bit" waiting there, she could coo like a dove. "Yes, please step inside, sir. Mr. Ghent's in the nursery. Yes, this is a lovely piece, isn't it?" For though drought ravaged the land, Ghent continued to dress his shop-window, and at the moment it was gay with cistus bushes and young ceanothus grown as standards and some late flowering rhododendrons. Mrs. Maintenance met him by the gateway in the treillage. A gentleman had come to look round, and appeared to be interested in Peter's cistus show.

Ghent found him bending over a bush. He was long and lean and colourless, and dressed in grey tweeds. His chin and nose were sharp and thin under his grey felt, and though Ghent had a feeling that he had seen him before somewhere he could not place his visitor.

"Good morning. Mr. Ghent?"

"Yes, sir. Do you wish to look round?"

The gentleman in grey pointed a long, thin finger at a particular bush.

"Nice thing—that."

"Yes, *Ladaniferus*, the true Green Cistus, sir."

"Hardy?"

"Oh, quite reasonably so, sir. Best in full sun, of course, with some shelter."

The visitor produced a note-book and wrote down the name.

"My hobby happens to be roses, Mr. Ghent, but I am developing a small piece of land, an addition, you understand. I rather fancy a bank of cistuses."

"Would you like one of my catalogues, sir?"

"Yes, I think so. May I look round?"

"Of course, sir. I'll take you round myself."

“Thank you.”

Peter collected a catalogue from the office. They were precious, and Ghent could not afford to spread them broadcast, but his visitor seemed to be a knowledgeable person, and not one of those trying individuals who wasted your time and a catalogue, and sent in no order. Ghent paused at the upper end of the Green Way, though its turf was ceasing to be green, save where clover and yarrow defied the drought.

“Any particular thing you fancy, sir. I’m afraid most of the early flowering shrubs are over. This freak spring, you know.”

His visitor was poking his nose into the catalogue.

“Yes, exceedingly difficult year. I may need a few special conifers, and I’m thinking of putting in a new hedge. Those blue cypresses.”

“Allumii, sir?”

“Yes, that’s the breed. Something about four feet.”

Ghent was not eager to show him that particular plantation, for it did not look hopeful, but his visitor appeared to be a persistent and meticulous soul. He sauntered, here, there, and everywhere on his long stilts of legs, and his nose was like a pointer when things were not quite as they should be.

“You seem to have suffered a good deal, Mr. Ghent.”

“We have, sir, frost and drought together.”

“I see you are having to water.”

“Doing what we can.”

“Dear, dear, a most disappointing year.”

His visitor was a little sorry for Ghent, but he was making this perambulation in the course of his professional duties. He saw Peter’s sick Allumiis, poked his nose at them, and looked dubious.

“Will they survive, Mr. Ghent?”

“Some of them, I hope, sir.”

“Not a very safe proposition, I’m afraid.”

“We have younger trees.”

“Yes, but I rather wanted the larger ones. You cannot guarantee, of course  
\_\_\_\_\_”

“We should not send out moribund trees, sir.”

“No, no, of course not.”

They returned towards the cottage, and Ghent, who was finding his visitor a little depressing, asked him the obvious question.

“Where is your garden, sir? Far away?”

“No, near Loddon, Mr. Ghent. Well, well, I’m afraid I have taken up a lot of your time.”

“Not at all, sir. Would you like to leave your name?”

“My name is Sowerby.”

“Sowerby? Of course, I thought I——”

“I hope I shall be able to send you an order.”

Peter showed Mr. Sowerby out knowing him now for what he was, the senior partner of Snape & Sowerby, but it did not occur to Ghent that the lawyer’s visit had been prompted by any other motive than the desire to purchase trees. Mr. Sowerby got into his car, and drove by way of Farley and the Marbridge road to Temple Towers. It was a circuitous route, and Mr. Sowerby was not altogether happy about it. Lawyer and horticulturist were in opposition, and Sowerby had liked young Ghent. Bad luck this drought. Particularly disastrous for people on the land.

Sowerby found Mr. Crabtree playing clock-golf with his daughter. Mr. Crabtree was a man who would cheat at games, if given the chance, wheedle his croquet ball into a more promising position, or call a ball out at tennis when it was in on the line. He hated being beaten, and his daughter was beating him, but then, she was Crabtree.

“Ha, Sowerby, any news?”

They left Irene to play solus, and strolled across to a very elaborate rustic summer-house with stained-glass windows.

“I’ve just been over young Ghent’s nursery.”

“Oh, you have!”

“Yes, I wanted to see some trees. I’m afraid he is having a rather rough time.”

Mr. Crabtree stared.

“Afraid! I’m your client, Sowerby, not that young Bolshie in shorts.”



Mr. Sowerby smiled, moistened his lips, and said: "Quite so."

She hated grey weather. All the unhappy things that had overtaken her in life had chosen grey days for their incidence. And a wind was rising. She saw it ruffling the willows and the water. Wind and grey skies together made summer seem shabby. Yes, she could suppose that she was a useless kind of creature; the person whom the social reformers called a parasite.

How nice!

She was alone in the house and glad to be alone. The long week-end had exhausted and disillusioned her. Romance had become as shabby as the weather. Romance! How she hated that word! But did she? If you tried to give to the wrong person? And now she felt humiliated and soiled. It would not last much longer, this affair. And what was she going to do about it, become somebody's secretary or drudge, pursue other shabby adventures, or disappear?

Restlessness consumed her. If she was alone in the house, and somehow responsible for it, why not get busy? She cleared away the breakfast things and washed them up.

There were beds to be made, and she always fumbled her bed-making. She had not even the hands of a capable housemaid. A decorative creature. She went upstairs and into His room, and felt revolted by it. Max was an untidy person about the house, a man who expected everything to be done for him, everything to be cleared up after him. His bed looked as though he had spent a restless night, and she felt strangely nauseated by that bed. Must she deal with it? She knew now that she hated him.

She went to the window and stood looking out. She saw the grey water and the wind-blown willows, and a figure swinging the handle of a pump. Almost, the figure seemed a mechanism, and yet, as she watched it she saw it become alive. She was conscious of compassion, of a sudden feeling for the significance of those monotonous movements, an understanding of the patient purpose behind them. The figure became spirit and ceased to be mere flesh. She saw him as man, contending, but not blindly, with the seeming malice of nature, while believing, that man, in struggling to transcend such forces, was fulfilling some destiny.

She stood quite a long while at the window, watching him and absorbing from his simple labour a feeling of assuagement and of strength.

And suddenly she remembered her absurd and futile excursion in the punt.

What an impulse! Had he suspected the poor, distracted purpose behind it? If so, what had he thought of her?

She turned about and looked at that dishevelled bed, and the will to deal with it came to her. She stripped the sheets and pillow-slip, and in the cause of a fastidious thoroughness re-garnished it with clean linen. He would never sleep here again. Of that she felt assured. Nor did she confront herself with the old saying, that as you make your bed, so must you lie in it.

Peter was very tired, with a tiredness not only of the body, but of the spirit. He had been so near to the earth all day, and if, in earthly things, love and hate are very near together, he had come near to hating those poor trees who cried out to him for water. Action and reaction. In restlessness of spirit he had gone out after supper to patrol his acres and to discover whether other live things were crying out for help. Almost he could have said to any fresh suppliant: "You dare to ask me for water, damn you!" Then, he had come upon a little solitary starveling that had been left over in a corner because it had not flourished like its fellows, and he had stood and looked at it, and become conscious of compassion and of inward laughter. Yes, laughter against yourself, that most divine medicine, so rare and stimulating in a world of little vulgar and bitter egoisms. He had fetched a can and filled it and given the starveling drink.

The wind had died away and the evening was grey and still, and the new mood that had replaced a feeling of angry weariness craved for contemplation and for contact with other essences. Objective things could become tyrannical unless you had the capacity for climbing above mere objectivity, and of divining, or feeling that you could divine, the ultimate realities beyond the sensuous veil. Ghent had the soul of a mystic, which meant that he realized that the very clever people had explained nothing, and that the eternal mystery remained.

Ghent wandered out and along the high road to the Weir Bridge. No traffic was passing at this quiet hour, and often, when he had felt lonely or too near to the challenge of nothingness, he would walk to the bridge, lean upon the parapet and contemplate the river. It flowed. How obvious, but how significant! It could not stand still and contemplate itself; and so, it escaped from man's illusion that he can stand and contemplate himself as something static and calculable, a kind of mathematical formula chalked up on a blackboard. He liked the leap and thunder of the weir, the gentle willows, Folly Island cushioned and afloat, the white stateliness of the old house up

yonder among the beeches. Even Temple Towers had meaning. It was a challenge and a contrast, just as life was full of challenges and contrasts. Life was beckoning, that was why it did not conform to the plans of those who were statically minded, the producers of schemes, philosophical and otherwise. Sin, and pain, and love, and grieving were like little vortices in the vast flow. They all belonged. Yet, something strove and made for harmony. Sounds could be just casual discords until they became music, and the musician can play even with discords.

Yes, he could suppose that Temple Towers and old Crabtree had their uses. He could remember Temple Manor's views upon their mutual neighbour, and my lady's witty exposition of the problem. "You and I, Peter, try to create beauty, and yet there are people who would accuse us of cowardice. They tell us that we must accept life as a savage struggle, and that the mystic is a fool who runs away to hide in dreams. I am a mystic, which means that I believe in things being meant, and that even ugliness is here to provoke us. We have to transcend it. Even Crabtree has its uses. It may provoke us both emotionally and spiritually. The crab-apple purges. We might become too soft and flowery if we had no barbarians to threaten us. We too must fight, on occasions. We humanitarians may be very close to a sentimental senility. We are apt to forget the urgent greeds of the lout world. Yes, my dear, old Crabtree and crude competition have their uses."

She too was drawn to the bridge that evening, perhaps because she was finding the empty house dim and lonely, and the bridge's arch was like a cool forehead catching the fading light. Also, there was assuagement in the sound of falling water. As she reached the gate at the end of the Folly Farm lane two cars raced up the cinder track leading from the Blue Lagoon, paused, hooting, at the junction, took the main road and turned right over the bridge to Loddon. A moment of noise, and all was peace again, with the roar of the weir dominating the English scene. She passed out and on, and not till she neared the spot where the bridge's western abutment began to lift the road, did she become aware of that other figure leaning over the parapet with its face to the weir pool and the valley. She stood still, hesitant. If she went on would he think that her coming was no mere coincidence? And did it matter? Yes, it would matter. Yes, she would go back. And then he turned his head, as though feeling some other presence near him, and saw her.

She could not go back now. That would have seemed so tricky and cheap, a piece of self-conscious affectation. She walked on. She saw him straighten and turn towards her, his right hand resting on the old stone coping.

She made herself smile, and he was thinking what a flowerlike face she had. But could flowers be frightened?

“Rather a good place this.”

She paused about a yard from him, and with her hands on the parapet, looked at the pool.

“I wonder why bridges attract one?”

He leaned sideways against the wall, observing her.

“They always do. I’ve noticed it when I’m in a car. The more narrow and hog-backed the bridge, the more likely you are to find someone loafing there.”

“Does that annoy you?”

He smiled.

“Well, no; it shouldn’t, though one’s apt to be such a cad in a hurry when one gets into a car. Dangerous, of course.”

“There always is danger, isn’t there, in anything we do?”

He was silent for some seconds as though her words had challenged and surprised him.

“Yes, I suppose there is, especially in these mechanical days. You go out for peace and a picnic, and get smashed up.”

“I wasn’t meaning quite that.”

“Oh! A little more subtly.”

“Perhaps. I mean, you never quite know what life has for you round the corner.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

She stood with her long fingers stroking the stone coping. It was cool and soothing to the touch, refreshed by the air that rose from the weir pool. How tantalizing and yet how pleasant was the sound of that falling water in a time of drought! The river seemed to speak for you, and to blur those little, sensitive silences that both link and separate two sensitive humans who find themselves suddenly and mysteriously attracted. They were strangers, and they were not.

He saw her lips move. Almost, they had the pouting fluidity of French lips.

“Tell me all about this. You must know it all.”

“You mean, the valley?”

“Yes.”

He turned square to the parapet.

“There lies Marplot, my little place. And there——”

“Why Marplot?”

“Perhaps there is a sting of old irony in that name. Anyhow, I have taken it for better or for worse.”

Her forehead seemed to pucker slightly.

“Is the land like matrimony?”

“Oh, somewhat, I suppose, in fair weather and in foul; with my sweat and strength I thee endow.”

She smiled.

“I like that. Go on, please.”

“And there is Folly Farm.”

“That’s me. Is there some old or new irony in that?”

“Hardly, I hope. And there’s Folly Island like a little green ship afloat. Yonder stands Farley and its elms where the rooks build. Then one comes to Temple Manor.”

“The great old white house.”

“Yes.”

“Like a Greek temple. Who lives there?”

“Rather a splendid person, Melissa, Lady Vandeleur.”

“It sounds like Meredith. Young or old?”

“Oh, sixty-five or so, but never old. A young heart, and the head of a queen.”

“I like that, too. And that other place on the right, Chocolate Castle?”

He laughed.

“And I like that! Very new gentleman of the name of Crabtree, so new that the paint smells.”

She let out a little laugh. If love should come to her it would possess the soul of a woman who liked to be amused, to enjoy the pique and sparkle of a spirit that was not turgid with mere sex. Could any words have described more

vividly the gentleman who had newly arrived? The paint still smelt. Oh, lovely!

Her voice grew vibrant and alive. She seemed to lose her droop and her melancholy.

“Is he very rich?”

“Oh, very.”

“And how——?”

“Builds houses by the thousand. He has what is called the money-making nose.”

“Semitic?”

“Oh, no, good broad British. Can smell a profit ten miles off. Besides, doesn't one wrong the Jews? They can be artists. They do know beauty and how to possess it.”

She said: “Almost I am coming to regard money as the source of all evil.”

“Too much money.”

She countered him quickly.

“Or not enough.”

There was silence for a moment. He was looking at the little multitudes of trees in his nursery. All his capital lay there, and if hundreds of his trees died, as die they might, capital would go, and profit cease, and with his reserves gone, he would be in Queer Street. Some old land-grabber like Crabtree would buy him out. What then? He would lack the capital to begin all over again. He might find himself as someone's head-gardener, or as a foreman in another firm's nursery. Yes, if he were lucky.

The light was failing, and he was aware of her drawing her hands away from the parapet.

“I must be going. I suppose one ought not to leave one's house empty.”

He looked at her sharply.

“You're not all alone there?”

She seemed to hesitate. What spirit was behind that sudden question? Like the ordinary predatory male, did he divine opportunity?

“Yes. My married couple walked out on me. The conditions were too rural.”

“But you oughtn’t to be alone there.”

There was concern in his voice, and she realized that this young man was no intriguer.

“I am trying to get a woman in. I’ve tried both Farley and Loddon. Neither were very helpful.”

He said: “Of course you must have somebody. Would you like me to ask my men? They may know of someone.”

“I should be grateful if you would.”

“I’ll ask them first thing to-morrow. They are both Farley men, and Farley goes by favour.”

“Thank you. If I could get a woman in for a few hours each day——”

“Someone to live in. You ought not to be alone, you know, at night.”

She smiled into the twilight, nor could he divine the feeling behind that smile. She realized that he was thinking for her, and not for himself, and in her experience such big brotherliness was singular and rare. Men petted you for what they could get.

“You mean burglars?”

He laughed, as though wishing to reassure her.

“No. I don’t suppose you would be bothered in that way. But an empty house, well, you know, rather *triste*. What they call ‘unked’ in Berkshire. I’ve been in one, and I know.”

She was touched.

“Yes, it isn’t that one’s scared.”

“No. It’s rather like seeing nothing but yourself in a mirror.”

Her eyes seemed to fall into a stare over the simile he had used.

“Yes, just like that. Or, one’s memories, the things one doesn’t want to live with.”

She broke off into sudden silence, and drawing back from the bridge wall, turned to go.

“Thank you so much.”

Was it that she shivered at the thought of the empty house, and did he divine that sensitive tremor?

“I’ll come as far as your gate.”

“Oh, please don’t bother.”

“Please let me. I’ll wait till I see a light in a window. You have matches?”

“Yes, yours, and my own.”

He walked with her to the lane and down it to the white fence, opened the gate for her and closed it behind her.

“Good night. I’ll wait here till you show a light.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, it’s silly, but I don’t know your name. Of course I can say, the lady at Folly Farm.”

She seemed to hesitate for a moment.

“Strangeways, Mrs. Strangeways.”

“Thank you. Good night.”

“Good night.”

She went in, and he waited there until he saw a light in one of the lower rooms, and then he turned and walked back to the bridge. He stood there looking at the white foam in the weir pool. His young face had a kind of dark sheen. Strangeways. Yes, it suited her, and his mood, and his feeling that there was some mystery about her. Mystery!

Was this the way one fell in love?



## IX

Ghent woke early, and with a feeling that something had happened to him, and that life was different. Had it rained yesterday? It had not. Was it raining to-day? He rolled out of bed, and saw the same grey sky, clouds hurried by the wind, the willows blowing. What a summer, dusty and shabby, and grey, with that eternal wind worrying the parched earth! Bob had told him only yesterday that the big sweet-chestnut on Farley Green was dying, or looked like death, and the tree was a hundred and fifty years old. Yes, but something was different. He looked across at Folly Farm, and remembered, and the mystery came back to the world, even though a sad wind blew, and the sky was rainless and grey.

Going out with Bunter at his heels he found Fanshaw at work with fagging-hook and crooked stick cutting the grass and weeds along the Badger's Lane hedge. Bob was one of Farley's wise men, in that he was darts champion, and knew everybody's worth and reputation, and held views upon the social scheme that were frank and emphatic. He believed in Temple Manor but not in Temple Towers. That dirty old tyke ought to have been drowned as a pup. Bob did not flatter you, and when Ghent explained the situation to him, Bob sharpened the fagging-hook, warned off a horse-fly, and aired certain opinions. Folly Farm had a bad name. For why? Well, it never had been a gentleman's house. Ignorant, half-bred people didn't make a house gentle, no, money or no money. Yes, houses were like that, just as nature didn't care a damn whether she dried you up or drowned you. Ghent knew by experience that it was useless to try and short-circuit Bob's conversation. You waited until he had repeated some obvious statement three times over with increasing emphasis, and then you tried again.

“Yes, Bob, but do you happen to know of anyone?”

As a matter of fact Bob did. He had a married sister who had lost her husband, and who, for the moment, was at a loose end. Just moping about and twittering and behaving like a widowed weed. What Jane needed was a job of work. But what sort of person was the lady across the water, and how had Mr. Peter become interested in Folly Farm? Bob was a little curious about the second part of the question, but he could mind his own business and Peter's.

“What sort o' lady is she, sir?”

“You mean Mrs. Strangeways?”

“Yes, not one of them hoity-toity bits from London, with a made up face and no manners. I don’t mind any sister o’ mine serving a real lady.”

“Rather the other way, Bob, I should say. She’s gentle.”

“Temple Manor not Temple Towers?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll put it to Jane this evening. By the way, that old bastard was messin’ about in our lane this morning.”

“Old Crabtree?”

“Sure. He says to me: ‘Trees looking a bit sick, my man, what?’ And I says to him: ‘Yes, my man, but we don’t grow mushrooms down here.’ Looked a bit tucked up about it, he did. I reckon he’s got his old bull’s-eyes on Marplot. I’ll tell ’ee what I’d do with old cuckoo-spit like Crabtree.”

“Give him a dose of nicotine, Bob. Well, will you ask your sister to go and see Mrs. Strangeways?”

Bob ran a thumb along the hook edge.

“I will, sir.”

Few of us realize how interesting our private affairs can be to other members of a circumscribed community, and when Mrs. Maintenance heard, as hear she did, that her master was interested in the lady across the water, Mrs. Maintenance sat up and took notice. And somebody else had seen Mr. Peter driving the lady into Loddon. Well, now, what was the meaning of that? Mrs. Maintenance subscribed to the local opinion that it was unwise either to pick up or be picked. Quite a number of the commandments could be broken both by getting into and getting out of cars! Your handbag or your virtue might suffer. And a married woman too! With a she-wolf waiting round the corner Mrs. Maintenance would think of Mr. Peter as “Poor Lamb”; not that he had any resemblance to that tame creature, either physically or temperamentally, but to Mrs. Maintenance Peter was a kind of Galahad. She washed for him, and she knew.

Now, who and what was the lady? A married woman! These week-end wives had to be watched. And when she heard from Bob that the master was interesting himself in providing domestic help for the lady over yonder, Mrs. Maintenance was troubled. She was always saying that Mr. Peter ought to get married. Not that she wanted him married, or would exactly welcome a strange

young woman in the house, but it was hard on a young man not to have what he wanted, especially when there were so many young wenches about who wanted what a fine, strong lad like Mr. Peter had to give.

“Tempting providence, I call it.”

So, when the bell rang while Ghent was having his tea, and Mrs. Maintenance went to answer it and found a strange young woman in the porch, Mrs. Maintenance put on her Seventh Commandment face and was cautious.

“Oh, would you mind giving these to Mr. Ghent?”

She held out two boxes of safety-matches, and Mrs. Maintenance eyed them as though the serpent might be concealed even in Bryant & May.

“You see, Mr. Ghent lent me two boxes quite a long while ago, and I promised to return them. I forgot. I’m so sorry.”

Had he, indeed, and how and when? And no doubt, this was a nice little excuse. Match-boxes forsooth! Mrs. Maintenance was austere.

“Mr. Ghent’s at his tea.”

“Yes. Please don’t disturb him. If you will give him these.”

“What name?”

“Mrs. Strangeways, from Folly Farm.”

Mrs. Maintenance held the door ajar until she had seen the lady pass out of the gate. A pretty creature, certainly, and a lady. Moreover, she had not attempted to push in, and Mrs. Maintenance, feeling vaguely mollified, and regretting some of her abruptness, placed the two boxes on the papier maché letter-tray, and carried them into the parlour.

“A lady left these, sir.”

Ghent stared at them. Was she imagining it, or did his colour rise?

“Oh, thanks, Mrs. Maintenance. Put them on the mantelpiece.”

Mrs. Maintenance did so, and bustled out, wondering whether you could assign a romantic significance to match-boxes.

Sunset.

Ghent, going out to look at the sky, a countryman’s habit, had a feeling that the purple-black cloud-bank into which the sun was sinking, promised a change in the weather. He saw smoke rising from one of the Folly Farm

chimneys. Certainly, there was a little chilliness in the air, and if she chose to light a fire for the sake of cheerfulness, well and good. As for the old tag about red dawns and red sunsets, this particular year was full of freaks and contrariness which flouted experience. He strolled down to the river bank, and saw the willows on Folly Island spun over with a web of gold. His eyes searched the garden across the water, and found it empty, though the hammock was still hanging under the lime trees.

Was it the hammock that provoked him, and suggested that he should go round and tell her that Bob's sister might be available to-morrow? Well, why not? It would be an act of consideration and of courtesy, and he could acknowledge the return of those matches. He was about to move away when he saw her come out into the garden. She appeared to hesitate for a moment, and then she wandered down to the water's edge.

Ghent raised an arm.

"May I come round for a moment? I have some news."

He fancied that she smiled across the water.

He found that she had walked up to the gate at the end of the lane and was waiting for him there.

"Thank you for the matches."

"So silly of me to forget. I hadn't forgotten, really. Running a house all on one's own——"

"Yes."

"What a lovely sky!"

"I hope it means rain."

"But I thought a sunset meant good weather."

"Supposed to, but this is one of those mysterious years when strange things happen."

Her eyelids flickered.

"Let's call it dawn instead of sunset."

"Why not? By the way, I think I have heard of someone who might come in and help you."

"Have you?"

"The sister of one of my men. She's a widow. He is seeing her to-night."

“Thank you so much.”

“If you are worried about anything, or want anything, please let me——”

Voices! Two people were coming along the highroad from the direction of Farley, but they were not yet visible to Ghent, for the gateway was recessed in the break of the hedge. Ghent half turned towards the road. He recognized the voices.

They belonged to John and Mary Lynwood, and Mary was saying: “Well, I think it’s a mug’s game trying to live on the land. Look at Peter! Keeping a sort of crèche for baby trees. If life’s to be any good, it’s got to be controlled, and you’ll admit you can’t control the weather.” Suddenly all four persons were in view, and the confrontation might have embarrassed a more sensitive person than Mary. She just looked amused. Here was the tree-nursemaid caught at a gate with a Delilah. And for that matter Peter did want his hair cutting.

Lynwood’s slow smile broke forth.

“Hallo, Peter, we were just coming to look you up.”

Ghent found his voice, and the urge to do and say something.

“Oh, Mary and John, this is Mrs. Strangeways.”

Mary gave the other woman a brusque nod, and deliberate consideration. Mrs. Strangeways might have been a shop-window in which no more than the perfect frocks were displayed. Her brother was kinder. He made some pleasant and banal remark about her being a new neighbour, and hoping she would like the valley.

Ghent had seen that piquant little face grow small and bothered. He glanced at Mary, and catching those hard blue eyes of hers set in a suburban stare, was moved to put himself between them.

“I’ll come back with you, John. Good night, Mrs. Strangeways.”

Her small head turned quickly.

“Good night. May it rain to-morrow.”

They had reached the crown of the bridge when John’s sister made a characteristic remark.

“Strangeways. Yes, it suits her. Decorative person.”

Ghent was head-in-air.

“Yes, her husband comes down for week-ends.”

Mary let out a little neighing giggle.

“Ah, that sort! I thought so from her frock.”

## X

The day that followed was grey and windy and rainless like its fellows, and Temple Manor, looking down upon the valley from its high terrace and the cool greenness of its beechwoods, saw the meadows silver brown with starved grasses. Lady Melissa saw it with eyes that were so different from those of Temple Towers, compassionately, understandingly, and with a homeliness that was of the country. John Doe's potato crop would be poor, and Jane Doe his wife would have no jam in her store-cupboard. The farmers, poor things, were short of feed for their beasts, and the root-crop had failed to germinate. In Farley village the local wells were giving out, and the community was asking why something was not done about it when the country could spend millions on beastly aeroplanes, and roads for the city folk.

Viner, her head-gardener, stood beside the lady, a big, blond, buxom man, with a grizzled moustache and gentle eyes.

"A crooked year, Viner."

"A Job's year, your ladyship."

She smiled at that, and at his grave, biblical face.

"How are we?"

"Not so bad, your ladyship. You see, we've got the deep well, and our force pump and hoses. I'm keeping the men on watering. That new big sprinkler's a peach."

"Yes, Viner, we can afford not to suffer. Things must be very difficult down there."

The big man nodded.

"Aye, no fruit, nothing growing as it should, the peas all yellow. Farmers feeding cake. In the old days I'd say it would be a famine year."

"How's Mr. Ghent doing?"

"Pretty badly, I hear, your ladyship. Losing hundreds of trees. You see, that's the trouble in a nursery, when you have to shift your stock every two or three years to make 'em ball properly. If you get caught by a drought like this, you're in trouble. Not a decent rain since January, March like June, and the

subsoil dried out.”

“Yes, Viner; it’s very hard.”

“It may break him, your ladyship. A good lad, too. And then, as everybody knows, Crabtree’s sitting on the fence like an old Tom-cat waiting to pounce.”

“Does everybody know? I seem to be very ignorant, Viner.”

“I shouldn’t say that, your ladyship. You know all that we know, and much more.”

She ordered out the dog-cart, and handling the reins herself, drove down the great beech avenue, and into Farley village. She saw a queue of women and lads waiting at the village pump, and the dry and rusty foliage of the old sweet-chestnut that was dying. How patient these countryfolk were, as patient as the trees! They did not fly into tantrums like the factory crowd over some petty grievance. They were so much wiser than the urban people, for they were part of the soil and of its essential reality. She pulled up, passed the reins to the groom, and got out. She spoke to the women by the pump-house as she spoke to her friends.

“I’m sorry the village is short of water. How much are you getting each?”

“Two buckets, your ladyship.”

“Makes life rather difficult. Something must be done about it.”

Faces brightened to her.

“If I had a tap in my place, your ladyship—— Our little old well’s given out.”

“Bad for back and legs, Sarah. Yes, something must be done about it.”

Sarah had served in her young days at the great house.

“If anybody can do anything about it, your ladyship, it would be you.”

“Thank you, Sarah. I’ll try.”

She drove on, thinking how much easier it was for her to keep her great garden in heart at a time such as this, than for these working people to save their cabbages. Cabbages mattered, yes, even more than her rare plants mattered to her. She had men and water and all the appliances money could buy, that peach of a sprinkler! Her lawns were green. She came to the Weir Bridge, and pulled up there, and looked at the river and the valley. There was water, water in abundance, and yet—— How silly it was! All that was needed was that someone should think and spend money.



She became aware of rude hootings. A car pulled up beside her. An angry face peered up, a pert little face with the smudge of a moustache.

“Say, haven’t you more sense than to stop in a place like this?”

She smiled down at the face.

“I’m sorry, but you see, we live here, and we like to look. We don’t just hoot and pass.”

Said the groom, as the cad drove on: “Yes, most of them are like that. No real sense, your ladyship, not even horse-sense. If a fellow spends five quid on an old tin box on wheels he thinks he’s a lord.”

“Yes, Simpson. I wonder why the world is in such a hurry? And it doesn’t seem to get anywhere, really, does it?”

Peter was spending an hour in the office, and not liking it any better than he liked the day. He was not liking anything this morning, for he had gone to his bed and risen from it with a feeling that someone had breathed on the mirror of mystery and tarnished it. Paw-marks; facile, vulgar cynicism. He was seeing Mary Lynwood as a handsome, sophisticated slut, who, like so many of the moderns, conceived it to be clever and modish to assume that no basket ever contained clean linen. Also, he had felt moved to dip into his ledgers and compare this year’s season with the last. He kept a record of the number of people who visited the nursery, whether they became purchasers or not, and the numbers were discouraging. Fewer orders, fewer visitors. It seemed that this shabby summer had disillusioned the gardening enthusiasts, and yet, regarded in other ways, it might promise to be profitable. If people lost trees, they would have to replace them. They would come to him for trees. But if he had no trees to sell? Oh, that was nonsense, hysteria. A drought did not wipe out a whole nursery. The fact was that John’s septic sister had upset him, and he was feeling bitter.

He did not hear the bell ring. It was George Garland who came to tell him that her ladyship was here.

“She’s in the front bit, sir.”

Ghent got off his stool. He was in a mood to curse any sort of interference, but Temple Manor was almost as welcome as rain would have been. Here was a sweet antidote to the cynic’s poison, a person of Olympian loveliness, who yet was human.

Ghent found her sitting on the seat by the treillage. His strip of beloved turf had become toast, and on this grey morning the cistus shrubs were opening

few flowers.

“Good morning, your ladyship.”

She knew at once that he was worried, for his brightness was like a streak of thin sunlight forcing its way through clouds. He had one of those very sensitive and illuminating faces that cannot conceal the inwardness of things. He was quickly angry, quickly touched, though his young dignity might try to wear a Spanish cloak.

“May I look round, Peter?”

“Of course. I’m afraid——”

She rose.

“Such a difficult year. Ground holding out?”

“Not too well.”

Bunter came to greet her, making gruff, conversational noises, and wagging a blunt stern. She bent down and caressed the dog. He had kind eyes.

“I have just been reproved, my dear.”

“You?”

“For stopping my dog-cart on the bridge. Silly old baggage of the period of King John.”

“The police? Hardly.”

“No, a little man in a car.”

“Oh, that sort of cad.”

“The genus cad is difficult to define. Bunter coming with us?”

“Wuff, wuff,” said the dog.

That his trees were suffering and he with them was only too plain to her. Yes, it really was rather damnable. Nor could any Jehovahs be brought to book. She had no liking for Jehovahs, nor for penitent Jobs. She preferred her Jobs recalcitrant. That was good English, an arrow on the string, and a glance that said: “Get thee to hell!”

She saw the length of hose trailing across the Green Way, and the sound of a pump.

“Having to water?”

“Yes, where we can.”

There was tiredness behind his voice, and more than tiredness, nor did she stand and stare at the poor things who were looking sick. Why stress the obvious? Critics can be dastardly people when a world is needing help, for the finding of flaws may be a profession, cherishing the ills it pretends to chasten. To such blame-lovers my lady would have said: "Go and do better. Then, we will listen."

"Any construction work this year, Peter?"

"No. I wish I had. This shabby summer seems to have depressed possible patrons."

"Do you know Sir Gavin Marwood, who has taken Thursby?"

"No. I have heard of him, of course."

"Thursby is rather derelict, my dear. I believe—— Well, I'll put in a word."

He glanced at her quickly.

"That's gracious of you."

"Not gracious. Shall we say——?"

"I find it gracious. This year is making things rather tough, but I'm damned if I'll be beaten."

"Good for you. The earth chastens those whom it wishes to love."

He laughed.

"I'm getting my medicine. Whimpering's no good on the land."

They were standing by the drooping elm, and turning to look across the river, her eyes fell upon Folly Farm. A figure was moving in the garden, carrying a basket towards the orchard.

"New people there, Peter?"

"Yes."

He was frowning. Should he honour that sudden impulse?

"A Mrs. Strangeways. I think she's rather nice. And not too happy."

How was it that she divined what was in his heart and head?

"Shall I call?"

"Would you? I know you are——"

She looked for a second at his tense young face.

“An inquisitive old woman? No, not quite that. I find all humans rather interesting, provided they are not Crabtree. My dear, if I called on Mr. Crabtree and asked him to help in financing a deep well and water-supply for Farley, what would the response be?”

Ghent smiled at nothing in particular.

“Snob and commercialist, in conflict! Does that sound cheap and bitter? I think he’d fall.”

“And if I asked him to dinner?”

“He’d be Adam.”

Her eyes sparkled and then grew thoughtful.

“I might try it. Yes, I’ll call on Folly Farm.”

“Just at present I’m afraid she’s got no maids.”

“All alone there?”

“Yes, but I’m trying to get her a woman, Bob’s sister. One has to be neighbourly.”

Dear lad, did he imagine she believed him to be no more than that?

Mrs. Strangeways was afraid of the letter. She had left it lying on the breakfast table, though she could not help glancing now and again at the familiar writing, so small and neat and particular. She was no student of calligraphy, but the Broster script revealed him to her as a man who did everything in front of a mirror. Even his handwriting seemed to scrutinize itself in a looking-glass, and to admire its tie and its trousers. The dramatization of self may remain bearable, if the actor can pull an ironic grimace at himself and laugh, but Max never laughed at himself. That would have been unseemly.

How sick she was of this strutting, mannered egoism, a self-consciousness that was never out of its clothes!

What had he to say to her?

He had not written to her for a week.

Was she piqued by this casualness, or was she frightened by it?

Max’s stay at Folly Farm had not been a success. Butter that tasted of

paraffin; a pie which had produced dyspepsia! Why had he allowed her to rent and furnish this rather lonely house? Why had he been so irritable? Love in a green valley, and the river and the willows, and clasped hands, and compassion, because a woman was giving that which was forbidden! No, that illusion had passed.

Bob Fanshaw's sister, Jane, put her head into the room. She had been persuaded to act as temporary help to Mrs. Strangeways.

"If the butcher calls, m'am, what shall I order?"

Oh, yes, the butcher! Mrs. Strangeways looked vague.

"Some cutlets, Jane, or a small leg of mutton."

"Yes, m'am."

"Has the man come to put the gas right?"

"Not yet, m'am."

"I hope he will come."

"Oh, yes, m'am, he'll come all right."

Jane was liking Mrs. Strangeways. She was such a pretty lady, and had a gentle voice, and seemed sad about something. And she did not expect you to make your supper off two sardines and a slice of stale bread.

Well, life had to be faced, though life had presented her with a series of tragic or shabby transformation scenes. Or was it just musical comedy? She took the Broster letter out into the garden, and sat down in a patch of transient sunlight. Some crises were best confronted in the sunlight. She could divine the approaching crisis.

She opened the letter, and read.

DEAR RENA,

I went to see my doctor on Thursday, and he gave me a thorough vetting. Apparently I have been burning the candle too fast. He advised me to limit my work for a while, and to eliminate worry.

I had intended talking certain things over with you on Sunday, but the fact is I felt too seedy. Matters have been very bad in the City. I have had a series of exasperating disappointments. We financial people, you know, have to carry rather exhausting responsibilities. Fact is, my dear, I shall have to be rather careful. I know you will understand. I'm afraid my next cheque will have to be

a little less generous.

Bad luck, but I know I can count on you to take the rough with the smooth.

I've seen Irene. She's an inexorable person.

Don't worry.

Love.

MAX.

Bad luck! Those words of his had become a kind of echo in her. Was she indeed one of those women who are fatal to men? That first tragic occasion, and the haunting belief that she had been responsible for it! Fog, her misreading of the meaning of a shadowy outline, her cry of "Right, keep right," and then the crash. But for that cry of hers and her gripping of his arm, poor Guy would be alive. Just a patch of fog on a dark road, and sense impressions that had been misconstrued! All her life had been obscured with patches of fog. Even in the summer sunlight she could feel a ghost mist rising from the river.

She shivered.

Yes, Max's passion for her had passed. Like all the other men she had met, his interest in her had been physical. He had never regarded her as a person. Vienna nights were over and all that sensuous glamour, Ascot and Goodwood, and little dinners in town while you drank champagne and the orchestra played Strauss waltzes. He had given her frocks and a pleasant little flat, and she had given him—herself. Surely, it was a curse for a woman to possess sex-allure and no money. Even Strauss waltzes could become a little shabby and sinister.

So he was preparing the ground for a formal retreat. She had no illusions about that letter. His health had to be considered; he had suffered financial losses. Irene was inexorable. And what was she going to do about it? Hope, desperately, for some amorous old gentleman to become interested in her? Oh no, she was soul-sick of that sort of thing. She was tired, not physically but spiritually, for, strangely enough, she was conscious of herself as spirit.

What happened to a pretty and rather useless woman when the illusion of being loved for something that mattered ceased from persuading her that one man was different from the others? She became just a drab, or ran a boarding-house, or called herself a secretary, or tried to keep her poor, pretty head afloat in water that became increasingly unpleasant and muddy.

Or, she just disappeared.

At the Temple Towers breakfast table—storms and reverberations. Poor Mary Crabtree, that Lot's Wife of a woman, sat pinched and congealed behind her silver coffee-pot. Thirty-five years of marriage had left her with an air of austere bewilderment. A woman of poor vitality she allowed life to bully her, as her little bandit of a husband, and her children bullied her. Even Temple Towers frightened her; she would have felt so much more a person in a Surbiton villa. As a social figure she was completely inadequate. Her elder daughter could say of her: "Mum's only fit to carry about a pocketful of snails."

Mr. Roger Crabtree was eating toast and marmalade as though some piece of grilled bread had bitten him, and he was indulging in retaliation.

"Damned Jacks-in-Office! Just sit on their bums and scribble chits to their betters!"

"Really, Father," said the wife; "such language!"

She did not ask how else the officials of the Loddon U.D.C. should sit. It was sufficient that her Roger had received a polite but curt letter from the council offices, requiring him to make certain alterations at The Rookery. Their surveyors and the medical officer had reported unfavourably upon the sanitary condition of the property.

"I'm surprised at Bacchus. Calls himself my doctor. I won't have him inside my house again."

Said his daughter, over the pages of the daily picture-paper where murderers and film stars compete for fame: "What's biting you, Parent?"

"Yes, you can read it. You're not like your mother. You've got some of your father's stuff in you."

He tossed the letter across to her.

"Ta," said Irene. "Is that nice for me, or not? Where did I get my red hair?"

"Not from me," said her father.

"Ma, I'm surprised at you! When did it happen and how?"

Her mother looked shocked.

"Your grandfather had auburn hair."

"Call it carrots. Was it, male or female?"

Her father grabbed more toast.

“I’ll take the case to court. Think I’m going to be bluffed, and have my property interfered with by a lot of tame clerks.”

Irene had read the letter, and she flicked it back to her father.

“Well, I can’t see much in it. I’d call it a storm in a cesspool.”

“Ya,” said her father; “what’s the use of having red hair if you can’t show fight. I’m a man of ideas. I don’t go about taking orders from Jacks-in-Office. This whole place is run by a gang of snobs. Would they send a bit of bump like this to that old bit of Dresden china over the river? Would Tom Bacchus condemn any of her property? It’s a conspiracy. They’re all jealous of my money. I’ll show ’em a thing or two.”

His wife rose from her chair. She knew that when her husband was in one of his tantrums, he was best left alone to tear the occasion to tatters.



## XI

She took out the punt and poled it up the river, as though the rhythmic trail and thrust of the pole would somehow help her to handle a decision. As an idle woman of pleasure she may have been peculiar in that she did know whether her balance at the bank was on the positive or negative side, and what the rough figure amounted to. She possessed about two hundred and seventy pounds to her credit at her London bank, about fifteen pounds in cash, a three years' lease of Folly Farm, some furniture, and her jewellery. Possibly, her rings and necklaces were worth two hundred pounds. Max had given her some of these trinkets. She had arranged with her banker to transmit twenty pounds a month to her in cash by registered post. She had the means to rusticate at Folly Farm for a year. Such was her situation in the material sense, but spiritually and emotionally she was nowhere.

She poled up the river as far as the Temple Manor boat-house, turned, and drifted back towards Folly Island. Its isolated floating greenness attracted her. She ran the punt in under the willows, tied it to a branch, and climbed ashore. Sitting down in the long grass with her face towards Marplot, she saw men uncoiling a hose and Ghent coming down to the pumping-stage with the little brown dog at his heels. His back was turned to her as he stood on the stage and swung the pump-handle, and the chug-chug of the pump joined itself to the sound of water falling at the weir.

For the moment her thoughts ceased to be centred on herself and crossed the river to Marplot. Poor lad, the year was treating him hardly. Jane was proving a conversational person, and her gossip had spread across the river to the place where her brother worked. Yes, poor Mr. Ghent was having a terrible time of it. It had taken him years to get the nursery back into shape, and just when he looked like making a success of it this dreadful drought had arrived and threatened to ruin him. Yes, and such a clean-living, nice young gentleman. Her brother Bob had always been particular about who he worked for, but there was nothing mean or crooked about Mr. Ghent. Yes, a real gentleman, though he did work with his hands. Not like old Crabtree up at Temple Towers.

Poor lad! But as she watched that tall figure with its brown arms at work, her compassion changed its temper. This was man, no mere pretty boy, man in

his eternal conflict with nature, man, the farmer, woodsman, or pioneer, builder of bridges and of roads, who, when nature in her trampling progress threatens his little dykes and sea-walls, must strip for action and fight back. Lose or win, he remained man, that indomitable creative creature who dared to compete with nature in his planning. Something stirred in her, some elemental urge that was far stronger than mere sensuous fancy. She could feel as woman to this man, she, who in her desperate moments could call herself a mere plaything.

She sat there on the grass bank, leaning against the trunk of a willow, watching him. She did not see him as Max Broster had seen him, a ridiculous robot, a Hodge, a fool who used his hands when other manipulative activities would be more potent and prosperous. His strength and his will to endure both touched and provoked her. And then her thoughts came back to self. She knew now, and with passion, that she longed to break with this useless, parasitic life; be something, a person, free to choose and free to give.

She thought: "Yes, to be utterly honest I should try and strip myself of all this tarnish. I should send him back his money, leave that house, and go out naked into a new world. I should try and begin all over again. But how?"

What a useless creature she was!

And if he were to know! Did he know?

More restlessness, more shabby self-revealings. She slipped back into the punt, unfastened it, and set it adrift. Should she obey the impulse of yesterday and go drifting down the river like some Lady of Shallot? But man was there. She could not repeat that rather futile gesture. It would seem like a cheap challenge.

Another sound came to her across the water, the chug-chug of a mechanism that was not worked by hand, and looking up river she saw the nose of a white motor-boat rounding the loop above Folly Island. It came on at speed, two wings of foam spread at its cutwater, its wash playing along the banks and setting the sedges and water-weeds waving. A wireless was blaring, and a Union Jack flew from the staff at the stern. The boat took the western fork above Folly Island, and whether the occupants saw the punt or not, they did not slacken speed. Indubitably, she was to be washed. She sat down abruptly on the cushions, facing the oncoming boat, the pole shipped and dripping. The wireless blared. She could read the name on the boat's white snout "Gigolo." Ghent turning to look, raised an arm and shouted, but the wireless smothered his voice.

The girl in control of the speed-boat saw the punt, and swung the wheel

over. She did not slacken speed, but swerved across below Folly Island. A little wave of water spilled itself into the rocking punt, and into Mrs. Strangeways' lap. The wash along the Marplot bank covered Ghent's pumping stage and filled his shoes with water.

A figure sat up suddenly in the boat's stern. It discovered the soused punt and the soused lady.

"Damn it, Rene, why didn't you slow down?"

The boat had swept past, but Mr. Crabtree had seen beauty in distress. He had an eye for a pretty face, if he had no taste in houses.

"Turn here, you little fool. Got to apologize."

The boat slackened speed and swung about, its wireless still blaring.

"Turn off that damned thing."

But another voice sounded across the water.

"What the devil do you mean by doing a thing like that? Don't you know the regulations?"

Crabtree glared at Ghent.

"Breaking 'em yourself, aren't you? No right to pump water out of the river. I'll report you."

The boat had come about close to the Marplot bank, and Mr. Crabtree, with his back to Ghent, set out to succour beauty in distress. "Never mind that pump. Got to apologize." The swell was dying away with faint plashings amid the water-weeds, and the white boat glided doucely towards the punt. Irene had switched off the engine. Mrs. Strangeways was standing up, with the pole in her hands, and her frock showing signs of her sousing.

"Say, I'm sorry."

"She shouldn't have done it," said her father; "reckless young devil. Really disgraceful. I'm afraid we gave you a lapful."

Mrs. Strangeways smiled at him.

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

Mr. Crabtree was emphatic.

"Believe me, it does. I apologize. That punt's half swamped, isn't it? Can we take you aboard, and put you ashore somewhere?"

"Please don't trouble. I live just over there."

“Folly Farm?”

“Yes.”

Boat and punt were side by side, and Mr. Crabtree was standing up and holding his hat in his hand.

“Very sporting of you, I’m sure. Afraid we’ve spoilt that frock. Ought to make it good, if you’d allow it.”

“Really, it is quite an old frock.”

Mr. Crabtree’s glance became more than paternal.

“Well, it doesn’t look like it to me. Sure we can’t do anything more?”

“Thank you. I’ll put the punt away, and go in and change.”

“Yes, you go in and change, my dear. Mustn’t catch cold. I’ll send down to inquire.”

Irene, who was on the edge of irreverent giggles, started up the engine and wafted her father away.

“Here, young woman, let me tell you you have no manners.”

“Ta-ta, Parent. But you did say bow-wow nicely to the pretty lady.”

“Pretty lady!” said her father. “Haven’t I had you educated?”

They sped homewards, wrangling, but at Temple Towers both Mr. Crabtree’s head-gardener and his wife received their orders. A basket of strawberries was to be sent down to Folly Farm, and Mary was to enter the Rolls that afternoon and go and call on the lady.

Ghent, with his shoes full of water, watched Mrs. Strangeways put the punt away, and appear on the lawn. She seemed to be in no hurry to change her frock, and she came down to the water’s edge and looked across the river at Peter.

He hailed her.

“I’m sorry about that. Did they get you badly?”

“Rather.”

“Oughtn’t you to go in and change?”

“Yes, I will. Who was the dear old gentleman?”

Ghent was feeling fierce.

“I suppose you couldn’t smell the paint?”

“Oh, Mr. Crabtree!”

“Complete with speed-boat and daughter.”

She turned and walked up towards the house, and Ghent faced about, and resumed his pumping with sudden ferocity. Was he never to be free from Temple Towers invasions? Had he the right to draw water from the river, and if he had not that right, and old Crabtree sneaked to the man in authority, would he be denied this precious water? Oh, damn and to hell with old Crabtree! And then he heard a voice hailing him.

“Hallo, sir.”

“Hallo.”

“Hose’s bust.”

“What!”

“Blown up, sir. Leaking all over the grass.”

Ghent swore. Damn the hose, and damn all people who manufactured and sold you rubbish. He walked off the stage, climbed the bank, and set off to inspect the damage. Bob had a section of hose in his hands, and he showed Ghent a half-inch split in the tube.

“Only one-ply, sir.”

“Yes, I know, Bob. Couldn’t afford more. Blast the ruddy thing. We’ll try some insulating-tape.”

But he felt sore and savage, and Mrs. Strangeways who had watched the incident from her bedroom window, and who had heard Bob’s shout and some of Peter’s angry language, was moved to quick compassion.

They patched up the shoddy rubber piping, and worked the pump with more discretion, but about four o’clock that afternoon Ghent trod inadvertently on the hose while George was pumping, and the sudden stopping of the flow and the rise and pressure caused the hose to burst about ten yards from the pump. Ghent did not swear on this occasion. He was feeling tired and grim and languageless, and as he walked down to examine this second burst, he saw a thing that pleased him less than the exasperating frailty of a piece of rubber tubing. He saw the Crabtree yellow Rolls buttering its way down the lane to

Folly Farm. It stopped outside the garden gate. Old man Crabtree himself emerged from it, followed by his wife. Poor Mary trailed through life behind him, up steps, and through gates and doorways, like some meek cow following the bull.

Ghent watched them walk along the garden path to the porch. Mr. Crabtree rang the bell, and Jane, who answered the bell, had no reason to love the master of Temple Towers.

“Your lady in?”

Jane stammered. She did so when flustered.

“M-M-Mrs. Strangeways-s-s-ly-lying down.”

Mary Crabtree was fumbling with her card-case, but her husband was not to be denied his gesture.

“Sorry to hear that. Go up and tell her that Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree have called. She’s not to come down, mind you, if she’s not feeling up to it. You understand?”

“Y-Y-Yes, sir,” said Jane.

So flustered was she that she left them standing in the porch, and went up to tell her mistress, and Mr. Crabtree, with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest, stood and watched Ghent and George Garland disconnecting the burst hose.

Mr. Crabtree was pleased. That young pup had taken the hint, had he, and was scared. Well, anyway, he would report the matter to the Conservators. Poor, silly, piddling show, that of young Ghent’s. Obviously, the drought was getting the better of him. In six months Marplot might be on the market.

Jane returned.

“Will you step in, please. Mrs. S-S-Strangeways will be down in two minutes.”

What was it that made her say that she was in to Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree, and to offer them tea in the garden? Ghent was asking that question, and so was she when the more remote significance of the social occasion dawned on her. She could have excused herself so easily, and yet she had flown into a pretty frock, attended to face and hair, and come down. She addressed herself to the lady, only to realize almost immediately that Mary Crabtree was very much a supernumerary, and that the old man had set the stage.

“Felt I must apologize again for this morning.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

“Believe me, I don’t regard it as nothing. A spoiled frock’s a serious matter, isn’t it, Mother?”

Mrs. Crabtree agreed with him as though he had pulled some invisible string. Old Crabtree was eyeing her frock.

“That didn’t cost three guineas, anyway!”

He was jaunty and debonair, and she began to realize that he had cruel, sensual eyes. He was the sort of old man who would begin patting you, and sitting close to you on a sofa.

She said: “Shall we go out into the garden? Perhaps you will stay, and have tea there?”

The room was too much like a cage with that old savage sitting and appraising her. She felt that all her points were being considered like the points of a mare that might be for sale. It was devastating how quickly some old men summed you up, and put you and your past and your future into a particular pigeonhole.

She rang the bell.

“Oh, Jane, we will have tea in the garden, please.”

They went out, and she felt that she wanted to keep Mary Crabtree between her and her husband. She began to talk garden. She even asked Mrs. Crabtree’s advice. Old Crabtree was facetious. He made fun of his wife’s horticultural enthusiasms.

“Got any snails, Mrs. Strangeways? My wife is great on snails.”

She was conscious of his intimate staring. She gathered that her legs interested him. She could see him smirking; and suddenly she felt desperate.

“I’m afraid my husband doesn’t know much about gardens.”

She was aware of the old man giving her a hard, cynical look. He grinned at her.

“Frocks more in his line, what!”

She realized that in trying to snub him, she had said the silliest thing it would have been possible for her to say.

Husband—what! A gentleman who came down for the week-end to enjoy himself with a pretty lady who had a nice taste in frocks! Temple Towers was a man of the world, yes, sir, a man of the world! When a pretty woman like

Mrs. Strangeways put up a hypothetical husband, it suggested a cock-shy and a challenge. Old man Crabtree sat down in the best deck-chair, leaving to Mary an uncouth rustic seat. He laid his hat on the grass, pulled up his trousers, and displayed light blue silk socks.

“Mr. Strangeways in business?”

She caught her breath.

“Yes, in the City.”

“Stock Exchange?”

“Not exactly. Finance, and all that.”

He smirked at her.

“That’s where the nice frocks come from. Where do you get ’em?”

“This was from Paris.”

“See that, Mother. You ought to try Paris. Mrs. Crabtree could have her thousand a year for frocks, but you won’t bother, Mother, will you? My wife’s very domestic. Passes on the pretty-pretties to the girls.”

Ghent reappeared on the opposite bank with a couple of watering-cans, and stood for a moment surveying the conversation piece in the Folly Farm garden. This was sacrilege! And old Crabtree, observing him, made a characteristic remark.

“That young pup’s no right to take water from the river.”

Mrs. Strangeways was busy with the tray which Jane had carried out and placed upon the garden table.

“No right?”

“No.”

“But surely it won’t hurt the river?”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, dear lady, if you’ll excuse me. Supposing every fellow who owned three yards of bank began to pinch water. Supposing factories did what they damned well pleased? Wouldn’t be much river left, what? You and I might be sitting over a mud-bank.”

He chuckled, and she poured out tea.

“But Mr. Ghent wants water for his trees.”

“Well, let him buy it, or put down a well of his own. Besides, the young



ass is just wasting his time over there. Ladling teaspoons on to the Sahara. No ideas, no sense, no money. I'm a man of ideas, Mrs. Strangeways."

She rose and carried a cup to Mrs. Crabtree.

"Is it sugar?"

"Two lumps, please."

"Three for me, I've got a sweet tooth."

Assuredly, he stank of new paint, most aggressively so.

She attempted to draw Mrs. Crabtree into conversation, but without success, for the husband decapitated all such attempts, like a boy switching off thistle heads with a stick. Lord Temple Towers, for that was what he proposed to be, handed no bouquets to poor Mary. Did Mr. Strangeways shoot? He could give him some rough shooting, and a day or two with the pheasants he preserved in Badger's Wood. "Costs me a guinea a bird, m'am, but no matter." Yes, Mr. Strangeways did shoot. And then she lapsed into a desperate lie. She was afraid that her husband would be away in the autumn. He might be going to America on business, business connected with the cinema world.

"What's he in—pictures?"

"Interested, financially."

"Why, that's an idea. I'm a man of ideas. He ought to put you on the screen. Just the figure for it, if I may say so."

"I'm afraid you're a flatterer, Mr. Crabtree."

"Me? I never flatter anybody, do I, Mother?"

Mrs. Crabtree, sitting up very straight, answered obediently:

"Never."

Mrs. Strangeways, too, was conscious of the man across the river, coming to fill his cans, and labouring with them up the bank. What did he think of her party? How would he have reacted to old man Crabtree's cynical and smirking suggestions? Why had she told those futile fibs? Because her life was a lie? Oh, if it would only rain, just to flout this vulgar old curmudgeon! How long was he going to sit in that chair, and air his blue socks, and ogle her?

"Like dancing, Mrs. Strangeways?"

"Dancing?"

"Yes, we give a hop now and again in the Temple Towers ballroom, don't

we, Mother?”

Mrs. Crabtree inclined her head.

“Rather a posh room, Mrs. Strangeways. My own idea. Had pictures painted on all the walls. American bar too. Yes, I’m a man of ideas. Even got a real live fountain in an alcove, fountain with ferns. Gives you a feeling of coolness when your collar’s getting sticky.”

“Indeed! How very original.”

“Cost me two thousand, that ballroom. If you’ve got ideas, they’re worth paying for.”

“Naturally.”

“I dance a bit myself, you know. Don’t I, Mother?”

“Yes, Roger, you do.”

She was rid of them at last. Mr. Crabtree entered the yellow Rolls before his wife, and letting down a window, smirked at her.

“You forgot to thank me for the strawberries.”

“How silly of me! Thank you so much. We ought to have had them for tea.”

“Don’t you worry about that, Mrs. Strangeways. We could eat strawberries every hour of the day up at Temple Towers, if we wanted to. Couldn’t we, Mother?”

“Yes, Roger, if we wanted to.”

The Rolls, driven by the melancholy and embittered Scattergood, carried them away.

Afterwards, she was confronted by the egregious lie she had told. It followed her round the garden, and into the house and into her bedroom like some persistent and suborning old man who had a lien on love and was determined to exercise it. “Now then, young woman, what about it?” What an ass she had been, a sick-making ass. She had had some experience of men, and Mr. Roger Crabtree belonged to the inexorable brotherhood of realists who believed in the philosophy of treating ’em rough and never writing, and who were persuaded that no woman ever told the truth. She gathered that he had not believed her, and that even if a Mr. Strangeways was postulated, Strangeways was not Broster. The truth would come out. It was bound to come out in a

country neighbourhood such as this.

But why was she so distracted about it? She had followed Mrs. Warren's profession for three years, even if she had been fooled into entering it. What was the difference between yesterday and to-day?

Was it because——?

She stood at her window and saw Peter Ghent bending down to fill two cans. She saw him straighten, stand, and look across the river. He appeared to be looking at her window and at her, and so strong was the impression that she drew back guiltily. Dear God, had she suddenly found blushes and a conscience because——? But how impossible, how blah! Love in a valley, and a young man with the eyes of an eager and passionate boy, a young man with illusions about beauty and the mystery one calls God! Oh, no, she was just imagining it. There could be no escape for her in the arms of so earnest a lover.

She took off the frock that Mr. Crabtree had admired, and put on a straw-coloured thing which was old and which she considered dowdy. As a matter of fact it was her fate to be incapable of looking anything but attractive whatever she happened to put on. Her slim, straight figure was too perfect, her head set so charmingly on its sensitive neck. Her hair was beautiful and sleeked itself into gentle waves whether she bothered about it or not.

Well, she would be practical; she would emulate poor, inarticulate Mrs. Crabtree. The garden was needing attention, and though the grass had been mown and chastened by the drought, weeds flourished. She had inherited an assortment of perennial plants that were struggling to survive in competition with the natural flora. She could put her useless hands to weeding, and rescuing delphiniums and phloxes and Michaelmas Daisies from gradual submergence. She could even emulate Peter Ghent and give the thirsty things a drink. Her equipment did include a Sussex trug, a weeding fork, and a small watering-can. She found herself dipping that absurd little can in the river, and was seen doing so by the man who filled and carried two three-gallon cans on each visit to the water.

Never, in the memory of man, had there been a year more fickle and sudden in its moods, and if the spirit of her had revolted against the illusions of mere sense enchantment, and she had said: "I will be dowdy; I will not truckle to sex," the day played tricks. It had been grey for the Crabtree occasion, but about seven o'clock the sky cleared as though a velarium had been stripped from it, and the sunlight came laughing across the valley. She had proposed to put away all enchantment, but the evening restored it to her. Mystery and

golden splendour and the loveliness of secret shadows came back to the world. The trees seemed to change colour; the river opened sleepy eyes. Such trees as were aflower in Ghent's nursery were lit up like brilliant threads in a green tapestry. The brickwork of the old bridge became warm as velvet. She felt the warmth of the sunlight on her cheek and neck, and something in her trembled and reached out to all this sudden beauty.

Jane came out to her.

"I've laid supper, m'am. Would you mind if I went out for an hour? I can wash up when I come back."

"Of course, Jane; go out."

"I'm just going up to Farley, m'am."

"Yes, Jane; I can manage."

She was liking Bob's sister, for though Jane talked too much, she was a kind soul. Mrs. Strangeways put her gardening gear away, and went in to supper, for Jane called it supper. And why shouldn't she clear away and wash up for Jane? It must be rather depressing to come back and find other people's leavings on your hands.

Mr. Crabtree's strawberries were on the table, but she did not fancy that fruit. She would leave it to Jane. She ate her supper with the evening sunlight slanting across the room, and touching a particular picture on the wall. It was one of her own pictures, for there had been days when she had dabbled in water-colours. At the age of eighteen she had been a Slade School student.

She had finished the meal, and had cleared away the plates that were to be washed, into the housemaid's pantry, when she heard the bell ring.

She stood, startled and irresolute.

Who was the visitor? Not that impossible old man?

## XII

She had closed and locked the porch door in Jane's absence, and she would have been glad of an old-fashioned grille through which she could have scrutinized her visitor.

"Who is it, please?"

"Peter Ghent."

She had a blue-and-white check glass-cloth in her hand, and she stood twisting it while the two selves in her struggled together.

"Jane's out."

"Please don't bother, if——"

And suddenly she was ashamed of her cowardice. One of those strange impulses that have made women surrender to fate or to God, and strip themselves and stand naked in the presence of some emotional revolution, moved her to open the door. She saw him standing there, a dark figure against the sunlit landscape; his face was infinitely grave and tired.

"Jane's out for an hour. I'm just washing-up for her."

His eyes were on hers.

"Can I help?"

She was trembling. Her eyelids flickered. This was not the Max Broster atmosphere. Oh, blessed naturalness! She felt that she wanted to wash in it and be clean.

"Haven't you worked enough for to-day?"

"Oh, I'm pretty tough. Besides, some of the trees that looked like passing out, have their heads up."

"I'm so glad."

She was glad. She stood back and let him in.

"Sit and be lazy while I finish."

"I'd like to help. I'm used to it. When my old lady goes out for the day I do

all the chores.”

He was wondering why her face looked so soft and mysterious and why the fear had gone out of her eyes. Nor could he divine the emergence in her of a kind of Godiva spirit, a feeling of solace and exaltation in her passion to renounce all shams. She was not going to lie and pretend to this one man. She was going to dare that which she had never dared before, even though he treated her as Angel Clare treated poor Tess.

She turned and walked down the passage leading to Jane’s pantry, and as he followed her, his young deliberate footsteps had an added meaning for her. How he would loathe her to be surreptitious, even though an inspired sincerity might hurt him, if he was what she felt him to be. There is no shame like surreptitious shame.

“Will you take the cloth, and dry?”

She passed it to him, and put her hands into the basin that held the plates and glass and cutlery. They stood side by side, with the evening sunlight shining in. She was glad of the light, and the mood that sustained her.

“So, you’ve had old Crabtree here.”

She smiled, and without looking at him, passed him a plate.

“Horrible old man.”

He took the plate from her.

“Was the paint very——?”

“Not even dry. And yet, I’m grateful to him.”

He glanced at her soft hair. What an innocent head she had!

“Grateful?”

“Yes, it might be difficult for you to understand. You see, I lied to Mr. Crabtree.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t suppose you have ever had the experience of being shown yourself in a cracked mirror. Imagine someone you despise showing you a very unpleasant picture of yourself. Making you realize what you must appear to be to a vulgar old cynic.”

“Did he do that?”

She passed him another plate.

“Yes. Hence, the idea of pretending about certain things becomes suddenly shameful. Please don’t drop the plate.”

He was holding it with both hands, and looking at her.

“What was the——?”

“I told him I was married.”

“I see.”

“And I’m not. So, when you have dried that plate, please walk out of the house, if you want to.”

He dried the plate, put it down with deliberate, steady hands. The silence held for some seconds. What would he do? She did not care, somehow. She was feeling full of a strange exultation, as though she had taken a handful of snow and held it against her bosom.

She said, almost brightly: “Now, in the language of the road repairers, ‘You have been warned.’ You know what kind of woman people like Crabtree may suppose me to be. If you——”

He stood quite still, looking out of the window.

“Wait a moment. Do you mind telling me something?”

“Haven’t I told you enough? Be merciful.”

“It’s rather different. You remember, the punt, and your losing the pole?”

Her face had a ravaged look.

“Oh, yes. If you must know, I was rather at the end of things.”

“I wondered.”

“So did I. Yes, please hang the cloth on that hook. Jane can put the things away. She knows where she likes them to live. And now, I think I’ll go out into the garden.”

She moved to the door, head up, the sunlight on her hair.

“May I come too?”

“Don’t you think you had better go home?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not the woman I was yesterday. I shall never be that sort of woman again.”

He followed her down the passage, his eyes on the white curve of her neck.

“You think I’m shocked?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, please——”

“But not in the way you think, perhaps. I mean—that——”

“You are shocked at yourself, not me?”

“It’s difficult to explain. You see——”

They had reached the garden, and suddenly she faced about, and her eyes were frightened.

“Please go home, now. Do you mind? I’m so new that I do not know myself, somehow. I must be smelling of paint.”

He looked at her steadfastly.

“No. Yes, I’ll go. But will you tell me your name?”

“Mrs. Strangeways. Yes, it really is that. I lost my husband years ago.”

“Please don’t tell me anything. I’ve no right. But I meant—your other name.”

“Renata.”

“Haven’t you any other?”

“Yes, Sybil.”

She saw him smile.

“That rather suits you better. And thank you, thank you most terribly. Good night.”

Mrs. Maintenance, who liked to have everything tidy and locked up by ten, fell to yawning in her chair, with the dog lying in her lap. Those wretched B.B.C. people had cut off the nine o’clock news, and Mrs. Maintenance, like most of the working world, loved to listen to the news and then toddle up to bed. Mr. Peter was out somewhere, which was unusual, and she could suppose that he had gone across to Chesters to smoke a pipe with Mr. Lynwood. In point of fact Mr. Peter was walking up and down the parched turf of the Green Way, watching a lighted window, and trying to harmonize elements in himself that were utterly at variance.



So, she was a kept woman!

And why had she been so starkly honest with him?

Had he been warned off? Because the other fellow——?

No, damn it, that was not the explanation! That was Crabtree philosophy. Had she not said: “I am not the woman of yesterday. I shall never be that sort of woman again.” She had been trying to make him understand. Yes, just what? That a woman may not be what the vulgar can assume her to be, that she can remain virginal in spite of—— Good God, was he being a prig? Morals. What were morals? The fence you tried to erect round the other person.

And then, hadn't she confessed that she had been feeling desperate about life?

She had not been dramatizing herself or playing with self-pity.

Crucifixion!

And old Crabtree had provided the spear and the sponge soaked in vinegar.

Sensual old cad!

A feeling of assuagement came to him. His restlessness died away. He went to the river and sat down on the bank close to the water. He could hear it stirring almost inaudibly in the water-weeds and sedges. How subtle and intimate nature could be! Her light was still burning, and he watched it. Yes, that was spirit, a tiny point of flame which refused to be put out, in spite of coarse circumstance and social sophistications. Strange how life got you! According to the old conventions he should have been shocked and nauseated, and he wasn't. He was conscious of a profound tenderness, compassion. He seemed to be aware of her as an aery, sensitive thing that had caught in a web, and was struggling to escape. Sensitive! Yes, how would he have felt had he been in her place? Would he not have cried out against any gesture that was too crude? Would he not have asked for a love that could honour the struggle for self-transfiguration, and waited devoutly and in silence?

Yes, he was in love with her, whatever she was and whatever she would be. Dear God, he had never thought to be in love like this! It wounded him, and he exulted. It was a kind of burning, aching tenderness. He wanted her as the parched soil wanted rain, but he did not want her as he supposed that other men had wanted her. Somehow, mere crude sex seemed rather horrible when he thought of her. Was her cry: “Oh, please, not that. Not yet.” The eyes of her spirit were open. They did not ask to be closed with fleshly kisses.

She leaned over in bed to blow out the candle, hesitated, and chose to let it burn a little longer.

She too was asking questions of life, questions that can be insoluble unless emotion breathes upon them.

She had read somewhere that the art of living is not revealed to the very clever people, because life is movement and feeling not a mathematical formula. Shabby thinking made for shabby living, and so much of modern thought is like iced water, brilliant but sterile.

What was she to do?

Something or nothing?

If she had said that the woman of yesterday was dead, then yesterday must die with yesterday's woman.

But how?

She was like some rather exotic plant that needed a support, a stake to which it could be attached. She had been conceived to cling, to put out tendrils.

What a problem!

She turned on her side and blew out the candle.

Wind, and the same grey, cloud-smirched sky, a shabby sky that would not rain. Yet, on this depressing morning, the day's labour had for Ghent something of the tang of adventure.

"All hands to the pump, Bob."

He could make a jest of it, even to rallying the flimsy hose-pipe upon its frailties and perversities. They trailed it out towards the plot whose turn it was to be given drink, and Ghent went down to the pumping-stage.

The river was dull and ruffled silver, the willows unhappy in the wind. Ghent had his back to Folly Farm, but now and again as he changed hands, he would half turn and glance over a shoulder at the garden across the water. He had been pumping for an hour, and George Garland was due to relieve him, when he saw her come out into the garden carrying a little brown box and an oblong, flat object that looked like a sheet of cardboard. She arranged a chair and table, and returning to the house, reappeared with a jug of water. Sitting down with the sketching-block on her knees, she looked across the river, and

raised a hand to him, a little slip of whiteness that made him think of a candle flame.

George came down to the river on long, deliberate legs, his cap tilted back and showing a ruff of impudent hair.

“My go, sir. No bursts this morning.”

Ghent made way for him, and climbing the bank, walked off to join Bob at the filling-tank, but coming to a clump of English yews that stood six feet in their socks, he paused behind them, and looked back. Yes, she was sketching or painting, and he stood and watched the movements of her head and hand. Her chin would come up, and her glance rest for some seconds upon the distant scene, and then her fair head would bow itself, and her hand become busy. What was her subject? The valley, his groves of trees, or even a human figure labouring at a pump? It occurred to him to wonder whether she could paint flowers. Flowers were the most difficult of all subjects, especially in the mass. He had tried an amateurish hand at it and produced nothing but a colour blurr, sentimental jam. You couldn't be just photographic or just impressionist and easy-arty. A flower-border was as subtle as a human face, far more so than some faces.

The work went on. They were dealing with a plantation of choice hybrid rhododendrons, and round each plant a little saucer-shaped hollow had been scooped with a hoe so that the water should sink without waste into the root-ball. Moreover, in working through such a plantation and especially with cans, Ghent and Bob had to move delicately so as not to damage the trees, for the rhododendron is a brittle subject. They were in the middle of the plantation when Peter heard a particular sound that associated itself with hostile memories. The Crabtree motor-boat was coming down the river but with more dignity and less crashing speed than on a previous occasion.

Ghent stood listening.

“Here's our old friend, Bob.”

Fanshaw, emptying a can into one of the water-scoops, turned a laconic head.

“Someone ought to tell him something. Heard about The Rookery, sir?”

“No, what's that?”

“The Council are on him to put the place in order, and what do you think he says he'll do?”

“Go to law, of course.”

“No, take the ruddy roof off the old houses, and let them rot.”

“He can’t do that, Bob, with the tenants inside. Wait a moment, listen.”

The boat’s engine had been switched off, and they could hear someone whistling as one whistles to a dog, but since this method of demanding attention did not produce the necessary reaction, Mr. Crabtree took to shouting.

“Hi, you there!”

The sound of pumping ceased.

“What do you mean by taking water out of the river? I warned young Ghent.”

George had a quick temper and a quicker tongue.

“You don’t own the river, do you? This isn’t The Rookery.”

Mr. Crabtree was standing up.

“I don’t want any sauce from you, my man. I don’t deal with underlings. You go and fetch your boss.”

George grinned on him.

“Fetch him yourself. We’ve got a saying in these parts, Crabtree. You can put a beggar on horseback, but you can’t make a gentleman of him.”

Ghent had waded out of the plantation, and was striding down towards the river. He could see Mrs. Strangeways, an attentive listener under the lime trees, and old Crabtree’s Panama hat and flat and angry face. George had landed him one.

Ghent came down to the bank.

“Good morning, Mr. Crabtree.”

“Ha, there you are! I’d like a——”

“One moment, Mr. Crabtree. I shall be obliged if you’ll refrain from whistling at my men. They’re not dogs, you know.”

The saturnine Scattergood, who was acting as motor-man, smirked exultantly behind his master’s back. This was the stuff to give ’em!

Mr. Crabtree shouted.

“I don’t want any impertinence from you, Ghent. I’ve warned you, haven’t I, against taking water from the river?”

Ghent smiled at him.

“If you would try and mind your own business, Mr. Crabtree, you might be more respected by your neighbours.”

“It is my business, Ghent, and you know it. I’ve got land below you on the river. I’ve got a right to see that my water isn’t interfered with.”

George Garland laughed. The words suggested other and elemental obstructions. Old Crabtree glared at him.

“Yes, a lout like you can be taught to laugh on the other side of his face.”

“Try it,” said George.

But Ghent gave Garland a nod.

“Go on pumping.”

George swung the handle, and Ghent, looking steadily at “Temple Towers,” showed smiling teeth.

“Go ahead, Mr. Crabtree. The trouble with you is that you have never been educated. You don’t know how to behave,” and he turned about and went back to his work among the trees.

But Ghent continued to keep his eyes upon the river. The engine of the motor-boat came to life for a dozen detonations, which gave the craft steering-weight. Mr. Crabtree had sat down, simmering. He had come upon other and more romantic affairs, and not to be insulted by a pauper like young Ghent. Scattergood had orders to run the boat alongside the Folly Farm steps.

“I’ll have to give that lad a lesson.”

“Yes, sir,” said Scattergood obsequiously, still gloating over George Garland’s country candour.

Mrs. Strangeways saw the boat making for her steps. Surely, the old wretch would not have the hardihood to come ashore and invade her garden after that very vulgar scene? But she did not know her Crabtree or appreciate the thickness of his skin. The boat sidled to her steps, and Scattergood stood up and held it pinned there with a boat-hook. She saw Mr. Crabtree rise on his short, thick legs. He had a basket in his hand. More strawberries!

She did not rise to meet him. She remained there with her sketching-block on her knees. She was afraid no longer of Mr. Crabtree and his world. Her appeal to youth had put her beyond and above such barbarians.

“Good morning.”

He took off his hat to her, and his close-cropped, grizzled head was like his smirk.

“Must apologize for someone’s bad manners.”

Her reply was instant.

“We all lose our tempers, sometimes, Mr. Crabtree.”

“Ah, but I don’t allow young louts like Ghent to lose their tempers with me.”

Her eyes widened. Incredible old man! Did he believe that he had behaved with dignity?

“Yes, a man in my position has to exert authority. Discipline, Mrs. Strangeways. I know how to deal with some of these bright young lads. Thought you might like these.”

He displayed the fruit, and then placed the basket on the ground.

“Doing a bit of painting, what?”

“Yes, just dabbling.”

He sidled round and looking over her shoulder, stood staring at a piece of impressionism in colour, soft greys, blues and greens, which puzzled him not a little. He liked his colours crude, and if he saw any colour more habitually than others, it was red. Moreover, he had the commercialist’s contempt for anything that was arty, or assumed such contempt. Men of affairs hired out such people, as you might hire a troupe of acrobats or half a dozen performing dogs.

“Very nice. But what’s that there?”

He had discovered some sort of human figure in the study, low down, near what he assumed to be water.

“Which?”

He bent over and pointed, and she felt his breath on the nape of her neck.

“That thing. Looks like a man.”

“Oh, that’s youth.”

“Youth!”

“Yes, symbolical, you know, youth, in conflict with nature, and the perversities of old man river.”

He rubbed his chin.

“That’s a song, isn’t it? That nigger fellow used to sing it.”

“Yes, it’s a song.”

“And who’s the fellow in the picture?”

“Mr. Ghent.”

“What!”

She assumed an air of bright innocence.

“Yes, you see, he’s part of the landscape, somehow, part of the real country, not bungalows and cheap motor-cars. He belongs there.”

Mr. Crabtree was gazing suspiciously at the back of her neck. He did not understand her, and when he did not understand a thing he felt insulted. Someone might be trying to pull his leg.

“Well, he won’t be long there, my dear. If you ask me, you can paint him out of the picture.”

She raised her head and appeared to look dreamily into the distance.

“Oh, why? I’m afraid I’m rather stupid, Mr. Crabtree.”

She heard him grunt.

“Well, he’ll be put out of business, and a man who’s out of business isn’t in the picture. Simply doesn’t count, you know. No ideas. I’m a man of ideas.”

She smiled vaguely.

“I see. Ideas. Of course, you are very much in the picture, Mr. Crabtree.”

“I should say so. I own half the landscape.”

“You don’t mind my painting your landscape?”

“You paint what you please, my dear. I’ll buy it. Now, try a strawberry. Old Mother Vandeleur hasn’t any fruit like mine.”

## XIII

Mrs. Prance of the Blue Lagoon was a jocund person, broad of hip, broad of nose, black of hair and of eye, a veritable Jocasta of a woman, whose breadth extended in other directions. She knew her world and she knew the creature man, especially so when it appeared as Crabtree, and since she had received some financial backing from Temple Towers, she was her most jocund self when the man of ideas turned up. She spread her hips and her bosom at him, and gave him jocund glances, and sat him down in her best chair, and with her own hands mixed him a cocktail.

“Why do they call ’em cocktails, Corah?”

“Because it’s good for the hens, my dear.”

Mr. Crabtree chuckled. He liked his humour that way, and Mrs. Prance’s humour was as broad as her face. She sat spread before him with a voluminous opulence which she knew was pleasing to lustful old men. Meanwhile, she wondered whether his visit postulated business or pleasure, or both.

“Well, how are houses?”

“Laying well. Good egg, my dear. Here’s to us.”

They clinked glasses, and drank.

“And how’s the naked stuff, swimming-pool and all that?”

Mrs. Prance crinkled up her broad nose.

“Not too bad. The weather’s a bit bloody, of course. But then, this dryness.”

“Good for wets.”

“Or the wits, old dear.”

“Yes, I’ve got them all right. Ideas. By the way, that young fellow Ghent any use to you?”

“Not much. Sold me some trees for my tubs.”

“Well, I’m getting him tied up. I’ve caught him pumping water out of the river, your water, my water. I own the bank opposite you, you know, for half a



mile. That means it's our water. I'm going for him over this. Won't you come in on the row?"

Mrs. Prance twiddled her glass.

"Litigation?"

"Yes, but you don't pay. You just come in with me on the protest. I'm going to see Sowerby this afternoon. You see, young Ghent's been rude to me, and I don't allow a cub like him to cheek me. Give him a lesson. Dry him up, both ways."

"You're tough," said she.

He was pleased.

"I am that. I'm a bad man to quarrel with. You see, if you get a penurious pup like young Ghent tied up in litigation, when he can't afford it, the thing's easy. I've a mind to buy his potty little nursery, and when I want a thing I get it. Ideas. It wouldn't make a bad building site. Good for you too, Corah."

She laughed at him and with him.

"Yes, trees can't bathe."

"And they only drink water, what! Oh, by the way, called on Mrs. Strangeways at Folly Farm?"

"No."

"Well, you do. Nice little bit. You might ask her to one of your Saturday hops."

"And you'll honour us?"

Mr. Crabtree winked at her.

"I might, if her amateur husband doesn't cut in for the week-end."

The yellow Rolls and Scattergood were waiting for him, and twenty minutes later a clerk climbed the stairs to Mr. Sowerby's room and told him that Mr. Roger Crabtree was below. The lawyer smiled a little tired smile. He had been to a dance the night before, and the jazz band had somehow reminded him of those flamboyant functions at Temple Towers where five or six insolent young men produced an insolent cacophony and called it music.

"Show Mr. Crabtree up."

Listening to Temple Towers objurgations on riparian rights, and the campaign that was to be opened against that rather nice lad with the honest

eyes, Mr. Sowerby seemed to hear once more the splurgings of a saxophone. Was there anything quite like the crass cunning of this old bandit? Human nature was sometimes incredible, but it came and sat in your office, and was both malicious and self-righteous.

“You see, we should get him both ways, Sowerby. If we put him off water, his trees die, and if he’s got to beat us he’ll have to spend money which he hasn’t got. What’s the position? I’ve always understood that a fellow can’t draw water from a river if the owners below him object.”

Mr. Sowerby would not commit himself, but he said: “Don’t you think this matter rather too small for you?”

“Small?”

“Yes. Ghent’s only a youngster, and——”

“The cub’s been rude to me, and I’ll teach him a lesson.”

Mr. Sowerby closed his eyes for a moment. He was still hearing jazz band and hating it.

“I’d rather you handled the matter yourself, Mr. Crabtree.”

“What! You mean you won’t act?”

“That is my meaning. I shouldn’t feel quite happy about it.”

“Damn it, man, I don’t see why. It’s business.”

“Quite so, but if I might tender you some advice, not only as a lawyer, but as a man——”

“You mean, I’ve got no case?”

“Ethically, I think not.”

“Ethically! What’s that?”

Mr. Sowerby gently smiled at him.

“Oh, well, our ideas don’t quite tally. I’d rather you handled the matter yourself, or——”

Mr. Crabtree looked hard at the lawyer.

“You’re a snob like the rest of ’em, Sowerby. Is that it?”

“Not quite that, sir, I think. Why not write Mr. Ghent a friendly letter?”

“I’ll write him a letter, Sowerby, a letter with some guts in it. And let me tell you, I don’t like your attitude. It isn’t professional. It’s—it’s smug. I pay a

lawyer to defend my interests.”

“I should always be ready to do that for a client, but there are other interests, you know. Even a lawyer has to be somewhat impartial.”

“Well, I don’t pay for that sort of stuff. A fellow who can’t or won’t deliver the goods is no use to me.”

And Mr. Crabtree walked out of the office.

Mrs. Strangeways had put her painting-block away, and was writing a letter, balancing the pad upon her knee. It was so much more easy a letter to write now that she had confessed herself to the spirit of youth, and was ready to put off the frock of expediency. Mr. Crabtree’s basket of strawberries lay on the grass beside her like some pagan offering, and Jane, coming out into the garden to consult her mistress upon some domestic detail, was told to remove that basket of fruit.

“You can eat them, Jane, or take them across to your brother.”

“Don’t you fancy ’em, m’am?”

“No, Jane.”

Jane picked up the basket and carried it into the house. Two pounds of perfect fruit! They might be a Crabtree product, but that was no reason why they should not be enjoyed, and Jane helped herself to half a dozen, popping them primly into her mouth, and dropping the stalks into the colander which she kept in the sink for the reception of such oddments.

Mrs. Strangeways re-read what she had written.

DEAR MAX,

I think it must have become obvious to both of us that a certain association has ceased to be real. I have been asking myself how so personal a recession should be persuaded to make its exit. I make no claims, and ask you to make none.

It is rather my wish that I should write you a cheque for such money as I have lying at the bank. Also, I should like to return the lease of this house and the furniture. Please do not misunderstand me. There is no pique in my decision. It is just that I have a feeling that what has happened between us should come to an end with some sort of dignity and niceness.

I hope you are feeling better, my dear.

Please don't worry about me.

Let us give each other back our freedom, and say "Thank you."

How strange was life! A month ago she would not have had the courage to write such a letter, and confront its implied finality. But the wheel turned, and the season changed, or the skies were opened, and you discovered unsuspected springs of chastity welling up within you. With a sincerity that was ruthless she was stripping herself of the past and its material hypocrisies, and going out naked into the world, she who was wise as to the beastliness of such an adventure. She would possess nothing, or next to nothing. She might be one of that crowd of lonely, resourceless women who have nothing to sell but sex, and for her such merchandise was no longer marketable. Yet, she was conscious of a strange peace, serenity, a tremor of exultation. She would be herself once more, free to live or die, to love or lose as the spirit of her chose.

What did this mean? That she was still young with the passionate generosity of youth, a creature to whom shabby compromise was cowardly. She could do the mad thing. She could crucify herself for an illusion. She could go and fight in Spain like some crusading youngster whom the old men called a fool. She could play the Magdalene, and give all in tears and unguents. What would the conventionalists say of such a choice? Shrug, and catalogue it as a form of emotional self-flagellation? Well, she did not care. All the accostings of life, its shabby, oblique glances in the market-place, had become like that basket of strawberries.

She was happy.

She had not known such happiness as this for years.

Even if death came it would be clean.

Yes, she was happy.

In the soft, summer twilight Ghent walked twice to the crown of the Weir Bridge, and each time the spirit failed in him. He could see her sitting under the lime trees, her straw-coloured dress like a flake of sunlight in the green dusk. He stood there and was afraid, and even the familiar tumult of the weir seemed strange to him.

For a second time he found himself loitering in the Marplot lane. He could

hear Bunter barking at the garden gate. “Why this thusness, my master? Have courage.” Yes, life was so much simpler for a dog who loved with his eyes and his tongue and his tail, and was not afflicted with supersensitive inhibitions. Why not behave like that most lovable and trustful of creatures? Why tie up your soul with insulating-tape or wrap it in cellophane? Man was more than a parcel of frustrated urges.

For a third time he set out towards the bridge, and as the hedge gave place to parapet, and the river and the Folly Farm garden became visible he saw that her chair was empty. He stood stock-still, shocked by the thought that she had seen his previous saunterings and misconstrued them. Had she imagined that he was going to do the thing that he had flinched from doing, and that she too was afraid, and had fled into the house? She was in no mood to meet him. She — But, then, of course, she might not realize, might mistrust, might flinch from what might seem to be just sex-adventure. He could not go blundering down into her garden like some besotted boy. It was unthinkable that he should hurt her.

The road, rising at the bridge, remained dead ground beyond it, and Ghent, strolling on up the slope, suddenly saw her coming towards him. Again, he stood still. She had something white in one hand. There was a letter-box in a brick pillar on the Marplot side of the bridge, and he could suppose that she had come out to post a letter. But had she seen him on the bridge, and had she been waiting until she thought the coast was clear?

What ought he to do? Turn back? But that would be absurd and churlish. Walk on and pretend that he was going to Chesters? She was very near now. She had shown no sign of faltering, and as he watched her face, it seemed to him that it had a kind of shadowless sheen. If he was like Balaam’s ass, she appeared as untroubled as God’s angel.

“Jane told me that there is a box here.”

She smiled at him.

“Yes, can I post it for you? I just came out to look at the sky.”

“I think I can walk as far as that. No rain yet, I’m afraid.”

He was standing by the parapet with the straightness and gravity of a sentry upon duty. No, she could not let him post that letter for her. He might have seen to whom it was addressed, and he could not very well divine its contents and their significance.

He said: “I am sorry about this morning.”

She had paused.

“Need you apologize for that ridiculous old man?”

“I’m afraid he is more than that.”

Her face became as serious as his.

“Do you think so? At the same time I’d like to warn you that——”

“Oh, yes, I know. He wants to stop me using water. It’s all very petty and puerile.”

“But can he?”

“I believe he can make things awkward. There are all sorts of legal snags, Conservators and Water Boards, and owners’ rights.”

“I’m afraid I’m dreadfully ignorant.”

“Well, one is. One doesn’t go about looking for trouble, until someone like our old friend tries to cross you. But you want to post your letter.”

“Won’t you come too?”

She saw his face and figure lose their stiffness.

“May I?”

“Well, it’s not very far! And these long summer evenings make one feel restless.”

“Yes, one can see too much.”

She glanced up at him quickly.

“Oh! Just how?”

“What I meant was, that you can go prowling around, looking at things you can’t alter. In winter——”

“You have to just sit by the fire?”

“Yes. But I’m not going to——”

“Why not?”

“But you didn’t know that I was——”

“Perhaps I did. It’s your trees.”

They had reached the box, and she slipped the letter into it.

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s my trees.”

“Do you love them very much?”

“Yes, one does. Besides, it’s more than that.”

“I know. We’re both up against things, in different ways. Mayn’t I see your trees?”

“Now?”

“Well, it’s rather dark. To-morrow?”

“I’d love you to. I have to go out in the morning. Would you come to tea? I’m afraid things are looking rather shabby.”

“It’s a shabby summer. Yes, I’ll come. About what time?”

“Half-past four?”

She turned to go back, and he walked with her over the bridge and as far as the Folly Farm gate, and in crossing the river after the posting of that letter she felt that she had put clean water between her and the past.

If we analyse ourselves too mercilessly we may discover that we are very ridiculous creatures, and that nothing in life is really worth while; so, it would appear that the tyrant, petty or otherwise, must remain unridiculous to himself, and his appetite for power inexhaustible.

So, two men, opening and reading their morning letters, could fly off and up into different clouds, and conceal themselves in emotional vapour. Ghent, with old Crabtree’s threatening letter in his pocket, went out to reflect upon it, and in wandering among his trees saw them as a tired physician might become conscious of poor humanity. He saw them differently, not merely as sick things to be succoured, but as poor bodies many of which were tainted, and would never be fit for life’s market-place.

Yes, why hadn’t he realized it before? Because he was young, because this was his first experience of one of nature’s disharmonies? Not only would scores of his conifers die, many that survived would be tainted trees, and in the brutal language of old Crabtree, unsaleable. He saw it now as he wandered amid the plantations. Rusty streaks everywhere, dead branches, tarnish, green bodies that looked as though vitriol had been splashed over parts of them. He might save his trees, or rain might save them, but hundreds of his conifers would be unsaleable, lopsided, maimed specimens which could not be fobbed off on possible purchasers. People expected to be supplied with perfect trees, not cripples with dead streaks in them. Well, naturally. Nor could he, as an

expert and a lover of trees, send out stuff that he would have described as rubbish.

Yes, how was it that he had not realized that after all this fuss and fury, this humping of cans, he was yet to be nature's fool, one of her whipping-boys? The dead trees that would stand there in sad and rusty splendour would be less significant than those that survived and were maimed. After years of work this shabby summer would leave him with hundreds of cripples, blemished things which were useless. Well, well! What was he going to do about it? Hang on, replace the cripples? And how? By propagation or by purchase? He could not afford to buy in new stock, unless it was baby stuff, and seed-sowing and cuttings meant that he would have to serve another seven years for Rachel.

Rachel! No, her name was—— But where the devil was he allowing himself to drift?

He sat down on the river bank and re-read Roger Crabtree's letter.

Old beast!

The young man in him raged. Was youth always to be flouted and fooled by the cunning old men? No, damn it, he would fight. After all, he still had his flowering shrubs, and his deciduous stuff, and the more precious things. Life had given him a slap in the face, and there was old Crabtree waiting on the other side of the hedge and expecting him to throw up his hands and boohoo.

Damn old Crabtree!

He made as though to tear up the letter and throw the pieces into the river, but he put it back in his pocket.

He was going up to see Lady Vandeleur. He would show her the letter. She was such an Olympian person. She always made you feel bigger than you were. Also, he was hoping that something might come of Sir Gavin Marwood's presence at Thursby. Given a job like the reconditioning of Thursby—— But, good Lord, one of the big bow-wow firms would more likely swallow that! The bill might run into thousands.

Also, she was coming to tea, and to look at his poor trees. Sybil. Yes, that name suited her. And had not she said that she too was up against things.

He would go and see Lady Melissa.

Ghent's old car turned into the south lodge gate, and he saw the great avenue before him. He drove slowly, for the avenue's stateliness forbade crass



speed; my lady loved neither cars nor aeroplanes. These splendid trees with their smooth grey trunks and their branches interlacing overhead belonged to a gracious and an understanding world. Under the high green roof of the beeches the light had a greenish tinge, and the air was exquisitely cool. Right and left the avenue's windows gave Ghent glimpses of the park, scrolls of grass growing tawny for lack of rain. Here too were more splendid trees that in their strength defied the drought, and innumerable vistas that ended in mystery.

Ghent drove up to the great white house which looked so cool and calm in its world of trees. Peace and assuagement dwelt here. Never had he come to Temple Manor without feeling that a tranquil and consoling hand had been laid upon his forehead. He took the car round to the stable yard and parking it there, made his way to a particular door. It was a private door, and used by the privileged few, and over its lintel it bore a Latin inscription, saying "This is the Door of Friends."

Ghent rang the bell, and found himself looking into the familiar and paternal face of old Sanderson the butler.

"Good morning, Mr. Sanderson. I wonder if her ladyship could see me?"

"I expect so, sir."

"I don't want to trouble her if—— Would you ask? Say I can come at any other time."

Old Sanderson had two smiles, one that was polite and clipped, and one which spread to his whiskers. He gave Ghent the whisker smile.

"Her ladyship is on the terrace. She will be going round the garden."

"I'll wait here."

"No, come in, Mr. Ghent. We've no party."

Ghent followed him in.

The great house was as cool and serene as its beech trees. It was full of beautiful things, things that said: "Look at me, and you may touch me if you have the right kind of fingers." The great hall was paved with squares of black and white marble, and Ghent always had the feeling that you should walk delicately over this floor. The high doorway and the tall windows were full of sunlight and green distances. He followed Sanderson, and saw the back of one of those big basket chairs, like a sentry-box, with a seat.

"Mr. Ghent, my lady."

Peter saw her knees and feet, and a hand, and then her profile.

“Mr. Ghent? Thank you, Sanderson. Bring Mr. Ghent a chair.”

She rose and stood for a moment, looking into his young face with those very kind, shrewd eyes. They could be very disconcerting eyes to people who did not please her, and the one thing she abhorred was insincerity. Almost she could respect the sincerity of old Crabtree’s crass selfishness and the stupendous stupidity of it, while despising his snobbery. If she loved youth, she loved it for its hot and magnanimous angers and its urge to set life free, though she knew that youth could be as self-absorbed as any Narcissus.

“Sit down, Peter.”

“Are you sure I’m not——”

“Quite sure. Besides, I want to pick your brains about one or two things.”

Some people used that horrible word psychic about her, but if she had peculiar powers of divination, that was for herself and the few. Besides, Peter’s very sensitive face was read so easily, like a boy’s face or a dog’s face. She hated faces that hung in front of you like bladders of lard.

He sat down and looked across the terrace at her landscape, and then along it to the group of cypresses that had been planted for a particular purpose, to shut out the impertinence that was Temple Towers.

“I’ve come for advice.”

She smiled at him.

“At my age one gives advice without expecting it to be taken.”

“It is rather necessary, in this case.”

Was he hard up, poor lad, and needing help? She did not like people who whimpered. She preferred the courage of the common people to the voluble pessimism and self-pity of the pseudo-intellectualists.

“Tell me.”

“It’s my dear neighbour.”

“Mr. Roger Crabtree?”

“Yes,” and he passed her the letter.

He watched her face while she was reading the letter. She began to smile. There were little crinkles of mischief round her eyes.

“Dear old man. Really, you know, Peter, he is rather like a gadfly.”

“Only you can’t swat him.”

“No, but he might be tamed, or educated. If he were received into a society in which certain things were not done, he might learn to cease from doing them. I think I was wrong in not calling on Temple Towers. What a conceited old woman!”

Ghent laughed.

“If anyone could cure him——! But what about his threat to take action? I’m quite ignorant of the law.”

“I think he could make much trouble for you, Peter. I’ll get an opinion on it.”

“Oh, but you mustn’t bother.”

“It piques me. But wait a moment. There’s a way round. I have heard of it being done before. No one can prevent you from digging a surface well within a few yards of the river. Water would seep into it.”

His face lit up.

“Why didn’t I think of that? Ten feet would be enough. We could do it in a day, and sink our pump out of sight.”

She folded up the letter.

“I’ll keep this, if I may, for my lawyers. It’s such a characteristic document. And how are things?”

“Oh, not too good. A lot of damage. The drought is going to spoil lots of trees, even if it doesn’t kill them.”

“I’m sorry, Peter.”

“I’m going to fight it out with nature and old Crabtree. Even if I go down, he shan’t have Marplot.”

“You won’t go down, my dear. By the way, I am seeing Sir Gavin soon. I will do a little canvassing.”

“Do you really think I have a chance?”

“I do.”

“It would help me most terribly. I don’t know why you should trouble.”

“Just because I like to. Cynics would call it the selfish glow engendered by the exercise of patronage.”

“Oh, damn the cynics! They would pull a butterfly to pieces and then assert that flight could not have been possible to so flimsy a creature. And they

analyse motives as though they were looking for maggots in cheese.”

“Good for you, my dear. By the way, I haven’t called yet on your new neighbour.”

“I rather wish you would. Old Crabtree has.”

“Shall we analyse motives!”

“He’s just a nasty old man. Started taking her strawberries.”

“Won’t you allow him even a paternal interest, Peter?”

His young face looked fierce.

“No. An old man like that brings tarnish. And she’s not wanting that. I mean—— Oh, if you would call on her, I think you would understand.”

“Yes, my dear, I think I understand.”

Suddenly, he flushed up and blurted the words at her.

“She’s coming to tea with me this afternoon.”

“Yes, my dear, I understand.”

## XIV

Mrs. Maintenance sat up and took notice.

Mrs. Strangeways was coming to tea, and Mr. Peter had returned by way of Loddon, bringing with him two small cardboard cartons containing scones and fancy cakes. Mr. Peter had apologized to her for the cakes. He was never one to hurt your feelings. "I thought it would save you trouble, Sarah. Rather sudden, too." It most certainly was. He was keeping on his best suit, the suit he had gone to Temple Manor in, and he had had his hair cut in Loddon. Even Bunter knew that by the smell. Well, well! Mrs. Maintenance and Jane had, of course, indulged in confidential gossip, and Jane had given Mrs. Maintenance to understand that Mrs. Strangeways was a pretty little lady.

Ghent did no work that afternoon, beyond consulting with Bob and George as to the digging of a shallow well about ten yards from the river bank. Fanshaw was convinced that they would strike water, and plenty of it, at ten feet. They could line the excavation with rough boards and strut it, and build a concealed stage for the pump. The men were eloquent on the subject of Mr. Crabtree.

"I guess I got him one," said George. "Better than a sock on the jaw."

"There's only one place I'd like to see the old blighter in."

"What's that, Bob?"

"His coffin."

"Covered with gold nobs and velvet. Suppose we'd better spread the soil we take out somewhere, sir, or old Nosey Parker will think we're digging for diamonds!"

Ghent did not think that such caution was necessary.

A happy restlessness possessed him. He spent half an hour in the little office, entering up two or three orders that had come in, and at a quarter to four he went across to the cottage. The Marplot parlour was a masculine room, and Ghent spent ten minutes shaking up the cushions, and hiding one of them under the sofa, for its flock was proposing to protrude. He tidied up mantelpiece and bookshelves, put his pipes away in the corner-cupboard, and

found a mat that would cover the hole in the carpet in front of the fireplace. At four o'clock Mrs. Maintenance came in to lay tea on the gate-legged table. Normally, it lived with only one flap in action, for the swing-gate of the other was shaky.

“Better leave it like that, Sarah.”

“It does look a little lopsided, sir, doesn't it?”

“Never mind. Safety first.”

Four o'clock! The solemn, gold-faced grandfather in the hall sang four deep, vibrant notes. She was coming at a quarter past four. Ghent strolled out into the cottage garden where a grass path ran from porch to gate between cottage borders backed by old fruit trees. He walked to the gate and back, not feeling the sun-scorched turf under his feet. In one border he had been trying out a selection of new delphiniums raised from his own seed taken from a particular plant, and the tall spires were in bloom. The raising of delphiniums is a glorious adventure, and these young plants had thrown up some splendid spikes of every shade of blue and mauve and violet, white-eyed and bee-eyed, the flowers set close upon the stem. Ghent had been giving them names, fanciful titles, “Blue Splendour,” “Isoult,” and to one “Salisbury” because of its immense, grey-blue spire. A fresh plant had just opened its first petals, cobalt blue and mauve, and Ghent stepped into the border to examine it more closely. Yes, this was an exquisite thing, and suddenly he knew that he wanted to call it after her. Sybil Strangeways. Should he ask her to honour——?

And then he heard the click of the gate-latch, and stood still, with a strange feeling of breathlessness, as though that little sound was more mysterious than the hum of the bees that were visiting the blue spikes of the flowers. She had come. He saw her in the gateway. She was wearing something grey that had a tinge of blue in it.

He stepped out of the border, and wondered why it was that he had nothing to say to her, nothing, save those few significant words that he did not dare to utter.

“I hope I'm not late.”

It was like some conventional opening on life's chessboard, but when she saw those sheaves of colour, her face became mystical.

“How lovely!”

That too was conventional in its language, but not in the way she spoke the words.

“Yes, some new hybrids.”

“Did you raise them yourself?”

“Yes. You never know what you are going to get. One plant gave me all these.”

“How lucky! Do you give them names?”

“Everybody does. That’s why our language is becoming like that of the Tower of Babel. Yes, I call that one Salisbury. Do you see?”

“Of course. The cathedral spire.”

“And that is Pale Hands.”

“But do delphiniums grow beside the Shalimar?”

He laughed, and watched her face.

“Perhaps. I haven’t a name for this one yet. Just opening up.”

“Yes, I think that is one of the loveliest. Look at the shading of the blues and mauves and violets.”

“Do you think you could paint it?”

“I could try.”

“I’ll send you the spike.”

“Oh, you mustn’t do that. Let it have its life.”

“Do you feel like that about things?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if you would let me use your name? Sybil Strangeways.”

Her lashes flickered. Had he gone too far?

“Yes. If you——”

“Thank you. I’ll label it presently.”

Mrs. Maintenance possessed an old pack-horse bell which she rang when a meal was ready, and Mr. Peter had to be brought in from the nursery, and Bunter’s barking and the ringing of the bell were mingled. The dog came trotting out, one ear up and one ear down, to make his bow to the lady, for Bunter had nice manners, and was a connoisseur of human perfumes. He wagged, smiled, and smelt Mrs. Strangeways’s shoes and skirt, and evidently he approved of her. When she bent down to pat him, with her face close to his

hairy head, he got in what Mrs. Maintenance described as “A quick one,” his tongue making contact with the tip of her pretty, blunt nose.

She laughed.

“My dear, that was sudden of you.”

Ghent gave Bunter a playful push with the toe of his shoe.

“Forward fellow!”

They went in to tea.

That funny old parlour of his intrigued her. She had seen nothing quite like it before. You stepped down into it from the passage, and saw the long, low latticed window with its faded yellow curtains full of the sunlight and green leaves and flowers. A sweet-water vine made a pattern about it. Mrs. Maintenance had spread a white cloth on the oak table. The china was blue Willow Pattern. Peter’s plate of confectionery cakes looked like a little dish of flowers. Would she pour out? Yes, he rather preferred nursery tea. She sat down in a rush-bottomed chair placed where her knees were free under the flap that could be relied upon in the matter of stability. Ghent took the other chair, with his legs tucked sideways against the lowered leaf.

She had her back to the light. He was facing it. It shone on her hair, but left her face in the shadow.

“Is it sugar?”

“Please. Two lumps.”

He watched the movements of her hands. Hands could be so mysterious, and yet so indicative. She was wearing no rings, and to him they were virginal hands.

“I see Mrs. Maintenance has given us jam. Do you——?”

“Is it raspberry?”

“Yes, and home made.”

“I used to be quite a pig about raspberry jam.”

He passed her the dish and a spoon.

“I can’t imagine you being a pig about anything.”

“All small girls are pigs.”



“Are they? Well, let’s call it human. Pig better than prig. I wonder how it is that one grows——?”

“What?”

“Fastidious.”

She bent her head over that word, and cutting a scone in half, buttered it and added jam.

“Yes, I know. If one can afford to be. Of course, one always ought to insist on being able to afford—— I do like your old lady’s name.”

“Maintenance.”

“Yes, so Tudor. She ought to wear a cap.”

He laughed.

“She doesn’t. Besides, it would have to be rather formidable.”

“Is she that?”

“Oh, no. Feels frightfully responsible about things.”

“I like that too. One should be. What’s her other name?”

“Sarah.”

“Like Sarah Siddons. That always makes me feel——”

She paused and the word slipped from him.

“Tragic.”

Her face seemed to darken a little under her hair. He saw her hand go to her cup, and then withdraw itself. There was a sense of frustration in the gesture.

“Perhaps.”

He had a piano in the parlour. He had suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to buy cigarettes, for being a pipe-smoker he had no use for those effeminacies, and getting up to hunt in the corner-cupboard for some forgotten box of straight-cuts, he was aware of her rising and going to the piano. It was not a good piano. In fact, it could be described as a farmhouse parlour piano, long and yellow in the tooth, and its voice cracking with age. She raised the lid of the keyboard, and touched a note, and a queer, husky thrill came from the wire.

“Terribly sorry. I’ve no cigarettes.”

“Please don’t bother. I don’t want to smoke.”

“And I’m afraid the piano is no good. That’s one of the tired notes.”

“Do you play?”

“No. Strum a bit. And you?”

“I used to be rather keen. Debussy, and Percy Grainger. Not the very very modern.”

“I won’t ask you to play on that. I’m awfully sorry about the cigarettes. Mrs. Maintenance is no use in such a crisis.”

“Really, I’m off smoking.”

“Do you mind if I——? No, I won’t.”

“Oh, yes, please do, especially a pipe.”

“Object to cigarettes?”

She had closed the keyboard and returned to her chair.

“Somehow, yes. Modernity seems to smell of cigarettes, and to have got its fingers stained with them.”

“Symbolical. Like the women who don’t seem able to drive a car without a cigarette stuck in their hard, bold faces.”

She turned to look out of the window.

“Yes, shallow faces. Like the new little houses, very sanitary and efficient.”

“But somehow horrible. By the way, Lady Vandeleur is coming to call on you.”

He saw her head go up. She was startled.

“Is she? I don’t know that I’m exactly in her world.”

He was lighting his pipe, and he paused.

“Oh, her world is Debussy and Keats, and Butterflies in The Rain, with a touch of Queen Elizabeth thrown in when people are nasty. You’ll like her awfully.”

He saw her hand go to her hair.

“I’m rather frightened, you know, of the people who can be themselves.

I'm only just beginning. When are you going to show me your trees?"

"Now, if you like."

"Yes, I'm not afraid of trees."

If she had said that she was only just beginning to be herself, she asked to be shown the life of a tree, how it began, what its babyhood was like, how it was bred and nurtured. So, Ghent took her first to that sheltered corner where hundreds of baby trees stood in frames, or sheltered by boards or wattles. And she was fascinated by these pygmy trees, sequoias, cedars, cypresses and junipers in miniature, glossy little creatures of every shade of green and gold and greyish blue. She bent down and touched them, stroked their soft pelts as she would have stroked a dog.

"Dear, funny little things. And yet, so dignified."

He was looking down at her, very conscious of those gentle gestures, and of the way her face had lit up. Bunter was with them, and the dog looked at his master, and then at the lady, and suddenly wagged a propitiatory tail. Ghent bent down and patted him.

"Isn't it strange that they should be so different."

Ghent smiled.

"Yes, that's the eternal mystery. Like music and poetry, it puts the cut-and-dried clever people in a corner to invent a new word that sounds marvellous and means nothing. But why, and how?"

She straightened and stood contemplating the young trees.

"Yes, it's all a mystery. And how tall does that one grow?"

"You mean that little fellow?"

"Yes."

"That's Mr. Sequoia, and he can run up to two hundred feet."

"And those little glossy green dears?"

"Thuya Lobii. Not quite so lofty. A hundred or more when grown as specimens."

"And what's that exquisite bluey thing?"

"Cupressus arizonica conica. Something of a novelty."

“Will it grow up to its name?”

“I’m short of information on that point.”

When she saw the great, weeping beech tree, she had to creep inside it and look up into the green cupola, while the dim light made her face very soft and pale. It seemed to Ghent that her eyes became larger and almost black, for the pupils were dilated in the shadow.

“What a place for a hot day.”

He said that it was always cool here, and that on Sundays in summer he went to sleep in a deck-chair.

She stood, head up, listening.

“How still! That’s the weir I can hear?”

“Yes, it never stops. I suppose I hardly notice it.”

“Nature sounds don’t matter. They just fit in.”

But when he took her down the Green Way with its parched turf, she grew more silent, for even to her inexperienced eyes the devastations of the drought were manifest. Everywhere, a tarnished or a rusty tree betrayed the touch of death, and the thing saddened her, not only because death among trees moved her to pity, but because they were his trees, and the loss of them meant much to him.

“Won’t they recover?”

“No. Good for the bonfire, that’s all. You see, in a nursery one has to move trees every two or three years.”

“Why?”

“To persuade them to make good root-balls, and so that they can be sold safely for transplanting. But in an abnormal year like this, one’s bound to have losses.”

“You have to take the risk?”

“Yes.”

She seemed to reflect upon that.

“Like life. Not easy to transplant yourself. Of course, you can’t water all these thousands of trees.”

“Not unless one was a very rich man, like our old friend.”

Her face hardened.

“Old beast! And he wants to stop you doing what you can.”

“Well, he wants my ground. Naboth’s Vineyard. If I break, he thinks——”

“But you won’t.”

“I’ll try not to. But you see, it isn’t only those dead trees. It’s the ones that are partially damaged. They’re not saleable. You can’t send out a blemished tree.”

“What do you do?”

“Cut out the dead stuff, and give them a chance to bush out again. But that means a loss. Having to wait for your returns.”

They had reached the boundary fence and its hedge, and he pushed through and showed her Mr. Roger Crabtree’s park. It had a wild and dishevelled beauty of its own with its purple polled thistles and ferns and bramble and briar-rose, but it did not owe any of its beauty to Temple Towers. And to Ghent it was sinister because of its suggestions, and the menace of weeds and conies.

“That’s Mr. Crabtree.”

Her face became elfish.

“Gone wild, or to seed!”

“I wish he would do. A few years ago those fields grew good wheat instead of docks and thistles. You see, I had to put all this wire up to keep the rabbits out. Destructive little devils.”

“Doesn’t the old man shoot them?”

“They tell me he couldn’t hit a haystack. Besides, he encourages the creatures. I have even found holes cut in my wire to let them on to my land.”

“That sounds incredible.”

“But true.”

“How utterly petty and spiteful. You wouldn’t think a rational person——”

Ghent laughed.

“Oh, we’re never quite rational, are we, even the wisest of us? And I suppose we should be rather damnable if we were. Prejudices, loves and hates, and mixed motives. I agree with Bunter when he goes berserk over a rat. Sometimes I feel like that over old Crabtree. Yes, we’re awful weathercocks.

A wind hits us, and we twirl round all in a second.”

She looked up into his face.

“I don’t know. I should have said that when you got set over a thing, you stuck at it. What about those water-cans?”

He smiled down at her.

“Oh, that was partly temper. Let’s go back by the river.”

Ghent’s little monologue on the rational man might have contained elements of prophecy, and your experimenting Deity, applying some painful stimulus to a certain portion of the human anatomy, might say to his class of angel students: “Let us see how the creature will jump.”

Mr. Max Broster, when he opened and read Mrs. Strangeways’s letter at his breakfast table, was quite unexpectedly angered by it, whereas a month ago he might have been conscious of relief. To put it crudely, his vanity appeared to be falling between two stools. His attempt to arrange a reconciliation with his wife had been spoilt by too much complacency and striding sex. He had taken Irene out to dinner at the Berkeley, given her a Gin and Italian, a bottle of Pommery 1921, a brandy and black coffee, and some rather patronizing compliments, and returning with her to her flat had attempted, rather roughly and prematurely, to restore marital relations. And Irene had slapped his face. Irene had said a number of very frank and unkind things to him. Did he think she was a tart, to be taken out to dinner, primed, and then tumbled on a bed. “No, my lad, I am not quite so easy as all that.” Well, really, women were inexplicable! What business had a wife to stand upon her dignity, when you showed a desire to restore to her a proper and legalized passion? And here was Renata also turning him down. His vanity was hurt. He felt exceedingly sorry for himself. He wanted to be flattered, comforted, petted.

He wanted Renata.

After all, might she not be attempting a noble self-effacement? Some women did that sort of thing. Just impulse, a kind of inverted tenderness. Besides, this was a new experience for him. He had always shed his romantic adventures, never been shed by them. He would give Irene a lesson. He would go down and be loved by Renata.

His car passed Marplot just when Ghent and Mrs. Strangeways were gazing upon the Crabtree wilderness. Cars passed over the Weir Bridge without being remarkable, nor did they hear it stop at the Folly Farm gate. The

gate was shut, and Mr. Broster, feeling that life was wronging him, even in such trivialities, got out and opened it. The garage was locked, and he had to leave his car outside the white fence.

Moreover, the porch door was locked. Jane, being nervous, saw to that; doors were locked when she was alone in the house. Mr. Broster rang the bell. Now, Jane had heard the car and taken a peep at it through the landing window, and seeing so handsome and sumptuous a machine was relieved of any anxiety as to tramps. She went down and unlocked and opened the porch door.

“Mrs. Strangeways in?”

Not only did he ask the question, but he showed every intention of coming in, as though he had a right to enter, but Jane stood her ground.

“Mrs. Strangeways is out, sir.”

“Out! Oh, where?”

“Having tea with Mr. Ghent, across the river.”

Jane did notice that the strange gentleman’s rather high and haughty face seemed to tighten.

“Is that so! Well, just give me the garage key. I’ll put the car away, and wait in the garden.”

Jane’s eyes popped.

“The garage key, sir?”

“Yes,” said he sharply; “I’ll put my luggage out, and you might carry it up.”

Jane’s eyes popped still further.

“Mrs. Strangeways wasn’t expecting anybody, sir.”

“So I infer. But you can carry that luggage up,” and he turned and walked out into the garden.

Jane stood biting a finger. She was not going to carry in any strange gentleman’s luggage, not she, without proper authority. And she did not like Mr. Broster. Nasty, supercilious sort of man, with his bits of whiskers, and his smeary mouth, and a voice that talked down at you as though you were less than the cat. Who was he, anyway, coming down with his car and his luggage as though he owned the place? Jane shut the door, and went back to her tea.

A deck-chair offered itself by the lime trees. Mr. Broster accepted it, sat

down, gave a tweak to his trousers, and felt peeved. Gone out to tea, had she? And who was Ghent? Oh, that fellow who grew trees, and humped cans about. The horticultural robot. Max felt for his case, and lit a cigarette. He sniffed the smoke, and then became aware of two figures strolling side by side along the opposite bank. He could not say just why, but he got the impression that they were very much taken up with each other. He saw them pause for a moment, and stand looking at Folly Island. Almost, their arms seemed to touch. The man said something, and the woman looked up suddenly into his face.

“Yes, just like a green ship.”

They remained there with a peculiar, dreamy stillness, gazing at the island and its willows, as though they were sharing in the inception of some new and mysterious revelation.



## XV

The little cry that came from her was almost inaudible and quite inarticulate, but it stung Ghent like a cry of pain. Head up, like some startled creature she was looking across the river to the garden of Folly Farm. A haze of fear had come back into her eyes. Ghent too saw the man in the deck-chair, his long legs extended, his little, distant face somehow sinister and menacing.

“You’ll have to excuse me.”

She began walking fast along the bank, and her movements had a vibrant breathlessness. And Ghent, suddenly very tense and grim, as though a cold wind was biting at his face, swung along beside her.

“Must you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I must. I—I didn’t——”

Her agitation seemed to smother her. She hurried, and her haste hurt him. Also, it drove him to a passionate recklessness.

“Can’t you tell me?”

Her face looked small and puckered.

“I—I can’t. Yes, I must. I didn’t expect him to come here again, ever.”

“Well, why go back?”

“I must. You remember that letter I posted?”

“Yes.”

“It was to tell him something was finished.”

They had reached the main turning towards the cottage, and Ghent, glancing back across the river, smiled strangely.

“What if I went?”

She looked at him with sudden fear.

“Oh, no, that would be—— I must do this myself. Please understand. I must go through with it.”

He said: "I think I understand. And if I do, can't I be allowed a part in it?"

Her eyes were poignant.

"No. There's a certain seemliness about things. It wouldn't be fair. One should clean up one's own spilt milk."

He was silent. They had passed the cottage, and were walking up the path towards the gate.

He opened it for her.

"There's one thing nothing can stop me doing."

"What?"

"I shall come across last thing, and see if I'm wanted in any way."

"Oh, you mustn't," and she fled.

Let it be confessed that Peter Ghent took cover under the weeping elm, and then, with a sudden fierceness of young self-scorn, flung himself out of that green tent, and went in search of something upon which he could use his hands. No, damn it, he was not going to spy upon her. If her intimate past had to be dealt with she was utterly right in her contention that she must deal with it herself. There was a stretch of the Badger's Lane hedge that needed trimming, and Ghent took a slasher from the tool-shed, and got to work upon the hedge. Striking upwards with the long-handled bill he was moved to think that this was how emotional entanglements should be dealt with, slashed at vigorously and lopped off. Yes, he did believe that he was beginning to understand her, and the ruthless sincerity with which she was seeking transplantation. A woman with a past! Well, he could suppose, that with the fierce and fastidious egoism of the lover, he should resent that past and be nauseated by it, and yet it was not so. Somehow, her sophistication attracted him. But was that the right word? He could not help thinking of her as being exquisitely virginal, a woman whose texture had not been tarnished, and who, when she gave would give with a passion and a completeness that were not those of mere raw youth. Was it that he wanted to rescue her? Was he inspired by a rather priggish pity? He swung the slasher and struck at the inward self accusation.

She tried to will herself into an aloof calmness as she walked across the grass to the lime trees.

“Didn’t you get my letter?”

She saw him draw up his long legs, and then stretch them out again. His upward glance was oblique and ironic.

“Oh, yes, my dear, I received that interesting epistle.”

“Then didn’t you understand?”

“Not quite. But now, if I may say so, I begin to appreciate the reason for this sudden display of virtue.”

She was trembling.

“Don’t be a beast, Max. I meant all I said in that letter.”

“Indeed!”

“I’ll write you a cheque for my balance, and return you the lease.”

He sat up, chuckling, but it was a malevolent chuckle.

“Am I as *de trop* as all that? I’ve brought my pyjamas with me.”

She had been standing beside his chair, but now she moved so as to face him.

“How cheap of you! I agree that the house is yours. You can sleep in it, but I shall not.”

His hard eyes quizzed her.

“Got a bed booked over the way?”

She stood very still a moment, and then she said: “Max, can’t you take this thing decently?”

“Not as I took you, indecently.”

“Oh, be quiet. If I had known then—— But what is the use of digging up things that are dead? I want to be free. I am going to be free.”

He smirked up at her.

“That’s splendid. But you are a rather expensive young woman. Can the lad over the way afford you?”

She shrugged.

“Why infer?”

“Do you deny it?”

She looked away, above his head.

“What if I don’t? But not in the way you understand. No woman is interesting to you, Max, until you have dined and drunk and are contemplating bed.”

“Thank you.”

“My dear, it’s so true. You love your own senses and the thing that pleases them. I want someone to love my spirit.”

He was growing angry.

“Don’t talk rot. Do you think that hobbledehoy——”

“Please leave him out of it.”

“Why should I? Let’s get down to brass tacks. You’ve been my tart, a very superior one, I’ll admit, and I’ve spent a damned lot of money on you.”

“I’d return everything if I could. And, Max, I gave you something which you never understood. I thought——”

“That I was going to make an honest woman of you.”

“Don’t be so cheap. In those early days I did believe——”

“Oh, did you! Well, you got well paid for it. And now, let me tell you, my dear, that if you’ve bamboozled that young fool over there——”

“Max!”

“It might be my duty to enlighten him.”

She did not flush at this. Her skin was the colour of a magnolia flower.

“How magnanimous of you. As a matter of fact, he knows.”

“That’s a lie.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“And he’s willing to take my leavings?”

She stood and looked at him.

“What a cad you are!”

“Am I? Well, anyway, I’m sleeping with you to-night.”

She did not answer him, but turned away, and walking to the water’s edge, sat down on the bank. She could suppose that a man of Max’s temperament could behave in this way when his vanity was smarting, but she could not believe that the beastliness would last. Even promiscuous cads can revert to

decency. The trouble was he had no sense of humour, only a kind of acid juice that squirted itself over life and thought the smeary product clever. And like Mr. Crabtree he had the eyes of the sensualist, though his were cold, and the older man's brown and hot. She felt sick of sex, nauseated by it. The thing had no magnanimity, no compassion. It could storm and threaten violence, and hail treachery as a kind of moral duty. And how had she ever come to love this man? Had she ever loved him? She had accepted the accostings of circumstance, the illusions of sense enchantment. He was tired of her, so why this cheap truculence? Had her tiring piqued him into a new desire for her? Was it just spite, the vanity of the flesh?

She watched the water slide past. She saw that the opposite bank was empty, and she was grateful for its emptiness. To have had him as a third party in this sordid wrangle would have been—well, sacrilege. And she was so afraid that even he could not forgive her this tarnish.

She heard Max's voice behind her.

"Well, thinking better of it?"

"I was leaving that to you."

"Much obliged. Doesn't it occur to you that you are an ungrateful little \_\_\_\_\_"

"I gave what you wanted me to give."

She heard him yawn, and could visualize him stretching.

"Dinner at eight, what! That female of yours had better be stimulated. I'll go in and unpack."

Her shoulders stiffened.

"Well, do. I think I'll stay here."

"Righto. I suppose you've got some of the fizz left I sent you?"

"I believe so."

"Splendid! We'll uncork, my dear. One feels a bit more friendly when one's warmed up, and in——"

He saw her head turn quickly.

"Very well. Go in and unpack."

Jane did not know what to make of the situation. Here was this very

superior gentleman unpacking his belongings in the spare-room, and whistling “The Lambeth Walk,” and shouting down the stairs to her. “Hallo, What’s Your Name, is the bath water hot?” Jane objected both to the what’s your name, and to his hoity-toity manners. No, the bath water was not hot, and it was not going to be hot unless Mrs. Strangeways ordered it to be so. Mr. Max Broster’s desultory whistling continued. He seemed to be making a great deal of noise upstairs, proprietary noise. “Banging about,” Jane called it. Again she heard his voice admonishing her.

“Hallo, Miss What’s Your Name.”

Jane bridled, even to herself, in the hall.

“My name is Masters, and Mrs., if you please.”

“How interesting! Well, Mrs. Masters, we beg to solicit dinner at eight.”

We indeed! Nasty, sarcastic bounder, with his little bits of whiskers and his sneery mouth! Jane retreated to the kitchen, and feeling more and more posed and perturbed by the situation, set herself the task of preparing a salad for Mrs. Strangeways’s supper. She was at work at the table by the window when her mistress appeared at it.

“Oh, Jane.”

The casement was open, and when Jane’s eyes rested upon her mistress’s face, she knew as woman that all was not well with the world.

“Yes, m’am.”

“I’m going out.”

“Are you, m’am?”

“Give the gentleman some supper, and tell him I shall not be in.”

Jane’s eyes popped.

“He’s unpacked his things, m’am.”

Mrs. Strangeways’s face looked drawn and pale.

“Jane, I want you to help me. Take all the clothes from the spare-room bed, and hide them.”

“I will, m’am.”

“And give the gentleman to understand that we’re not expecting him to stay.”

“With pleasure, m’am.”

Jane saw her mistress disappear into the Folly Farm orchard, and if Jane's curiosity was somewhat head-in-air, her prejudices were all on the side of the sex. Didn't she know what pestilent, mischievous nuisances men could be? And that cheeky bounder upstairs, whistling and shouting about the place as though it belonged to him! And what, exactly, was his significance in Mrs. Strangeways's world? Funny people from London! But Jane liked where she liked, and was more than ready to help confound the person whom she did not approve of, a most national and wholesome reaction. Tepid people are past praying for.

Jane waited until she heard Mr. Max Broster come down the stairs, and go into the dining-room to help himself to a drink from the cocktail cabinet. That had been one of his installations. He carried the little drink with him out into the garden, and Jane bundled up the stairs and into the spare-room, and dragging all the clothes off the bed, trailed them into her own room and hid them under her own bed. Bolster and pillow-case followed. Jane had not been born and bred Fanshaw for nothing. Brother Bob would have enjoyed all this. She did more. She huddled Mr. Broster's belongings back into his two suit-cases, set them on the landing, locked the spare-room door, and also Mrs. Strangeways's door, and pocketed the keys. That would give Mr. Little Bits of Whiskers something to think about. And he expected dinner at eight, did he? Well, he should have it! She soused the salad with vinegar, and placed three slices of cold and rather stale tongue on a dish. Sweets? Not likely! He could be satisfied with a piece of Cheshire cheese, and then get into that swanky car of his and tootle off to digest the tongue and vinegar and cheese, and other matters. Jane knew a thing or two about chastening the appetites of the male.

Mr. Broster did kick the door, and Jane had been expecting some such reaction.

"Hi, woman, what the devil do you mean by putting my luggage out here?"

He had gone up to refill his cigarette-case, and so had discovered the plot.

Jane stood primly in the hall.

"Supper is served, sir. Mrs. Strangeways told me to serve it to you before you left."

"Where's your mistress?"

"Gone out, sir."

"Where?"

“I don’t know, sir. Would you like plain water or cocoa with your supper?”

Shades of Le Chat de Paris, Udolpho’s, the Mayfair and the Ritz, plain water or cocoa!

“Damn you, woman, where’s the key of this door?”

Jane, having sacrificed to courtesy, conceived it her privilege to use candour.

“Where you won’t find it. And let me tell you there are no bedclothes on that bed. And if you want your supper——”

“Who told you to do this?”

“That isn’t any business of yours, is it? You must be a very stupid gent not to see when you’re not wanted.”

She heard the sudden, immanent descent, and the sounds of a suit-case banging against the banisters. So, he was coming down, and Jane retreated towards the kitchen door.

“Your supper’s there if you want it. You can have it before you leave.”

“Oh, go to hell, you interfering bitch!”

Jane cackled. She was not shocked by such language, but accepted it as the bouquet of victory. She watched Mr. Broster bundle himself and his suit-cases out of the porch door. He had left his black, anarchist hat on the garden table, and he went to collect it. Jane moved to the porch, prepared, if necessary, to shut and lock the door. But Little Bits of Whiskers attempted no further invasions. He walked out of the garden, and round to the garage, and a moment later Jane heard the indignant roar of his car’s engine. She too was a luxury product, and not accustomed to such butcherly treatment.

“That’s right. Snort off,” said Jane, and went and emptied the vinegar-drenched salad into the dustbin. What had been good enough for my lord was not good enough for my lady.

Ghent was sufficiently human to allow himself three or four expeditions in the direction of the river. Keeping among the trees, like a swimmer whose head alone projected above the water, he did witness some of the incidents of the tragi-comedy. He saw Mr. Broster in solitary occupation of the garden, and later his abrupt exit from the house with his two yellow real-leather suit-cases. He witnessed the recovery of the hat, and could distinguish the good Jane on guard in the porch doorway.



Then had come the roar of the car's engine, and the complaining of harshly-treated gears. Peter had seen the black and beige machine shoot up to the Folly Farm gate, take the high road and cross the bridge.

So, she had kept faith with herself! She had persuaded the past to withdraw itself in a fume of frustration. And Ghent exulted. If the male in him had coveted the dramatic privilege of going across and throwing the other fellow out, he had sufficient subtlety to grasp the more delicate significance of this other form of expulsion.

Bunter's bark and the ringing of Mrs. Maintenance's bell warned him that supper was ready. The sky was a limpid blue, and filled with little flocculent clouds that were beginning to blush as the sun set. A perfect evening, still and calm. As he sat down to his supper, facing the window, he could see the light playing on the Folly Farm trees and along the tawny grass. Should he go across there presently, as he had threatened to do? Had not the provocation passed? Would it not be more gentle to refrain, and to leave her unvexed on this critical evening?

His mind could not satisfy his heart over this. What did a woman ask for, especially a woman of sensitive and fastidious texture? Would it not be rather loutish to rush in just when she had written *explicit* at the end of a particular experience? He lit his pipe, and sitting by the window, watched the dusk come down. The day drew in its slender fingers, and ceasing to touch the green world, suffered it to go grey.

Mrs. Maintenance came in to clear the table.

"Have you finished, sir?"

Oh, yes, he had finished, and he wanted to be alone. He took Bunter with him, for a dog can be no more exacting than your shadow, and going down to the river, he sat down on the bank. The darkness deepened. The weir kept up its ceaseless underchant. He was watching for lights to appear in the house across the water, and presently one window on the ground floor came to life. He saw someone pass between the window and the light, and the lover in him smiled. But it was Jane he saw, an agitated Jane, which goes to prove how a man's fancy may go astray.

He remained there, with the dog curled up beside him. The stars came out. How was she feeling, assuaged, happy? She had kept faith with herself.

And then he heard a voice calling in the darkness.

"Mr. Peter, Mr. Peter!"

It was Mrs. Maintenance's voice, and he scrambled up and answered it.

"Hallo."

"Will you come here, please. Jane's here."

Jane! Why Jane? He walked back towards Marplot, and in the yard he saw two dim shapes standing close together.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"Jane's worried, sir."

Jane's shriller voice broke in.

"She went out, sir, and she hasn't come back. Her supper's been waiting hours. I'm worried, Mr. Ghent. You see——"

"How long has Mrs. Strangeways been away, Jane?"

"Hours, sir. I've hunted all over the garden and the orchard. I don't like it, sir."

Neither did he.

"I'll come back with you, Jane. We must find her."

## XVI

Neither Mrs. Maintenance nor Jane would have had any use for your psychological hero who might have demanded five pages of rather futile self-analysis before condescending to function as a positive and helpful person, which goes to prove that the world's sanity is in the keeping of the common folk. Mrs. Maintenance would not have thanked you for a negation in trousers, or for any sickly sophistication that suffered from habitual queasiness of the soul. Nor would most women, for that matter. Ghent's "We must find her" was immediate and human, as was the first question he asked of Jane as they crossed the Weir Bridge.

"Have you looked in the boat-house?"

Jane had not.

"But she wouldn't go punting at night, sir, would she?"

Ghent was silent, and his silence implied that after the stresses of an emotional crisis anything might be possible.

He had brought a torch with him, instead of some dim horn lantern of dreams, and he made straight for the boat-house with Jane at his heels. The river doors were open, and when he shone his light into the dark interior he saw that the punt had gone.

"She's on the river, Jane."

He did not say that his fear was that she might be in the river, but Jane seemed to divine the possible tragedy, and to shiver over it.

"Oh, dear, sir!"

"Better go back to the house, Jane, in case—— I'll go exploring."

Up river the Folly Farm orchard ended in an old thorn hedge, and beyond it lay open meadows. Ghent's first reaction had been to remember that other occasion when she had let the punt-pole drop in the river, and had gone drifting down towards the weir. Had she——? But the lover in him flung off that tragic question. Was it not more probable that she had taken to the water to avoid the solicitations of the other man? If he worked his way along the river he might find the punt tied up under the willows. The thorn hedge ended at the

top of the bank, and the bank itself was fenced with posts and wire, and Ghent forced his way between the strands, and moving along the bank, kept flashing his torch. The most blessed thing about the crisis was that this was open country, with no cottage near, and that no curiosity was likely to be aroused by his flashing torch, or by his calling to her.

“Mrs. Strangeways, Mrs. Strangeways.”

He did no more than speak the words, for he knew that his ordinary speaking voice would be sufficient. Working from willow to willow, and turning his torch on the water below the bank, he covered the stretch of river as far as the Temple Reach. He saw nothing, heard nothing. And then it occurred to him that she might have crossed the river to put it between her and Folly Farm. The punt might be lying under his nursery. He retraced his steps, passed through the orchard and garden, and recrossing the bridge, began his search of the Marplot bank. He worked along it as far as the Temple Towers boundary, and found nothing.

Returning, he became aware of Folly Island lying dim and blurred in the centre of the stream. Of course! She might be there. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He stood and flashed his torch once or twice, and spoke to the island.

“Mrs. Strangeways, Mrs. Strangeways. Are you there? We're worried.”

No answer came to him, and yet, though he could not say why, he had a feeling that she had taken sanctuary on the island. He did possess a semi-derelict old punt, a sort of black and tarred coffin that lived under a little penthouse a hundred yards above the bridge. The thing leaked, and was usually to be found with an inch of water in its bottom. Ghent made for the punt, and unmoored it. As he had expected the floor was awash, but he stepped in, and picked up a paddle, and kneeling, drove the clumsy, sodden craft in the direction of Folly Island.

The night seemed to have grown darker, and looking up, he saw half the sky obscured, while in the eastern arch the stars still shone. He heard the thunder of the weir behind him, and the splash and suck of the paddle, and the drip of water from it. The willows of Folly Island loomed up ahead, indistinguishable save as a blurred mass in the darkness. The river itself retained a vague suggestion of light, and the black bulk of the island rose sudden and solid above the windless polished water.

Ghent let the punt slide in close to the bank, its nose pointing up the river.

“Mrs. Strangeways.”

Silence. And then, close to him and lying against the bank he saw a lighter

object, the Folly Farm punt. It swayed slightly in the swell made by his own craft. So, she was here!

“Mrs. Strangeways.”

No answer. He dug the paddle in and stopped his punt.

“I only want to know that you are safe.”

He heard a faint stirring in the grass. Her voice, when it came, seemed to drop down to him out of the near obscurity of a willow.

“Is it you?”

He stood up.

“Yes, Peter Ghent. We were worried. I had to find you.”

“I’m sorry.”

He could not see her. He was speaking to an unseen presence and a voice.

“I’m not. I could not help being scared.”

“Was it necessary?”

“Yes, if a thing can’t be helped. He’s gone, you know. You don’t mind my telling you?”

She did not answer him for a moment, and then she said: “Why should I mind?”

Nor could he answer her question. His punt was beginning to drift downstream, and with three or four sweeps of the paddle he brought it gunwale to gunwale with hers. The wretched thing was leaking, and he could feel the water washing round his ankles. Well, her crisis was past, and he could assume that she would ferry herself back to Folly Farm.

“Can you manage? The bank’s rather steep. I’ll steady your punt for you.”

Almost her voice sounded casual.

“Oh, I’m staying here for the night.”

“Staying on the island?”

“Yes, I have a rug and the punt cushions, and the grass is dry.”

“But, you——”

“I am not going back to that house.”

“You mean, not till the morning?”

“No, I am never going back to it.”

He stared up into the darkness under the willows. Was she serious? Had that cad said such impossible things to her that no compromise of any kind was possible? Yes, he could understand the finality of her revolt, and a wounded fastidiousness that shrank from every contact with certain associations. Meanwhile, his wretched punt was proposing to sink under his feet. Probably his weight had strained a plank and the thing was leaking like a sieve.

He said: “I’m awfully sorry. Do you mind if I come ashore for a moment? My boat’s trying to sink.”

“Oh, take mine. I shan’t need it to-night.”

So, she did not want him to land! Well, that, too, was understandable. She had suffered sufficiently from male interference, and she was accepting no sympathy on trust. He transferred himself to her punt, and getting hold of the mooring rope of his own craft, worked it into the bank, and groped for a convenient willow bough to which he could tether it. The waterlogged punt could be baled out and recovered by daylight.

Her voice came to him suddenly out of the darkness.

“Peter, I’ve changed my mind.”

“You are going back?”

“No. You will have to fetch me in the morning. Are you very wet?”

“No, only socks and shoes.”

“Don’t go for a minute.”

He sat down in the stern of her punt, for her last words had touched him.

“All right.”

“Where are you?”

“Sitting in your punt. I’ll stay here as little, or as long as you please.”

He heard a movement in the grass and water-weeds. She had slipped half-way down the bank, and was sitting there with her feet about a yard above the water. He could see her now, and the darkness had become like a veil half shrouding her presence.

“Oh, my dear, I expect you think I’m quite mad.”

“One can be in love with some sorts of madness.”

Almost, he could feel her flinch.

“No, not that word, please! How many women must have felt as I do. You are up against things, and some man comes along and is kind, and perhaps you are grateful, and he has a tale to tell. And perhaps you fancy that you are being rather fine and human, until you realize that you are just an incident. Oh, these incidents, and the men who are misunderstood by their wives! But, the woman who believes is the fool.”

He could distinguish a foot in a light-coloured shoe lying near him in the grass. He wanted to touch it, but held back.

“So many men think they can buy things, my dear. I don’t think I realized till to-night how utterly I had been wrapped up and passed over the counter. And why am I telling you this? Because I won’t be a lie any more to anybody. I couldn’t sleep again in that house.”

“Clean grass and the sky.”

“Absolutely. Now, please go, Peter. I want to be alone with myself, my new self.”

He stood up.

“I’m to come and fetch you in the morning?”

“If you think it worth while.”

“I’ll come, almost as soon as it is light.”

He was unfastening the rope of her punt, and as he fumbled at the knot, he was moved to ask her the obvious question.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You mean, you have nowhere to go?”

“Nowhere, my dear, after I have packed and settled with the good Jane.”

He had cast the rope loose, and the stream began to carry the punt away from the bank. He caught a willow branch, and held on.

“But that’s impossible.”

“Freedom’s impossible, unless——”

“But one’s never free. I mean, things and people. One’s always tied up in the human show.”

She was silent, and then she said: “Please go now, my dear. I’m not going to tie you or myself to anything. Good night.”

He released the bough, and let the punt drift, and a moment later she heard the splash of the paddle. She was standing now among the water-weeds, and steadying herself against a branch that drooped lower over the river. And suddenly she felt dreadfully alone, and she called to him across the water.

“Peter.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not showing off. You do believe that?”

“Of course I believe it.”

“Thank you, Peter. Good night.”

Ghent berthed the punt in his own small boat-house, and having spoken with Mrs. Maintenance, went across to reassure Jane. But what was he to tell Jane? That her mistress was spending the night on Folly Island because a particular house was so associated with unpleasant memories that she refused to return to it? And what would Jane make of that? Good lord, it was a pretty problem that she had set herself and him! In every sense she had cut herself adrift and he, though understanding her inspiration and honouring it, felt himself to be posed and helpless. She was not asking for interference. She was proposing to serve her penance as women will serve it, with passion and anguish and exultation. But how splendid! Yes, splendid and completely baffling.

He was crossing the bridge when he remembered that Folly Island was part of the Temple Manor estate. Lady Melissa! Mrs. Strangeways was trespassing on Vandeleur property, and to-morrow Temple Manor was proposing to call on Folly Farm. Ye gods, what a tangle! And what the devil was he to tell Jane?

The inspiration came to him as he passed through the Folly Farm gate. He saw lights in most of the lower windows, and he concluded that Bob’s sister believed in maintaining a cheerful appearance. Jane herself had carried a chair out into the porch, and was keeping vigil there. She heard Ghent’s footsteps, and came to meet him.

“Is that you, sir?”

“All right, Jane. I’ve found Mrs. Strangeways.”

“That’s a blessing.”

“She’s on Folly Island, and she’s staying the night there. The fact is, Jane, she’s rather afraid the gentleman might come back.”



“I reckon he won’t do that, sir, after what I did to him.”

“What did you do to him, Jane?”

“Packed his bags for him, and took the bedclothes away, and locked him out of the room. A rare pet he was in, I can tell you.”

“Good for you, Jane.”

“But, Mr. Peter, she can’t spend the night in a place like that.”

“She has a rug and the punt cushions, and the grass is quite dry. I think we’ll leave her in peace, Jane.”

“Well, poor dear, she needs it. Though what that cheeky blighter with his little bits of whisker——”

“Yes, Jane, I know,” and he felt a quick desire to deflect her from the subject. “I’ll fetch her ashore in the morning. And what about you? Do you mind being left alone? I dare say Mrs. Maintenance——”

“I don’t mind, sir. I always lock my door.”

“Quite right, Jane. But if the gentleman should come back, fetch me. I’ll throw him out.”

“I rather wish he would come back, Mr. Peter. I’d like to see you——”

“Yes, Jane, but I think it’s best as it is. I dare say you settled him.”

“I wish he had tried my salad,” and to Ghent the implication was obscure.

“Not poison, Jane?”

“No, I soused it in vinegar. Sort of hint, Mr. Peter.”

Ghent laughed.

“You’re your brother’s sister, Jane.”

Mrs. Maintenance was sitting up for him, with Bunter in her lap, a Mrs. Maintenance, who had divined in all these strange happenings, the imminence of romance. Dear, dear! And such an apocryphal person, a mysterious lady from London who was visited by strange gentlemen, and quarrelled with them! Mrs. Maintenance always thought in pairs or plurals, eggs by the dozen, tea and sugar by the pound. Rashers of bacon never arrived singly, and her habit was to multiply objects and circumstances. Ghent, seeing the light on in the kitchen, was wise as to the state of doubt that might exist in Mrs. Maintenance’s maternal mind. As Jane might have put it, “It was a noosance,

but if your stocking had a hole in it, especially where it showed, peace and self-respect made you get on with the job and mend it.”

He patted Bunter’s head.

“Time for little dogs to go to bed. You too, Sarah, you must be tired. Yes, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I hope not, sir. Strange goings on.”

He stood in front of her, serious yet smiling, and Mrs. Maintenance could never withstand that smile of his. If she had been a young thing, well, well!

“Life can be a strange box of tricks, Sarah. I’d rather help than find fault. It’s so easy to feel good, when one’s looked after like I am.”

Mrs. Maintenance’s bosom appeared to rise.

“Some people are easy to do for, Mr. Peter. I’m an old woman, and I was brought up——”

“I’ve always found you a good sort, Sarah. If I ever ask you to help, you’ll help, or I’m no judge of people. By the way, could you manage tea for Lady Vandeleur to-morrow?”

Mrs. Maintenance was prepared to provide tea for Lady Vandeleur on every day of the week.

“Good. She may be coming. She told me she was calling on Mrs. Strangeways at Folly Farm.”

Mrs. Maintenance’s bosom became less fluffed up. Certainly, if Temple Manor could recognize Folly Farm, the mystery could be said to be less sinister.

“Very good, sir.”

“I’m going to bed. Nighty-night, Bunter. Good night, Sarah.”

“Good night to you, sir.”

The wise men tell us that a good conscience charms sweet sleep, but it is probable that a tranquil stomach is a more admirable bed-fellow, and though Ghent might have been blessed with both, sleep played with him like a squirrel round a tree trunk. His brain was a bagful of questions which kept spilling themselves out upon his pillow. What of to-morrow? What of breakfast, what of tea? How could he recover his foundered punt without causing comment? Was the suppression of human comment possible? Well, why trouble about it

when you could prognosticate an element of patronage and of malice? The impulse to blame is universal, and causes the blamer to feel superior. But that was not the pith of the problem. How could he persuade her to do, what? How could he intervene, when she had tried to make him understand that her spirit had gone into retreat, and was shrinking from human interference? If she had cut herself off from Folly Farm where did she propose to go? Had she any money? Had she any friends? If not, what the devil was to be done about it? Yes, this was an emotional problem that transcended the exigencies of a drought. You could not dip a can in the river and solve such a problem by watering it. Oh, damn money, or rather the lack of it! He himself was on the edge of the rocks. Moreover, the very thing she might resent would be a gesture that hinted at the power of the purse.

Yes, it was a subtle and delicate business, as subtle and delicate as certain ways of caring. If intervention there was to be, who could intervene? Lady Melissa? But these two women were complete strangers, and what was Folly Farm to Temple Manor? Yet, the more Ghent fumbled at the tangled skein, the more he realized that other hands than his must begin the unravelling of the problem, delicate hands, fastidious hands, fingers that could touch life lightly and with humour. If he could persuade a certain person——! No, persuasion was the wrong word. Let him suppose that two people were brought together, two sensitives who might be attracted to each other, was it not possible that the interaction might work like the interplay of light and shadow?

What if he went to Temple Manor and made a confession? The one quality that counted with Lady Vandeleur was sincerity, not the vulgar candour of crude minds, but the showing of the chequered surface of your soul. Besides, you could not fool her. Only fools think they can fool the wise. She might look into your mirror, and smile with tolerant compassion, and say, "I don't think that sort of thing should be done." She would give no reasons, nor indulge in ethics. All that it amounted to was that certain sensitive and fastidious creatures thought and felt and behaved in a particular way, and asked you, if you were to be of their world, to react and behave as they did. It might be in the blood; it might be in breeding, it might be in the gradual growth of self, the full flower of a beautiful maturity. Had not Temple Manor taught him that beautiful behaviour did matter; that it was artistry? And in the solving of this problem supreme artistry was needed.

## XVII

**M**rs. Maintenance heard him go down the stairs soon after her window curtains had changed from black to grey. She kept an alarum clock beside her bed, and she could just read on its large plain face the time of the day. Dear, dear, would the summer drought have dragged him out of bed so early? Bunter the dog had also been disturbed by his master's early rising. Bunter slept in a round basket at the foot of Mrs. Maintenance's bed. He whimpered, left it, went to the door and sniffed, and then turning questioning eyes upon Mrs. Maintenance, came and sprang upon her bed.

"Yes, my pet," said she, "Mr. Peter has it badly, poor dear. Getting up at this hour of the morning! No use our getting up like that!"

Ghent went down to the river. It was grey under a grey sky, and running with a kind of glassy stealth between grey green banks and willows that were asleep. Your true countryman loves this first hour after the dawn when the world seems a more mysterious place untroubled by any human discord. The very light has a stealth of its own, and the grass may yet be drinking the dew. Distances are hazed and strange, and wild life possesses the morning. The stillness was supreme. Ghent strolled along the bank until he was opposite Folly Island, and among its willows he could see a streak of blue, the rug that covered her.

She was asleep. Two moorhens were bobbing about, in and out of the water-weeds just below where she was lying. Well, let her sleep for a while; he would go across presently when the day was a little older. And then it occurred to him that waking on that island might be a rather chilly business, and that according to Jane she had gone supperless to bed. Mrs. Maintenance heard him busy in the kitchen below her bedroom. He was lighting the kitchen fire and filling a kettle, and rummaging in the larder for a loaf of bread and butter. When he went across in the punt he would take her early morning tea, but if the teapot was to retain its heat it would need a cosy. Did such an article exist in Marplot? He failed to find one, and pondering the problem, was inspired to go upstairs and take a clean pair of rough wool socks from a drawer. They were number nines and loosely woven, and with a little ingenuity he thought that he could slip them over the teapot and remove them before the brew was served.

Mrs. Maintenance saw him going down to the river carrying that tray. Poor lad, this was supreme devotion! He stepped down delicately into the punt, placed the tray on the floor-boards, unfastened the painter and poled the boat out. It took him less than a minute to reach Folly Island, and with the punt lying close under the bank he realized that he could not see her or tell whether she was asleep or awake. A sudden shyness seized him. Did he understand that it might be churlish to wake her too abruptly, and that to surprise a woman at that raw hour might be rather blah and tactless? Would he wish to be caught with his hair tousled and a beard on his chin? There is a ritual in rising, the unsubtle infringement of which a woman might resent.

He tied up the punt, and removing the improvised tea-cosy, he took the tray in one hand, and got hold of a willow bough with the other, and carefully pulled himself up the bank. She was asleep. He dared just one glance at her, and was strangely moved. She looked such a kid, with her small face and her tumbled hair. He put the tray on the grass beside her, and in doing so, noticed a small dressing-case lying there, the sacred reliquary of Venus. Then, he scrambled back into the punt, and unfastening the mooring rope, held on to a willow bough.

“Mrs. Strangeways.”

He heard a stirring up above.

“Yes. Is it——?”

Then—silence. He could picture her sitting up, with sleep in her eyes, a little bewildered.

“I’ve put some tea by you.”

“Tea! How lovely of you. I was quite lost for a moment.”

“I’m afraid the bread and butter’s rather thick. I’ll come back presently.”

He poled the punt down stream, and she sat up, and brushing back her hair, looked at the tray that he had placed on the grass beside her. Her face grew touched and tender. This was not the Broster philosophy! And she was so ready for that tea. She took the tray on her lap, and recalling those last words of his in which he had apologized for the thickness of the bread and butter, she was moved to wonder at the otherness of his manhood. Could he handle a situation as he touched a flower, and yet remain what he was, the essential man? Obviously. He had said that he would come back presently. That too contained a strange and sensitive comprehension of the things that were precious to a woman.

She drank two cups of tea and ate all the bread and butter, and then, putting the tray aside, took the dressing-case on her knees, and attended to the morning's ritual. This had been her first night under the stars, and to her surprise she had slept restfully and deeply on the punt cushions, and covered by a rug. But her poor frock had suffered in the process, and when she had put on her shoes, she stood up and tried to smooth out the creases, only to realize that they insisted upon pathos, and that nothing but a hot iron would cure them. She took a stroll round the island. Its green aloofness pleased her, according as it did with her feeling for a retreat, and it occurred to her that since she was renouncing Folly Farm, she might find in this island a temporary sanctuary. Why shouldn't she camp here, release and pay off Jane, bring such things as she needed to the island, and feel at peace. She needed time to draw her breath, a kind of interlude for reflection and readjustment. Her very sophistications seemed to challenge some such experience. And who would quarrel with her for camping on this island? The river was like a castle moat, and this little green world her keep.

Looking down stream she saw Ghent and the punt coming up the river, and she returned to her camping place and sat down on her cushions. How would he react to her inspiration? Would a man who brought you early morning tea appreciate the nuances of such a situation? She sat with her chin cupped in her hands, watching and considering him. Her eyes grew tender. Oh, yes, she was not going to suffer him to play the hero, unless and until she felt herself to be what she had been ten years ago. There must be an interlude, a season of self-searching. After all, he was a mere boy, and she both eighteen and as old as time.

The sun broke through as the punt came under the droop of the willows, and the water was scolloped with light. She stood up on the edge of the bank.

"I'm afraid I have eaten all the bread and butter."

"Well, that's splendid. If you'll pass down the tray, I can take you both across."

"And bring me back?"

He had been smiling up at her, and his smile died away.

"Back here?"

"Yes. I like this island. Why shouldn't I camp here? It doesn't smell of fresh paint."

"No, it's not Crabtree. Of course there's no reason."

“No rent to pay. I must go across and settle with Jane. If I could rig up some sort of tent.”

He said: “I could lend you a tent. It’s very small. I used to go camping. But what about the house, and all your things?”

“I can bring across what I want. Everything else goes elsewhere, if you understand.”

He looked up at her and nodded.

“I understand.”

So, apparently, did Jane, for when Ghent had unloaded the tea-tray on his own bank and ferried her across to Folly Farm, and leaving her the punt, gone back by way of the bridge to Marplot to breakfast and the work of the day, he saw Bob’s sister enter the garden gate. She went round to the back door, and two minutes later Mrs. Maintenance came in with a message.

“Jane’s come for a tent, sir.”

Mrs. Maintenance uttered the words as though the whole situation had passed beyond her understanding and could only be treated unemotionally, like the visit of the butcher or the baker.

“Oh yes, it’s in my store-room.”

He left his bacon and eggs and went to hunt up the tent, and having found it in its canvas cover, he carried it out to Jane who was waiting at the back door.

“Afraid it’s rather dusty, Jane.”

Jane’s face committed her to no comments, either upon tents and their uses, or upon a situation that to her must have been completely unusual.

“Thank you, sir. Mrs. Strangeways said that if I fetched it it would save you trouble.”

“The pegs should be in the bag, Jane.”

“Pegs, sir.”

“Yes, the tent pegs.”

“Oh, of course, sir.”

And Ghent went back to his breakfast, wondering what had passed between the two women.

Meanwhile, that sump or surface well was to be dug for the new water-supply that might cheat Mr. Roger Crabtree and his legal proclivities, and Ghent went out to confer with Bob on the place to be chosen. He found Bob standing among some trees and gazing across the river at two women loading a punt, but when he heard Ghent's footsteps he shed all appearance of interest in these activities. His head and shoulders bent themselves to the business of hoeing.

"What about our well, Bob?"

"Want us to start on it?"

"I should say so. I have to drive up to Temple Manor, and I'll give you a hand later."

Fanshaw rubbed his chin.

"Well, if we've got to fox that ruddy old swine, we'd better get on with it. I reckon the best place would be down there by the rhodos."

"I think we'd better spread the soil, Bob, barrow it and throw it behind those 'Lawsons'."

"There'll be a lot of muck, sir."

"Can't be helped. If we pile it up we shall give the game away."

"He'll nose it out, whatever we do."

"Never mind. And if he does spot the trick, I don't think he can stop us. If you strike much loose gravel you had better line and strut. We should strike clay lower down."

"Plenty o' that. Pity old Crabtree isn't sunk in it."

"Yes, I know. I should be back by ten."

As Ghent moved away he saw the punt being poled out of the boat-house, and that there were two women in it. So the good Jane was helping to establish her mistress on the island, while he was proposing to propitiate the island's actual mistress. What should he say to Lady Vandeleur? Should he make her a complete confession? His feeling about it was that nothing but the whole-hearted truth would be satisfying to Temple Manor.

Bob and George, spading up soil into two barrows, and trundling it off to be spread behind the rows of cypresses, kept watch upon the river, for, if Mr. Crabtree could make a universal nuisance of himself, these labouring men



could be stubborn in their countering of his spite. Also, both Bob and George knew that if Mr. Ghent went under they would exchange an employer whom they liked and respected, for a tyrant who would show them no consideration whatsoever, and in the rustic mind Marplot became a kind of redoubt defying this old land-grabber. But while digging the new well and removing the soil, they could not help observing those feminine activities on Folly Island. Two women were pitching a small tent amid the willows, and one of the women was Bob's sister.

George had a merry mind and a tongue that was as quick as his temper, nor could he keep those cheeky eyes of his from being interested in other folk's affairs. George thought Folly Farm a funny show. And was Jane going to camp with the lady? Bob, who was in his most laconic mood, said that was Jane's business, and that George might mind his. Candour had its own class gradations.

"Well, I suppose a chap can ask a question?"

"Ah," said Bob; "that depends on how you ask it."

"Bloody touchy, this morning, aren't you?"

"Maybe. What I should like to know is why we've got to shift two or three tons of earth because of that old——"

Bob used a very vulgar word, and George twitted him.

"Better be careful, brother, with ladies about. Blessed if they aren't coming back in the punt."

They were, with Mrs. Strangeways handling the pole. They tied up at the boat-house, and began to load more gear into the craft, a garden chair, sundry pieces of crockery, bedclothes tied up in a roll, a small table, books. George could not keep his tongue from comment.

"Gosh, looks as though she was going to play Robinson Crusoe."

Bob stuck his spade in the ground, and got hold of the barrow stilts.

"And why not?"

"Well, she hasn't the look for it. Pretty bit of work, but not the sort——"

"Go on, get busy. It's none of your business, anyway."

And Fanshaw's implacable, round-shouldered figure propelled the loaded barrow in the direction of the cypresses.

The punt was travelling up stream again to Folly Island. Its cargo was

unloaded, Mrs. Strangeways passing the various objects up to Jane who stood upon the bank.

“I think I can manage now, Jane.”

“Sure, m’am?”

“Quite. You’ve been very kind, Jane. I wish——”

Jane’s eyes blinked.

“I don’t mind what I do when I like.”

“I’m afraid I have let you down, Jane. Are you sure you are satisfied?”

“I haven’t been bought, have I?”

“No, Jane, you’ve given me something better than——”

“Well, that’s as it should be. Some ladies don’t understand that a woman doesn’t want to be bought.”

“No, you’ve been my friend, Jane. I had better take you back now. What about your trunk?”

“Bob’ll see to that, m’am. A chap who can carry a sack of potatoes won’t worry about my little trunk.”

It was George who spotted the coming of the enemy, probably because George had a more roving eye and a more listening ear, and was less work absorbed than Bob Fanshaw. Jane’s brother would attack a job with the concentrated enthusiasm and the stark gloom of a fanatic, allowing himself none of those contemplative loiterings that are dear to the labouring philosopher. Other men were apt to complain that Bob tore his guts out over a job, and so inconvenienced theirs. And why all this fury for forty-two bob a week?

“Hallo, he’s coming, brother.”

“Who?”

“Old bun-head.”

George had heard, above the thunder of the weir, the sound of a motor-boat coming down the river, and as he stood leaning on his spade, the nose of the boat came poking round the curve of Temple Reach.

“Better take cover, hadn’t we?”

“What for?”

“To fox the old beast, brother.”

Bob shouldered his spade.

“He never gives anything away, nor’ll we.”

They took cover behind the rows of cypresses, and watching through the trees, saw the Temple Towers motor-boat towing a v-shaped wash behind it. The water-weeds bowed and rustled, as though saluting the great man. Scattergood was in charge. Mr. Crabtree sat in the stern-sheets, wearing a beige-coloured sports coat and a fawn felt hat with a jay’s feather tucked into the band. The boat was travelling at a medium speed, and in passing Folly Island Mr. Crabtree became aware of the little white tent, and the moored punt. Campers! Mr. Crabtree did not approve of campers. He stood up in the boat, and so was able to see a woman’s head and shoulders; she was kneeling in the grass, filling an oil-stove with paraffin. Mrs. Strangeways!

The boat swept past the island, and Mr. Crabtree sat down again and spoke to Scattergood.

“Needn’t put in at Folly Farm.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Run her in close to young Ghent’s bank. Then you can turn. And stop at the island, alongside that punt.”

Ghent had removed the pump from the pumping-stage, and when Mr. Crabtree saw that it had gone, he smirked to himself. So that letter of his had given young Ghent a fright and something to think about! Good egg! That was the way to deal with a cub like Ghent. Mr. Crabtree could not see the square hole that had been opened beyond the bank, nor the raw soil spread behind the cypresses. His ultimatum had produced its effect, and he was in a mood to enjoy the prestige of victory.

“Turn her round, Scattergood.”

Scattergood turned her round.

Mrs. Strangeways had been aware of Temple Towers’s presence upon the river, and she had remained on her knees, believing that she could not be seen by anyone in a boat, but when Scattergood shut off the engine, and the boat slid into the island, her neck and shoulders stiffened. Had the old wretch seen her? She could hear a sound of movement below the bank, the rocking of the punt, for Mr. Crabtree was a heavy man and not easy in his movements. A

moment later she saw the fawn-coloured hat appear, and under it his impertinent, hard old face.

“Well, well, well! Funny place for a morning call! What, camping?”

“Yes,” said she, “camping.”

He climbed the bank, and with his fists stuffed into his trouser pockets, he appraised her and the scene. Yes, that very small tent could not be described as cover for two, and there was only one deck-chair. Mr. Crabtree became *gaillard* and facetious.

“Well, well, well, paddling in the dew, what! But, if you’ll excuse me, I shouldn’t have thought——”

She wanted to say, “Oh, *do* you think?” But she got on her feet and sat down in the one deck-chair so that he should not occupy it.

“I rather like a place like this. No visitors.”

“And what’s hubby think about it?”

Vulgar old man! She reached for a book, and the gesture should have been final, but Mr. Crabtree believed that he knew all about women, and that a chilly exterior was intended as a challenge.

“Got the old woman’s permission?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The island belongs to the Vandeleur dame.”

She lied: “Oh yes, I know. I’m expecting her to call on me to-day.”

“Calling on you, is she?”

“Yes.”

“That’s funny.”

“Why funny?”

“Because she’s a regular old stiff.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes. I’m a man of ideas. I didn’t get ’em willed to me by some decayed squire.”

“Yes, I quite appreciate that.”

She opened her book, but Mr. Crabtree persisted.

“Nobby little tent you’ve got.”

“Yes, Mr. Ghent lent it to me.”

She fixed her eyes on her book, but she could divine in the silence her visitor’s extreme displeasure. He rattled his keys and his money, stared hard at her for several seconds, and then dramatized what he considered to be a dignified departure.

“Well, well, well! I’m a busy man. Must be getting along.”

She glanced at him momentarily.

“Yes, ideas must keep you very busy, Mr. Crabtree.”

She watched him descend the bank, and heard the rocking of the punt as his bulk disturbed it, as he disturbed most things. Well, this shabby old Ulysses might not desire to regard her in the future as Mrs. Calypso of Folly Island!

## XVIII

It seemed to Peter Ghent that the Temple Manor beech trees were more like a sacred grove than on any morning he could remember, stately and still, and guarding the long approach to the white house. The abrupt chattering of his old car's engine might be topical and irreverent, like Montmartre being indecently clever in St. Cloud, but the massive foliage of the trees seemed to smother and assuage the sound, spreading beneficent green hands over it and saying: "Peace, peace, little chatterer, there is no folly so foolish as mere haste." On the lawn where the shadows were lying Ghent saw one of my lady's new rain-makers at work, a queer little machine on legs that tossed an arc of glittering water to and fro with a rhythmical, soothing steadfastness. Ghent watched it for a moment, but without envy. Man's ingenuity seemed good when it was in sympathy with nature, and did not hack and tear and destroy, or rush about to foul woods and hedgerows with stuff that should have been deposited in urban dustbins.

Mr. Sanderson smiled in his whiskers. Yes, her ladyship was on the terrace, and as Ghent was led through the hall, he saw the door of a black and gold lacquer cabinet hanging open, and showing the red lacquer within. Lady Melissa kept her Zeiss glasses in a drawer of that cabinet, and she used these glasses to watch birds and trees and flowers. When your flesh began to fail, while your spirit remained young, such things as these were useful supplements. She could call them her crutches. Moreover, in contemplating the landscape through them she had focused Folly Island, and discovered among the willows a little patch of whiteness, and other unfamiliar objects. Someone was camping there, and she had not been asked or informed.

When Ghent came out on to the terrace she had her binoculars turned upon the water-fan, and was watching its spray sweeping to and fro and catching the light that filtered through the trees. The distant chug of the engine and force-pump were inaudible to her, and as she watched the man-made rain she thought that if man's ingenuity could always function in this way, life might be less like a nursery full of little raucous egotisms. If one could smother oratory for a generation, totalitarian hysteria, and the mouthings of a smug socialism that posed as an angel and talked like poor Poll! Envy in black kid gloves and a red surplice! And then she saw Peter Ghent, and wondered whether that rain-maker of hers moved him to envy, and to the snarl of nasty class-

consciousness.

“Hallo, Peter. I’m sorry.”

He smiled at her.

“For what?”

“For having rain on my grass. And yet, it is for the sake of the grass.”

“It’s rather good to watch.”

“You don’t hate me for it?”

“Hardly.”

“Thirsty things should make one sympathetic. It might even cause one to agitate, as I am doing for the poor Farley housewives. But, of course, that would be condemned as patronage. I am numbered among the old pirates who should be made to walk the plank.”

Ghent laughed.

“I think Farley would object to that.”

“I wonder! It must be terribly tempting to be offered plunder.”

Said Ghent: “Man always seems to be such a humbug and a fool when he gets on a platform. I think I’d always prefer my freedom, even if it were a bit shabby.”

“To mass-produced and mass-coerced dullness. Man is never a slave to circumstance, my dear, is he? How droll it all is! Give as little as possible, and get all you can. Mr. Crabtree and the Russian enthusiasts are really so alike, just painted on opposite sides of the shield. Take the glasses, and look at Folly Island for me, will you?”

Ghent took the glasses, but he did not raise them.

“That’s why I am here. To explain Folly Island, if I can.”

There were occasions when Lady Vandeleur gazed at you with the round eyes of a very young child, as though life continued to surprise her. She would look at Mr. Crabtree in this way, as she might gaze at the first wart-hog to provide her with the actual proof of its existence. With Peter Ghent her glances were sometimes maternal, or playful and oblique. There might be little crinkles of light in them, and a faint narrowing of the orbits.

“Well, explain, my dear. I seem to see a tent.”

“Yes, my tent.”

“Has Mrs. Maintenance——?”

“No, I’m not occupying the tent. I’ve lent it to Mrs. Strangeways.”

She noticed that he stood beside her chair, and turned towards the valley so that she should not look too directly into his face.

“Does she know that it is my island?”

“No. And I didn’t tell her. I wanted to explain.”

“Let me guess.”

“It might help. I feel rather——”

“Like the first confessional! Let us assume that Mrs. Strangeways has a past.”

“Yes, but——”

“Wait, my dear; I’m being intuitive, not pertly sophisticated. She has a past, yes, and a present and a future. Folly Farm is somehow associated with the past; Folly Island is very much the present.”

“Absolutely so. It’s a kind of retreat, if you know what I mean?”

“And she has left Folly Farm?”

“Yes.”

“Was she turned out?”

“In a way, yes, only she turned herself out, for reasons I——”

“A man, Peter?”

“Yes, you can call it a man.”

“I see. That sort of person. And the idea is——”

“She called it transplantation.”

“New soil, virgin, yet impoverished.”

“I believe she hasn’t a penny, and nowhere to go. That’s the sort of ruthlessness——”

“That is final. Yes, something that touches one like those fine and reckless renunciations of the young. Just how old is she?”

“I haven’t thought.”

“Thirty?”



“Very likely. It doesn’t matter.”

Lady Melissa looked at the sky.

“Well, my call will have to be made on Folly Island. I shall have to ask Sanderson to order out the punt. My third gardener is quite a good boatman.”

She saw his chin jerk round.

“Your ladyship will go?”

“I am interested.”

“Thank you most terribly. Something wants doing, and I can’t—— You see, she does not want the sort of interference a man might supply.”

“Quite, my dear. If you understand that, you’re unusual. Men are so apt to think that no voyage of discovery can be made without a pair of trousers being hoisted at the mast-head.”

Ghent let his old car free-wheel down the avenue of beeches, and with a noiselessness that was a salute to them and to their mistress. He was feeling rather happy, but unlike so many of the moderns he had no desire to advertise it by creating noise. He was telling himself what a marvellous person she was. Life came so easily to her and seemed to run like silk through her hands. And why? Because she was serene and secure? No, it was not the magic of mere money, or old Crabtree would have been a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. That was the absurd mistake the poor, scrambling crowd could not help making in its belief that inward blessedness could be created by acquiring every sort of material thing. You threw butchers’ meat and tomatoes and cream cakes, and a wireless set, and free tickets to Brighton, and a motor-bike and a jerry-built bungalow into a heap, and called it art, a study in still life. It was all very good and admirable, but its production theory failed to take into account that intangible something which used to be called soul. It did not explain the serenity seen on the faces of some old labouring men. It dished out cheap blessings and did not rate them as toys, or realize that spoiled children grow tired of toys and break them. The thing was to rediscover the divine essence of which humanity would not tire.

Yes, she was a marvellous person, perhaps because she was so serenely sure of herself and knew herself too well to suffer from poses and insincerities. Her dignity was complete because she had ceased from thinking about it. She did not envy anybody. She had no one to propitiate, no one to fool. She could behave, not as the new psychology contends because she clicked to every clockwork circumstance, but because she had climbed above circumstance. Like music and poetry she was above all the ologies, and unexplainable by

them. She was a person, a work of art, and like life not reducible to a chemical formula.

Was it possible for the new social ideologies to create such personalities? Hardly, when so many of their high priests paraded with a bunch of white jasmine in one hand, and a bottle of vitriol in the other.

Ghent ran the car into the Marplot stable and went off to see how Bob and George were progressing. He found that they had sunk the shaft to a depth of five feet, and were working in a gravel bed that refused to be dealt with by a spade. Fanshaw was down the shaft, working with pick and shovel, while George filled and barrowed.

“Any water, Bob?”

“Not likely, sir. See this here stuff. Now you can see why we dry out in a season like this.”

Ghent bent down and examining the sides of the shaft, saw the crust of soil that covered this natural filter-bed.

“Yes, not much bottom, Bob, but good for a wet year.”

“God give us a few! We’ve had old Nosey Parker on the job.”

“Oh! He didn’t trespass?”

“No, came down the river in his ruddy boat, just to see, I guess, if we were still pumping.”

“Did he spot anything?”

“I guess not. Went across to call on the lady.”

“What, to Folly Island?”

“He did that. Didn’t stay long, though. Nosed off home again.”

Ghent, squatting there on the edge of the shaft, made every appearance of being interested in it and in it alone.

“Think we ought to line and strut, Bob?”

“No need, yet. This old gravel’s like a concrete wall. Besides, the timber would get in the way. Can’t work all cluttered up.”

“I wonder how thick that bed is?”

“Can’t be much more of it, sir. We want a bit of sand, and then clay. That ought to mean water.”

Ghent nodded. He was wondering whether he ought to warn Folly Island that Temple Manor was to be expected, or whether such intervention was best avoided. Also, he could make no contact with Folly Island save by hailing it across the river, and his men were too much in evidence as listeners. He would be compelled to recover his own waterlogged punt if he wished to visit her, without swimming.

George might have read his thoughts.

“The old punt’s gone, sir.”

“Yes, I know. Sank under me, the other night. Leaky old coffin.”

He took off his coat, and laid it on the grass.

“I’ll take a turn, Bob, down there.”

Fanshaw eyed him over the lip of the hole.

“Got your best trousers on, sir. Better keep to the barrow. George can take turns with me.”

But at one o’clock, when the men had knocked off and gone to their midday meal, Ghent strolled up the river, and saw her sitting on a cushion under the willows. He did not raise his voice, but spoke as though she were standing close to him.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Things all right?”

“Oh, quite.”

He waved and turned away, deciding that Lady Melissa, the river, and Folly Island were best left to weave out the situation for themselves.

Folly Island was making tea, kneeling on the grass and holding the kettle in one hand and the teapot in the other, when it was startled by those sudden voices.

“This will do, Gibbs.”

“Can you manage, your ladyship?”

“Yes, the bank is not too steep for me. Go down to Marplot and leave this letter, and come back in three-quarters of an hour.”

Mrs. Strangeways put down the kettle and the teapot, almost like some sibyl surprised while distilling a magic infusion, and rose from her knees as Temple Manor's black hat and white hair appeared amid the willows. Her reaction was instant, sweeping away any self-conscious inhibition.

"Oh, let me help you."

Her quick glide to the bank with outstretched hand was met by an upward smile, and a hand that went out to hers.

"Thank you, my dear. Mrs. Strangeways, I believe?"

"Yes."

"The formal should precede the informal, but we have reversed the process! Thank you."

For the moment they stood looking at each other, both of them conscious of an immediate and mutual attraction, and the pause was like the opening and closing of a door upon two women who were friends without the intimate inwardness of the process being questioned.

"I was going to make tea. May I give you tea?"

"Thank you, I should love it."

"I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I have to ask your forgiveness for trespassing. I did not know the island belonged to you."

"On paper, it does, but I make you free of it."

"Thank you. Do you like a deck-chair high or low?"

"A compromise. Half-way. One can compromise over chairs, but not——"

A quick look passed between them.

"Yes, but on some things, no."

Mrs. Strangeways adjusted the chair, made sure that the supporting rail was safely in the notches, and placed a cushion in it.

"I will leave you, Lady Vandeleur, to compromise with the cushion!"

Excellent! Lady Melissa took the chair, and Mrs. Strangeways went down on her knees, and replaced the kettle on the spirit-stove, for during this interlude the kettle had ceased to steam. She knelt, watching it and watched by Lady Vandeleur, who, as a woman somewhat wise as to the texture of life in temperaments, flowers and china, was moved to declare that this kneeling figure in its straw-coloured frock was fine art. The child, for Lady Melissa

thought of anyone under thirty-five as a child, had one of those exquisite, creamy skins that never show much colour. The set of the head on the sensitive, slender neck was very attractive. So was the little blunt nose, and those stag's eyes that gave you a queer impression of wildness and fear, the eyes of a creature doomed to be hunted. Mrs. Strangeways's hands were long and slender, her shoulders softly rounded like the shoulders of Georgian women. Despite the slightness of her figure it had no angles, but was fine and flexible and fluid. Her poise as she knelt there was perfect, without being anything of a pose.

She said, with a sudden lifting of the head: "I'm afraid I haven't any cake."

"I prefer bread and butter."

"Yes, I can give you that."

She uncovered a dish that contained six thin slices.

"I had better cut some more."

The kettle was boiling again, and she filled the teapot, and setting it aside, reached for a tin biscuit-box in which she was keeping her bread.

"It's such fun doing things for oneself."

Lady Vandeleur asked a question.

"Have you, always?"

"Not recently. That makes it refreshing."

"The privilege has been much denied me."

"Yes, I suppose——"

"My head-gardener takes it almost as a personal reproach if I attempt to weed a border."

She was spreading butter on the loaf, and Lady Melissa noticed that she wore no rings.

"But that's rather touching, isn't it? I mean, if one gets real service, affectionate service, not something that's bought——"

"Yes, my dear, one is touched by it. So little is gained in life by shouting. I suppose that is why capable and dominant women have such cubs of sons."

"Have they?"

"In my experience, yes. The women who sit softly on sofas seem to hold men more surely than those vigorous efficients who smack a ball and wear

riding-breeches. Have you ever worn trousers?"

Mrs. Strangeways's profile became what is described as piquant. She could crinkle up that little blunt nose of hers.

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't."

"Little slops in grey flannel bags. The real inwardness of the phase has perplexed me. Do they want to look like boys?"

"Or do boyish things?"

"Perhaps. This freedom idea."

"Which isn't."

"Which may be a pose."

"Or a protest."

They looked at each other and were pleased. Mrs. Strangeways poured out the tea, and passed Lady Melissa her cup.

"Is it sugar?"

"One lump."

"Sometimes one must make one's protest, don't you think?"

"Utterly. However inconvenient and problematical——"

Mrs. Strangeways's poise became pensive. She poured out her own tea, and forgot the sugar.

"Yes, I know. That, in a way, is why I am here. Oh, but I don't want to bother you——"

"It doesn't. May I have some bread and butter?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Isn't it rather a bore——?"

"The human situation? My dear, it's the eternal riddle of the Sphinx, Mona Lisa's smile, the curious urge that makes us do the difficult thing when the easy thing might be so much more comfortable."

Mrs. Strangeways helped herself to bread and butter, rolling the slice up and holding it poised. Her head drooped a little on its pretty neck, and Lady Melissa thought: "Yes, I understand how a young man like my poor Peter feels about you. But why poor Peter? And are you as innocent as you seem? Probably most of Botticelli's angels were little sluts. But not you, somehow, unless I have lost my flair. Yes, the Tragic Muse, or the climbing plant that

must have something to cling to. Nature still produces such plants, in spite of emancipation. Yes, feminine tendrils. When the man grows them he is a poor thing and marries money, or lives on women, and cultivates cacti or breeds prize guinea-pigs. The painted husband! Yes, I know he is normal in certain parts of the globe, but I don't like him in England."

She asked a sudden question.

"And how long are you going to camp here?"

Mrs. Strangeways came out of her droop.

"As long as you will let me."

"I think the weather might be more unsympathetic than I should be. Any other reasons? Forgive me."

Mrs. Strangeways looked her straight in the face.

"Oh, yes, finance and other things. You see, I can't afford, at present, to go anywhere else."

"Is the state temporary or permanent?"

"I suppose it will have to be temporary."

"Yes, crises cannot last indefinitely, like the Central Europe situation. War or compromise."

"I refuse to compromise."

"No? Sometimes, that is very difficult."

"Well, I tried compromise and was compromised. I'm being rather frank with you."

"I like it. But why?"

"Just—no compromise."

"I see. Have you any kind of job in prospect?"

"No. I'm trying to think, and I seem to be discovering that I'm a rather useless sort of person. I'm getting rather old for a mannequin, and I seem to be too ornamental to be safe for the routine jobs."

"My dear, just how old are you?"

"Thirty-one. I would like to be twenty-one and begin all over again. That's rather my idea."

"Innocence. Is anyone innocent these days?"

“Let’s say untarnished.”

Lady Vandeleur held out her cup.

“May I have some more? One need never be that you know, so long as one can wash in Jordan.”

“You do believe that?”

“I do.”

She refilled Lady Vandeleur’s cup, and added milk and one lump of sugar, and turning on her knees, knelt like youth at the feet of the Eternal Mother.

“Thank you so very much. So few people seem to think that it is worth while.”

“Save some of the young and some of the old, my dear. May and September. July and August are apt to be hot and stuffy, and too full of the business of living. Never believe the man or woman who says that nothing matters. It means that they have been beaten in life and are cowards.”

“What matters?”

“Oh, certain loyalties, to oneself and others, certain cleanliness, compassion, a secret belief that the whole business is not a nasty and sanguinary joke. Oh yes, things do matter supremely, in spite of the drearies and the decadents. Ask a tree whether good growth is worth while, and I suppose it would say: ‘Well, I have to, the thing’s in me, somehow.’ And it is in us, my dear, if we don’t let it be poisoned. But I’m becoming preachy-preachy.”

Then, Mrs. Strangeways did a surprising and sudden thing. She made a quick movement, bent her head, and put her lips to Lady Melissa’s knee.

“You have given me just what I wanted. And half an hour ago we had never seen each other.”

Lady Vandeleur laid a hand on Mrs. Strangeways’s head.

“Women such as we are have known each other always.”

When he had the little world of Marplot to himself, and the light was failing, Ghent went out, carrying an old blue bathing-dress and a towel, and using the weeping beech tree as a tent, changed and trotted down one of the grass paths to the river. He swam up stream past Folly Island, and turning to drift down in the dusk, made land where her punt lay. With his arms resting on



the gunwale of the punt, he called to her.

“Mrs. Strangeways.”

She had been watching, and she came and sat in the grass at the top of the bank, and her face was dim to him.

“How did you like her?”

“She’s everything that you said she was, and more. She says I can stay here.”

“How long will you?”

“How long?” and her voice paused. “Oh, perhaps until it rains. If I produce rain for you——”

“That leaves me in a quandary.”

“And how?”

“If rain drives you away, am I to hope for it?”

She was silent. Then she said: “I’d rather think of that which you need most.”

“That which I need most. I’ll reflect on that. I’m going now. Good night.”

He dropped back into the water, and she, with her arms wrapped round her knees, sat and watched his dark head float down stream.

## XIX

Ghent was to remember that particular morning, for at the time it promised to be indicative of what might happen afterwards. He was up at five o'clock, eager to see whether any water had seeped into the shaft, and he found it dry, and completely prohibitive. As for the day itself, it began with splendour, an absolute red sunset of a dawn, and across the water he could see the light striking upon the little white tent amid the willows, and he reflected that if weather lore was to be relied upon this fiery sky spelt rain.

Rain! Drink for his trees, and a damp depression over yonder. And if she abandoned the island she had nowhere to go.

By seven o'clock the sky had clouded over, and a fine drizzle began, sufficient to damp leaves and roofs, but not to fill gutters and set rain-pipes gurgling. Ghent went in to shave, with one eye on the mirror and the other on the window. Part of him was longing to hear a pronounced patter on the leaves, part of him feared it, for her sake. He could not persuade himself that she was of a texture to withstand much rain; she was silk, not frieze.

At eight o'clock it was still mizzling, and Ghent met Bob in the yard.

“What do you think of it?”

Bob did not think much of it. He said that this was a slut of a summer that played every sort of trick on you, and did not know its own mind.

“No water yet, Bob.”

“Well, we'll go a bit deeper.”

“We ought to have a winch.”

“No. We can pull it out with a bucket, sir.”

As a pessimist Bob was justified. This amazing year flouted all your prognostications. By nine o'clock the sky began to clear, and the drizzle died away. By ten o'clock the sun was shining.

All three of them were at work on the well, Bob down below, and Ghent and George drawing up and emptying the buckets of soil, when Ghent saw two motor pantehnicons cross the bridge and stop at the Folly Farm gate. They were tigerish-looking vehicles, striped in yellow and black, and when Ghent

saw them enter the Folly Farm lane he realized that Mr. Max Broster had not wasted much time either in losing his temper or putting the loss of it into practical shape. These gentlemen had orders to clear Folly Farm of its furniture. The gesture was final, so final that Ghent did not know whether to be sorry or glad.

Leaving the men, without saying anything to them, he walked along the bank until he was level with Folly Island. The yellow vans were visible from where he stood. Also, he could see Mrs. Strangeways sitting in her deck-chair with a book in her lap.

He hailed her.

“Have you seen your visitors?”

She had. She came down to the punt.

“Yes. I left the key in the door for them. I rather expected this to happen.”

“Have you cleared all your things?”

“Everything. Please don’t worry.”

Ghent returned to the well, to find George on his knees, peering into this open grave as though a crock of gold had been uncovered there.

“It’s coming in, sir.”

Down below, Bob, with his fist in a mass of clay that had suddenly grown sticky, was pecking with the pick at a spot on the wall where water was oozing into the shaft. Ghent knelt down beside George.

“Struck it, Bob?”

“Looks like it, sir. There’s a sort of vein in the clay here, a bit of ballast. Gosh, yes, she’s coming in all right.”

The trickle became a jet, and Bob was standing in a puddle of water.

“Better come out, Bob.”

A short ladder made of two by one deals, nailed to lengths of two by four battens, lay on the grass. George slid it down into the pit, and Fanshaw emerged, bringing his tools with him. The three of them stood and watched that spurt of water filling the bottom of their well.

“If she goes on like that, sir, it’ll come in as fast as we can pump.”

“Better get a stage in, Bob, hadn’t we? Think the walls will hold?”

Fanshaw scratched his head.

“We’ll get some struts in, and board up the gravel. The clay’ll hold all right.”

“There’s the wood from the old shed we pulled down. Good enough for that job.”

“I should say so.”

They were busy fixing a staging for the pump and boarding in the upper part of the shaft, when the nursery bell began to ring. None of them heard it, and Mrs. Maintenance was obliged to come down to the river and warn Peter that he had a visitor.

“Mr. Pelling, sir.”

“Mr. Pelling?”

“Yes. He’s waiting in the office.”

“All right. Tell him I’ll be up in half a minute.”

Ghent washed his hands in the river, put on his coat, and set off to interview Mr. Pelling. He avoided any interchange of glances between himself and his two men, for he had every reason to feel anxious, and he guessed that both Bob and George knew it. Mr. Pelling was a member of a big firm of nurserymen, a firm which bought in stock from smaller men and resold to their customers. For two years Mr. Pelling’s order had been of considerable importance to Ghent, though the trade prices were much less than the money he would have received from private buyers. Peter had been expecting a visit from Mr. Pelling, and he had been worried by the prospect of losing a large and possible order in a year when both nature and man seemed to be in league against him.

Mr. Pelling had strayed from the office. Possibly, he had taken the opportunity of exploring on his own, and Ghent found him in the Green Way, inspecting the Marplot rhododendrons. Mr. Pelling was a complete study in brown, hair, face, clothes, boots, hat. In figure he was stout, in speech and movements deliberate. His eyes were sleepy, and blue, but the actual Mr. Pelling was very much awake.

“Morning, Mr. Ghent. How are things?”

Peter smiled upon him.

“Oh, a bit stuffy, but I’m not complaining.”

“Had any rain?”

“Not much. Have you?”

Mr. Pelling had a dry wit.

“One or two passing clouds have had a cold in the head. But our soil’s pretty retentive. Rhodos won’t be budding out much.”

“No. But it’s rather early to tell.”

“Can’t send out rhodos without flower buds,” said Mr. Pelling, knowing his own mind; “people don’t like it. Can’t expect them to wait two years for a flower show. A bit of rain now, and a little drought later on would be different. I wanted some rhodos.”

Ghent kept smiling.

“I’m sorry. Anything I can show you?”

“Got any young Fletchus?”

“Yes.”

“And Allumiis? Four foot stuff. We’re short.”

Ghent’s smile faded for a moment.

“Yes. But we’ve been rather unlucky with Allumiis. Moved most of them last autumn.”

“Looking sick?”

“Yes, rather. I’ll show you.”

Mr. Pelling might be a trader of trees, but he was also a grower of them, and if those seemingly sleepy eyes of his saw what was more than plain to the expert, Mr. Pelling was a kindly person, and he did not stress the obvious. Half those particular cypresses were unmarketable, and even the moving of the survivors would entail a risk. In fact, in considering the reputation of his own firm, he knew that it would be bad business for him to touch any of Ghent’s trees this season.

“Sorry, Ghent; I’m afraid there’s too much risk.”

“Quite. I shouldn’t have sold you those trees, even if you had asked for them.”

“Yes, you have always been very straight with us. If I were you, Ghent, I wouldn’t lift a single conifer this season. Let ’em sit tight and have a chance. I know that is rather stiff advice.”

“I think it’s sound, Mr. Pelling. Our deciduous stuff will be all right, I think. Shall you want any of it?”

“I’ll see. We’re rather well-stocked ourselves in that line. I’ll let you know later.”

Peter walked back with Mr. Pelling to his waiting car, and smiled on him, as though Mr. Pelling had promised him a considerable order, though he was very sure that he would do no business with Messrs. Pelling & Co. this year. It was not to be expected that a firm with so high a reputation would sponsor doubtful trees. Mr. Pelling drove off in his smart new coupé, and Ghent went back to his work with the men, to be struck by the futility of digging that hole in the ground. What was the use? The little spurt of water the pump would throw could not save him from bankruptcy. He had not the capital to enable him to hold out for another year.

Almost, he said to the two men: “Oh, we won’t bother, Bob. We are wasting our time,” but he knew that such an order would be a confession of defeat. There was that in him which would not admit defeat, but would go on with the normal round, as in a city that will not surrender until the last sack of corn has been opened. Besides, what else was there for him to do? Bob and George had rigged up a rough staging for the pump, and they went to collect the timber for lining the upper part of the shaft. Ghent joined them. There was assuagement and comfort in using your hands when your head was bothered by a problem that seemed insoluble, and your heart felt sore. Also, he became aware of a kind of inarticulate gentleness in the attitude of these two labouring men. Neither of them referred to Mr. Pelling’s visit, or asked questions, and yet Ghent felt that they knew that no order had been forthcoming, and that he was worried. So the three of them worked together, George with cheerful quips, Bob with a laconic concentration that was characteristic of the man. Both of them knew that their own jobs were in jeopardy, and they may have felt, just as Ghent did, that they were attempting to sweep back the sea with a broom. Yet after all, you could not throw up your hands and whimper. You just went on with the job. That was what work on the land taught you. It was no use indulging in a sit-down strike against nature.

And Ghent was grateful to them. He felt that these two men knew that he was feeling pretty miserable, and that they avoided looking at him too closely, for there are human subtleties and reticences that the man of the soil understands like the gentleman he can be.

Lady Melissa, telling her man to pull up on the Weir Bridge, sat and surveyed the scene. Let the modern world accuse her of obstructing progress. The Vandeleurs had built this bridge, and if she, the last of them, was not

allowed to use it as a grandstand, then privilege was indeed dead. She could see the black and yellow pantechnicons at Folly Farm, and men in white aprons carrying and loading furniture into the vans. That, too, was final. On the other side of the river three figures were at work about Ghent's water-shaft, and in mid-stream Folly Island had set a little white sail, Mrs. Strangeways's tent. The stage was peopled and complete, and when Mr. Crabtree's motor-boat suddenly appeared round a green bend, Lady Melissa smiled on it, and told the man to drive on to the Marplot gate. Even the evil genius of this English scene was present.

Lady Melissa came upon them unannounced. The hose had been fixed to the pump, and Ghent was holding the end of it, while Fanshaw swung the pump-handle. With each pulsation of the pump a little jet of water gushed from the end of the tube. Peter was watching it, almost with a pity that was ironic, and in his sloped shoulders and bowed head Lady Melissa divined a feeling of futility.

"So, you have found water. Good afternoon, Bob; good afternoon, George."

Ghent turned sharply and saw her. His face was very grave. And then he smiled.

"Yes, we've found it, my lady."

He let the end of the hose drop to the ground, and Bob ceased pumping. The pipe emptied itself like a creature bleeding to death, and in the silence they heard Mr. Crabtree's motor-boat passing down the river. It was level with Folly Island, and all the men turned and looked at it with secret anger.

Lady Melissa understood.

"Mr. Crabtree, I think?"

"Yes," said Ghent, "on an observation tour."

Lady Vandeleur walked forward towards the bank.

"Shall we stroll along the river. I have one or two things to ask you."

Ghent's head went up. He put himself beside her, and they passed along the bank together at the moment when the Temple Towers boat drew level with Ghent's well. They were aware of Mr. Roger Crabtree's full moon of a face turned up towards them.

Lady Melissa paused for a moment to survey the scene, but her consciousness of it did not appear to include Mr. Roger Crabtree and his boat.

She looked over and beyond them to the elms of Farley, smilingly, serenely. She spoke to Ghent.

“When every prospect pleases, Peter.”

She resumed her walk along the river, with Ghent at her side, a young man who understood the significance of this gesture. Temple Manor had unfurled a flag, stretched out a regal hand. And possibly Mr. Roger Crabtree, that man of ideas, had gauged the meaning of Temple Manor’s association with Marplot.



## XX

**M**r. Crabtree was not a man who camouflaged his feelings in the family circle. His indignations had for him complete validity. He was angry, therefore his indignation was good and right. He broke forth at lunch upon the snobberies and jobberies of the countryside, and said very vulgar things about Temple Manor and Marplot. He declared that he had always suspected that old woman of being an elderly vampire, and that she was vamping young Ghent.

For once, Mrs. Mary protested.

“Really, Roger, how can you say such things?”

“I do say ’em.”

Irene, who had prepared a tennis-party for the afternoon, and who was more interested in a particular person who was to be present than in her father’s fret and fury, caused a diversion by announcing that Bill was going to land in the paddock. She had had the Jerseys moved from it for the occasion.

“What!” snapped her father, “what, what!”

“Bill’s flying over in his new Gosshawk.”

“And who’s Bill?”

“My latest.”

“Land in my paddock? I’m damned if he will.”

“And just how are you going to stop him, Parent? Stand in the middle of the field and flag-wag?”

“I won’t have it. Moving my cows.”

“Well, Bill’s flying over and he’s got to come down somewhere. He makes up our four. Besides, if you’re a man of ideas, Parent, here’s one.”

“What’s the idea?”

“Why don’t you buy a plane?”

“What for? And who’s going to fly it?”

“I might, Parent. Bill could teach me. Besides, that isn’t the whole idea.”

“Well, get on with it.”

“Haven’t you heard that old Mother Vandeleur hates anything in the air. Gets quite jittery about it. Well, if we had a plane we could fly around over Temple Manor and make things hum a bit. If you want to be nasty over the garden fence——”

Mr. Crabtree grinned at his daughter.

“You’re a bright one, you are. It is an idea. Get her mad, what? Listen to that, Mother. I guess the girl takes after me.”

“Yes, Roger,” said Mrs. Crabtree meekly, “but I don’t want a horrid, noisy thing like that.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“And the cows. I’m sure it wouldn’t be good for the milk.”

“Or the snails, Ma!”

Mrs. Crabtree showed temper.

“I won’t be ridiculed by my children. I may say, that I have had nothing but unhappiness from——”

“Don’t be a coot, Mater.”

“Coot, indeed! Your father may say unkind things, but I won’t——”

Mr. Crabtree exerted authority. He might be rude to his wife, but that was his particular privilege.

“You dry up, young woman. I won’t have you being rude to your mother.”

“Fectious,” said Irene, making a mouth.

“‘Fectious!’ Why don’t you talk English?”

“In, Parent, in. Good English and catching. Good-bye, going to see that Smith has marked the court out properly. He’s the world’s worst boob.”

“You’ve no manners,” said her father.

“Fectious, old dear. We’re tough, we are. Aren’t you a tough?”

“Get along with you!” said Mr. Crabtree, not displeased.

Ghent heard someone shouting across the river. He was proposing to

salvage his submerged punt that evening, and to borrow Mrs. Strangeways's punt for the purpose, and standing in the Folly Farm orchard he saw one of the remover's men hailing Folly Island and its occupant. The man was dressed in black, and wore a bowler hat. He had a hoarse voice like a crow's, and a very large red mouth, and both his colour and his cawing suggested a large, black bird.

"Hi, lidy, what abart the punt? Excoose me, but we've orders ter take it."

He kept on croaking the same refrain until Mrs. Strangeways appeared among the willows.

"I'm keeping the punt."

"You'll ex-coose me, of course, lidy, but our orders were——"

"Yes, I understand. I will communicate with the gentleman about it. The punt is staying."

"Very good, lidy."

He mooched off, doubtless realizing that since the punt was protected by a stretch of water and that to recover it one of them would have to strip and swim the river, and that, in a state of nature, the temporary possession of the punt was ensured to her by the water and the nudity of a cutting-out party. Mrs. Strangeways, leaning against a willow, watched the black figure disappear, while reflecting upon the complete and thorough spitefulness of her late lover. Max had been very prompt in emptying Folly Farm. He was even prepared to impound and warehouse a large object like the punt. Well, she would keep it for a week or two, and then run it into the Folly Farm boat-house, and inform him that the craft was now at his disposal.

Five minutes later she heard another voice, Ghent's voice. It spoke to her quietly across the river.

"Mrs. Strangeways, would you mind if I came to collect my punt this evening?"

"How can you get across?"

"Oh, swim. I expect I can empty the thing, and get it back to my side."

"No, I'll fetch you."

"Would you?"

"Isn't that common sense?"

"Well, yes, in a way," though had she been nearer to him and able to see

his eyes, she would have realized that she transcended common sense.

Bill duly arrived in his Gosshawk, landing in the Temple Towers paddock after exhibiting himself and his machine to the startled cows and a passively indignant Mrs. Crabtree. Three sets of tennis were played, and then Bill took Irene up for a joy ride, and under her instructions cut every sort of aerial caper and made every sort of noise directly over Temple Manor. He flew round and round over the house, zoomed up with his engine roaring, swooped down on it, and almost lifted a leg over the place. Roger Crabtree watched these aerial acrobatics from the Temple Towers terrace, and chuckled appreciatively. That should be giving the old hen something to cluck about! Yes, daughter Irene was distinctly a bright young thing. She had ideas, like her father.

Ghent, too, heard this dreadful noise; everybody in the neighbourhood heard it; and he went out to watch the machine's stunts over Temple Manor. Who was responsible for this exhibition? The Crabtrees? He remained there observing the show until he saw the plane fly back across the river, and after circling Temple Towers, glide down to land near Mr. Crabtree's house.

It was very grey and still when she poled the punt across to the Marplot bank. Peter was waiting there, wearing brown shorts and an old green pullover, for the recovering of his submerged punt promised to be a damp affair. Bunter, who came trotting down to join in the adventure, was taken on board, with a length of rope and a tin can for baling. Regarded in the modern spirit the dog was Ghent's chaperon.

If they were a little shy of each other, and moved to evasion in the matter of any intimate interchange, the day had had its incidents for the making of conversation. Had he found water? He had, but he did not confess to his own feeling of helplessness in his clash with nature. Nor did he tell her of Mr. Pelling's visit and the unhappy inference he had drawn from it. The aeroplane's high-jinks over Temple Manor was a subject that offered itself inevitably, and allowed them to exchange suggestions as to the plane's origin and the purpose of its performance.

Ghent was sure it was a Crabtree gesture.

"Did you see her with me this morning?"

"Yes."

"Just as our old friend went by. He sat up and took notice. I wonder if he

was up in that machine.”

“Are such things done on purpose?”

“In the Crabtree world, yes. They were stunting over Temple Manor just to annoy her. She happens to have a particular loathing for flying lorries.”

“It seems too petty.”

“Oh, just human nature in its back-yard phase.”

The evening might be grey, but it was so gentle a greyness and so English, and so laced with green, that she stood still for a moment, letting the pole trail in the water. Bunter, sitting at his master’s feet, looked up at her inquiringly, with his head on one side. Very little water was coming down, and the punt slid on towards the island without much drift down stream. Ghent, putting out a hand to stroke the dog, saw her slim figure and gentle head against the greenness of the island and the willows.

“I wonder why the world can’t be content with this? I suppose it used to be.”

Did she expect him to answer that question? Besides, the answering of it would involve a complete criticism of the industrial age and its ideals, or lack of them.

“Oh, I think we have been educated out of nature. We moderns are so easily bored.”

“Are you?”

“Sometimes. But I chose this life, and I don’t suppose I could stomach any other. After all, it’s real.”

She echoed the word.

“Yes, real. In a London flat nothing is very real. If you feel bored you rush out to join a crowd that has nothing real to do. Distractions. To escape from life, somehow, because you are not really living. Is that it?”

“Possibly. You see, I’m prejudiced in favour of the country mind. Life in the cities is tinned, stale stuff.”

Bunter was the first to land, scuttling up the bank as though he might expect to discover rabbits upon the island. Standing in her punt, which she had moored to a willow, Ghent could see the nose of his own craft just under water. The water was shallow here, and the drought had lowered the river level, and slipping over the gunwale Ghent found that he was on a shingle bank and that the water did not rise above his knees. He reached for the rope

he had brought with him, he slipped an end through the mooring ring and knotted it.

“Can I help?”

She was standing up above, and he threw her the other end of the rope and told her to pass it over a biggish bough, and to drop the end back to him. She did so, and when he pulled on the rope, the nose of his old black coffin rose above water. He stood considering the problem. Baling would be useless unless he could get the punt on an even keel, and he waded round to the stern end, bent down, got his hands under the boat and raised it. But he realized that he would need a second piece of rope to hold it in position, and he had not got that rope.

“I see. You want someone to bale, while you hold the stern up.”

“That’s the problem.”

“Wait a minute.”

She disappeared, to return with her skirt pinned up, and a bucket in her hand.

“If I get in, ever so gently, do you think you can hold on?”

He smiled at her.

“You’ll get wet.”

“What fun! Ready?”

“Yes.”

She slithered down the bank, and into the waterlogged punt, and both rope and Ghent’s arms sufficed to hold it steady.

“Splendid.”

She set to with the bucket, a little flush on her face, her movements those of an excited child.

“If we get it half afloat, you can bale too.”

“Yes,” said he, with his eyes on her face.

“Can you manage?”

“Rather.”

“What fun!”

Bunter, having discovered no wild life on the island, sat solemnly up above

and watched them. She was flinging water out of the boat with a kind of happy recklessness. The gunwale began to rise, until Ghent, letting go for a moment, saw that it had sufficient buoyancy to support her. He dashed for the baling tin, passed it to Mrs. Strangeways, and deprived her of the bucket.

“I can work from outside.”

She laughed.

“All hands to the pump.”

They found that they could bale out water sufficiently quickly to outpace the leak, but when no more than two inches of water were left in the punt, both bucket and tin failed to scoop up a satisfying quantity. It occurred to Ghent that if he pushed the boat against the bank, and holding it there, turned it on its side, the rest of the water could be spilled out. He told her to climb on to the bank, and then he tried to turn the punt over, with one side pressed against the bank, but the water left in it made the lift just too much for him.

“Wait a moment.”

She joined him in the river, and adding her strength to his, they were able to roll the punt on its side, and run the water out of it.

“Just the difference. I say, your skirt has got wet.”

“Well, I have another.”

And then he realized that if he was to persuade the leaky punt back into its boat-house, there was no time for dalliance. He called Bunter down, and climbing into the punt, unfastened the rope, and then found that he had neither pole nor paddle.

“Sorry, I’m afraid I shall have to rush the wretched thing over before it sinks again. I haven’t a paddle.”

“I have two.”

She waded to her own punt, took a paddle out of it, and passed it to him.

“Thanks so much. I’ll return it to-morrow.”

“I’ll fetch it. You won’t be able——”

“No, that’s true. Not until this old coffin has had its leak plugged and has had a coat of tar.”

“I’ll fetch the paddle. Or why shouldn’t I lend it to you?”

“All right.”

“In return for the tent!”

He pushed off, and then paused to look down at her as she stood knee deep in the water. His face had taken to itself a sudden shimmer of shyness.

“I suppose you couldn’t come over and let Mrs. Maintenance give you supper?”

Her face had grown as shy as his.

“I might.”

“Do, Sybil.”

“I will. What time?”

“About eight.”

“I’ll come, Peter. Nothing formal.”

“Oh no, nothing formal.”

Ghent paddled the old punt across without it sinking under him. She saw him drag it half-way up the bank until the water had poured out of it, and then turn it bottom upwards. He waved to her, and walked off towards Marplot with the dog at his heels, and she sat down in the grass, with her chin cupped in her hands. How peaceful it was here, and how the doing of simple things seemed to bring people together! She had helped him; her strength, added to his, had sufficed to lift that burden, and she was happy. Yes, happiness came to you uncourted. It seemed to be a part of nature, like rain and sunlight, a subtle essence distilled from the things you did spontaneously. You could not plan for it, buy it, or deposit it in the bank, and as someone had said to her it was the very clever people who seemed to make such a horrid mess of their own lives.

She sat there while the warm dusk came down. She found herself praying that it might rain, because he needed rain so badly. She more than suspected that things were rather desperate for him, poor dear! If only she could help as she had helped him with that punt, add her smaller strength to his. Would it be possible? Was she sure of her new self? Oh yes, she was very sure. All this was different, not tinned life, or the futile sophistications of the city. She wanted to be knee-deep in reality, to work, to give, to spend herself to the utmost for real man. She spread her hands and looked at them. She had been rather proud of her hands, and with justification, but now she saw them with different eyes. Max had liked tinted finger-nails! Ye gods, what nasty symbolism! Painted claws! What were hands for? Use, work, helping. Would



such hands as hers have any meaning in a little world of trees? But, dear heart, she was becoming too forward in her feelings. She had nothing, and he was drifting towards the rocks, poor lad. They had poverty and its problems in common, if nothing else, but might not that nothing mean everything? If she had stripped herself of the past, she would come to this new life, clean and naked.

Ghent wandered out into the warm darkness. He saw a faint haze of light across the river, the candle that was burning in her tent. He stood and watched it until it suddenly vanished, and he could picture her leaning over, and with her pretty mouth blowing out the flame. How was it she was different to him from other women, that her mouth was more than a mouth, and seemed to have a little soul of its own, a soul that could be gay and sad, with wings fluttering or folded? What was it he loved in her, temperament, esprit, a lovely shell, a kind of beautiful childishness, her little sensitive face, the very shames she had experienced. Shames! What was shame? She had suffered adventure and adversities just as his trees were suffering from drought.

He stood there a long while in the darkness, reflecting upon the strange choice she had made, the ruthlessness of her rebirth. She had been born again into the world, naked. She had nothing over her head but that flimsy tent, and her sojourn on the island was at the mercy of wind and weather. But what a lovely situation, how like her little, sensitive face, and her frail, butterfly body! But she had courage.

He walked up and down by the dark river.

Ought he not to tell her how precarious his own small world was, an island threatened by Crabtree seas? If he saw himself as her comrade and lover, should she not know that in six months' time he might be somebody's gardener, or a shabby young man, an ex-public schoolboy out of a job? She had been used to such other things. What could he give her, at the best? And then, as he turned about by the boundary fence he saw the light on the island had come alive again. She had re-lit her candle. Perhaps she was as sleepless as he felt. Perhaps she too was feeling her way into the mysteries of to-morrow?

Yes, feeling your way! Life was like that, unless you subscribed to the butcher-boy's credo, some new blood and sawdust ideology.

He felt that he ought to tell her.

He would tell her.

## XXI

**H**aving taken long in going to sleep, Peter overslept himself, and was roused by Mrs. Maintenance knocking at his door. "Your tea, sir." He stretched, reached for his watch, saw that it was seven o'clock, and let his head fall back for a moment on the pillow. He was conscious of a feeling of languor, of wanting to lie there and dream, but the early tea waited for him and so did the day's adventure. He rolled out of bed, went to the window, and pulling back the curtains, saw a heavy, tumid sky. Heat, thundery heat. Was it possible that the day would give them rain?

There were other indications of a storm. Mrs. Maintenance returned him a curt, "Very good, sir" when he told her that Mrs. Strangeways was to be expected to supper, and Bob Fanshaw was in one of his awkward moods. His back looked more round than usual as he slouched about the tool-shed with an air of disgruntled gloom. Bob's manners could be somewhat trying on such occasions, but Ghent, who knew the man, bore with his surliness and ignored it.

"Thundery, Bob."

Bob grunted.

"I think we will give the pump a miss, and gamble on a storm."

Bob made more animal noises, which Ghent translated into expressions of pessimism.

"Where've you put the cutting-box?"

"On the shelf, as usual. Well, if we get some rain, Bob."

"Won't rain here."

"Why not?"

"Sure to miss us. Always does. Breaks on the hills and leaves us dry. Is it soft wood cuttings we're taking?"

"Yes, soft wood, Bob. You know that as well as I do."

Fanshaw slouched off, wilfully leaving the zinc vasculum behind him. Bloody silly contraption! Ghent had always insisted upon this box being used,

especially in very dry weather, and Bob would always leave it behind if he could. Rustic obstinacy can be tireless.

“Take the box, Bob.”

“If it’s going to rain,” said Bob rudely, “I don’t see——”

“I thought it was you who said it wasn’t going to rain.”

“Nor is it. Won’t rain till November.”

“Well, take the box, man.”

“Won’t make no difference. I don’t hold——”

Ghent lost patience. There were times when he could bear with Fanshaw’s prejudices, and the resistance of the rustic mind to any new refinement in technique, but on this stuffy morning Bob’s grumpy opposition irritated him. He wanted to say: “You obstinate, ignorant idiot, do what I tell you, and be damned.” But he held himself in. He spoke to the man gently.

“Bob, I’ve enough worries without you adding to them.”

Fanshaw grunted.

“I don’t want to make any more worries for ’ee.”

“All right. I have reasons for what I do and say.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll come along and join you in five minutes.”

Fanshaw took the big zinc box, tucked it under his arm, and mooched out to his work, and Ghent knew that whatever his mood might be, he would not advertise his sulkiness by slacking.

Remembering the salvaged punt, he called to George, who was watering the propagating frames, and went down to the river to pull the old boat up the bank where it could be tarred more easily. The river was like the sky, leaden and sunless. It was a morning when the water seemed to lose its look of fluidity, and to become like a sheet of polished metal. It showed no ripple marks, only viscous streaks where the current moved sluggishly. Between them they pulled the punt up the bank, and George had enough discretion to refrain from asking questions.

“Think we shall get it, George?”

“I’d say it’d break about four.”

“Why four?”

“By the feel of it, sir. Sulky sort of storm that takes a long time to say anything. Rather like Brother Bob on a bad day.”

“Bob doesn’t think we’ll get it.”

“He told me we should, sir.”

“He told me we shouldn’t.”

They both laughed. No Mary could be quite so contrary as Bob Fanshaw.

All the morning Ghent watched that sky while he worked. The temper of it did not appear to change; it remained sullen and non-committal, a tantalizing canopy of cloud. There was no wind. The air was close and dead. It was a day when a man sweated easily, and yet could not rid himself of his sweat, and felt tired and heavy. Once or twice thunder rumbled in the distance.

“What d’you think of that, Bob?”

“Wind,” said Bob grumpily, “this ruddy year can’t do aught but blow.”

Yes, Bob’s manners were very much out of order.

Would it rain? Ghent found himself confronting a double-faced problem. If the day were to give them a real, crashing storm, with deluges of rain, what would happen to Mrs. Strangeways on the island? That tent was a poor, old flimsy thing, and only fit for fair weather. Folly Farm was locked up, and the keys had been returned to the landlord in Farley. Certainly, there was the boat-house, and in a crisis she could run her punt in there, make her bed in it and sleep in the punt.

When they knocked off work at five o’clock Bob was still surly, and save for distant thunder the storm had given them nothing. Also, the three of them were tired, for it had occurred to Peter that in view of possible rain it would be a wise course to break up some of the soil in the smaller and more precious of his plantations. Broken soil would take up the rain more thoroughly, whereas a caked surface would let it lie in puddles to evaporate, or send it flooding down to the grass verges. For several hours they had poked at the caked crust with digging forks, breaking it into rough clods about the young trees, on the chance of letting in the rain. It had been a bad day for work, heavy and sultry, and the stubborn, brick-like soil had jarred their hands and not improved their tempers.

Ghent, having locked up the office and the tool-shed, walked across the yard, just as the men were leaving. Fanshaw’s rounded back continued to suggest an uncompromising pessimism. Peter watched them wheel their

bicycles into the lane, and heard their voices dying away in the direction of Farley.

“Like to bet on it, brother?”

“Bet on what?” growled Bob.

“Rain.”

“We shan’t get any ruddy rain. Poking about with forks, all for nothing.”

“Bet you a bob, then, it won’t rain!”

“Shut it; I’m not feeling funny.”

Ghent went in to his tea. He noticed that Mrs. Maintenance had put flowers into the old pewter tankard that decorated the gate-legged table. Mrs. Maintenance was not an adept in the arranging of flowers, or in the blending of her colours, but for this concession Ghent was grateful. If the good Sarah had deigned to pack that pot with flowers, then her disapproval of Mrs. Strangeways coming to sup with him could not be too serious. Or was it housewifely pride? Mrs. Maintenance had stuck a sheaf of cornflowers, gaillardias, coreopsis, and pink achillea into the pewter tankard, and though it was not exactly a happy posy, Peter did not dare to interfere with it. Sarah noticed such things and was touchy about them, and like most capable creatures she preferred praise to criticism. She would iron the trousers of Ghent’s pyjamas in a particular way, and go on ironing them in that same way, though they stuck out sideways like boards. Ghent had often wished to say to her, “Iron them down the front, Sarah, like tailor’s trousers,” but, after all, no one saw you in pyjamas, so what did it matter?

Mrs. Maintenance came into the room while he was drinking his second cup of tea and watching that ominous sky through the parlour window, and just as Sarah entered, there was a flash of light over Farley, followed by a growl of thunder.

“There’s going to be a storm, sir.”

“I hope so, Sarah.”

“If it is a bad storm, sir, do you think the lady will come?”

Peter’s impulse was to repeat the “I hope so” more emphatically.

“Better prepare, Sarah, anyway.”

“I have, sir. Chops and green peas, and trifle. But if there’s any doubt, sir, I don’t want to roast good meat for nothing.”

“Quite so, Sarah. But I think we ought to be ready.”

Mrs. Maintenance’s scepticism both troubled him, and prompted him to action. If there was to be a storm, would it not be better for Mrs. Strangeways to cross the river before the storm broke? The island would not be a comfortable spot, with lightning playing about. She might be afraid of lightning, and at Marplot she would have a roof over her head. Ghent finished his tea, lit a pipe and went down to the river. The green valley was filled with a strange, grey-blue gloom. The air was heavy and still, and even the sound of the weir had a muffled indistinctness. Walking along the bank Ghent saw her tent standing like a white stone amid the willows. Even the foliage of the trees had a dark solidity. The water lay like black glass about the island.

A few drops of rain fell as he came level with the island. Mrs. Strangeways was kneeling by the tent, doing something to the guy-ropes. Was she slacking them off, or tightening them? If she pulled them too tight, and the rain came down, the wetted ropes might put too much tension on the canvas, and the tent would split, for it was an old and flimsy thing.

He called across to her.

“Mrs. Strangeways, Mrs. Strangeways.”

She turned on her knees.

“The sky looks pretty ugly. Why not cross now?”

Her voice came back to him with peculiar distinctness.

“I might. I’m just tightening up the ropes. I’ve put everything inside I can.”

“Don’t tighten them too much.”

“Mustn’t I?”

“No, the tent might split.”

He watched her slacken off the ropes, and disappear into the tent. When she reappeared she was wearing a brown mackintosh, but no hat. She laced up the flap, and climbed down the bank into the punt. Already the still surface of the river was being pitted by heavy drops of rain. She unmoored the punt, and poled across, and Ghent pointed her down stream. She could house her punt in his empty boat-house.

“Isn’t it splendid!”

“You mean——?”

“You are going to get your rain.”

Her little face had a strangely luminous look, in contrast to the heavy greens and blues and greys of the landscape and the sky. There was some emotional quality about her that thrilled him. He caught the nose of the punt as it glided into the rough, tarred shed, and reaching for the rope, knotted it through the ring. She shipped the pole, and he held the punt steady while she stepped out.

“I’m so glad.”

“Thank you.”

“What lovely big drops.”

“Your hair will get wet.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Take my hat.”

“No, it’s rather lovely to feel the rain on one’s hair.”

Half-way to the cottage the Camperdown elm offered its green umbrella, and they took shelter here, while the rain came rattling on the leaves. A grey curtain had been let down over the valley, and all its familiar details were blurred. Ghent’s face was wet, and so was her hair, and as they stood there side by side, she was conscious of secret exultation. She glanced up at him. His face looked all smoothed out and young, as though his very body was drinking in all this exquisite and refreshing wetness like the trees and the soil.

“I’m so glad.”

“Yes, it’s all so good.”

Already they could see little trickles of water running over the parched grass of the Green Way. Moreover, the rain was beginning to find its way through the canopy of leaves, and to drip upon their heads and shoulders.

“Time we made a bolt for the cottage.”

“Oh, let’s stay a little longer.”

“I hope your tent will be all right.”

She pointed.

“Look. The island’s almost lost. It’s all wrapped up in gossamer.”

Suddenly, over Temple Manor, the sky cracked, and a zig-zag of light flashed from the sky into the tops of the trees.

“Warning signal. Time to take cover. Wait a moment; I’ll run for an

umbrella.”

He was gone before she could stop him.

But an umbrella was not a thing he happened to possess, or one that was in a fit state to be held over her precious head. He opened the kitchen door, to find Mrs. Maintenance enjoying half an hour’s leisure in her armchair with the daily paper. It was her paper, and she paid for it, and disagreed with most of its opinions, but a daily grievance was cheap at a penny. Ghent was content with a more responsible paper on Sunday, and if he wished to read the *Daily Grievance*, it was always at his disposal.

“Will you lend me your umbrella, Sarah?”

Mrs. Maintenance’s umbrella was, rather like her virtue, kept treasured and neatly rolled. Also, it was a very mature article, and had been twice re-covered. She put down her paper, and removed her spectacles.

“My umbrella, sir?”

Was he asking so much of her?

“Yes, Sarah. I’ve left Mrs. Strangeways out there under the elm, and it’s raining like——”

Mrs. Maintenance shuffled her feet into her slippers, and stood up. Her umbrella lived upstairs in her bedroom, rather like some sacred flag sheathed in tissue paper. Silently, she passed up the stairs, and Ghent waited for her in the passage, feeling that Sarah was the eternal matriarch who might sit in judgment upon him and his romance. She came stolidly down the stairs. She presented the handle end of the umbrella to him.

“She’s welcome to it, Mr. Peter.”

“Thank you, ever so much, Sarah.”

Her solid old face hung solemnly in front of him, and suddenly he kissed it, and something seemed to happen to Mrs. Maintenance’s self-control. She put both her hands on his shoulders, and patted them.

“There, there, if it’s all right for you, Mr. Peter, I’m not——”

“It is all right for me, Sarah. You’re about the best friend I have, you know.”

“Lorks, you’re all wet, my dear; you ought to change your coat.”

“I will, Sarah, in a minute. I’m rather happy about this rain, you know.”

Of course he was, and happy about something else. Sarah followed him to



the back door and saw him dash off across the yard. Bless the lad, if he hadn't forgotten to open the umbrella! Mrs. Maintenance sniffed once or twice with feeling, returned to the kitchen, closed the door, and sitting down in her chair, put on her spectacles and picked up the paper. Her old eyes fell upon a particular caption.

"Why Not Be A Glamour Girl?"

Mrs. Maintenance sniffed. Well, really! Serving up stuff like that to respectable people! Glamour girl, indeed! It was an impertinent rag to ask her such a question. She tossed the paper into the grate, and called to Bunter who was assuming sleep on the hearthrug, and who had appeared wise as to his master's absorption in other matters.

"Come here, lovey. There'll be other news, some day, for you and me, I'm thinking."

Bunter jumped into her lap and licked her nose.

"Just you put your paws together, my lad, and pray she mayn't be that. Glamour girl, indeed! Little bits with bleached hair!"

The sky was lit up as he reached the Camperdown elm; a glare of light made all the wet leaves glisten, and her hair, almost as wet as the leaves, had darkened in colour. He opened the umbrella for her.

"This is Sarah's, and rather precious. She lent it."

"How sweet of her!"

He handed her the umbrella, but showed no inclination to share it.

"You must have half."

"Oh, no; it's simply gorgeous getting soaked like this. I'd like to be wet three times over. I say, I'm rather worried about your tent."

"I'm not. Other things matter more. You will have to change your clothes, you know."

"Yes, or I shall get a scolding."

"Does Mrs. Maintenance scold you?"

"Sometimes. Quite severe and maternal."

"I hope she won't scold me."

He could not help those words slipping out. "Could anybody?" And, for a

moment there was silence between them. The brown turf under their feet was like a flooded carpet, and the sound of the rain mingled with the roar of the weir. The sky seemed to crack overhead as they reached the yard, which had become a patchwork of puddles, and Ghent, taking her by the arm, hurried her into the cottage.

“That was pretty near.”

She laughed.

“Wasn’t it? Hadn’t I better——?”

He took the soaked umbrella from her, and was leaning it against the passage wall when Mrs. Maintenance appeared from the kitchen. Wet umbrellas and wall-paper should not be allowed to meet, and though Sarah did not say so, her face might have been refusing the wiles of the glamour girl.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Maintenance. I’m afraid I——”

“You’d better give me your mackintosh, madam.”

“Yes, I had, hadn’t I? Thank you so much. And thank you for the umbrella.”

Sarah took both, one in each hand.

“And you go up and change, Mr. Peter.”

Ghent made a droll face behind Mrs. Maintenance’s back.

“Yes, Sarah. I’ll be a good boy, Sarah. Will you show Mrs. Strangeways into the parlour?”

“I will, sir. You go up and change, and remember to bring those wet things down. I’ll have to dry them in front of the kitchen fire.”

Ghent disappeared up the stairs.

Mrs. Maintenance went to hang up Mrs. Strangeways’s mackintosh, and to stand the umbrella to drain in the sink, and Mrs. Strangeways followed her into the kitchen. Like Mrs. M. it was a place of extreme cleanliness and self-respect, with everything bright and polished, though the linoleum was shabby and the curtains had been washed until all the colour had gone from them. Bunter, rising from the hearthrug to do the duties of the kitchen, had his head caressed.

“What a nice kitchen, Mrs. Maintenance. What do you use to polish things with?”

“Silvex, madam.”

“Isn’t this rain a relief? I’m so glad it has come.”

“Yes, madam; I hope it hasn’t come too late.”

“Too late? No, I hope not. I do hope not.”

Mrs. Maintenance shuffled across the kitchen in her slippers.

“May I show you into the parlour, madam?”

Mrs. Strangeways smiled at her.

“Thank you.”

“Have you had tea, madam?”

“Oh yes.”

“I’m afraid the storm won’t be very good for the island.”

“I put everything I could under cover.”

“I hope the rain won’t get through the tent.”

“Well, if it does, it does.”

Mrs. Maintenance, who had felt it her duty to stand upon her dignity, and to “Madam” Mrs. Strangeways, found herself tempted to address her as “Dearie.” Well, if she did, she did. Funny, how you couldn’t help liking some people for the way they smiled, and the sound of their voices, and the colour of their hair and the expression of their eyes. Glamour girl, indeed! Sarah, in her jealous moments, might have wished to be able to apply those words to Mrs. Strangeways, but they simply would not fit. She liked this little lady. She made you feel warm and friendly and smooth inside. She seemed so natural-like, as Sarah expressed it. She talked to you as though you were accepted as a very important and responsible person, which Sarah felt she was.

“Would you like to see the paper, while Mr. Peter’s upstairs?”

“Thank you, Sarah, I should. But perhaps you are reading it?”

“I’ve read it. Besides, I have my cooking to do.”

Sarah, having been addressed as Sarah, and found, to her surprise, that she was liking it, went to fetch the *Daily Grievance*. She folded it neatly and carried it into the parlour.

“I don’t say that I hold with all that’s in it, Mrs. Strangeways. There must be a lot of fools in the world, judging by what they give ’em to read.”

Mrs. Strangeways laughed, and the laugh pleased Sarah.

“Yes, there must be, mustn’t there. Thank you so much. I haven’t seen a paper for days.”

She did not read Mrs. Maintenance’s paper. She curled herself up on the old sofa under the long, low window, and watched the rain. Everything was hazed by it; everything dripped. She could hear the water gurgling down a pipe, and making a liquid, musical sound in the water-butt at the corner of the cottage. Sarah had shut both casements. Mrs. Strangeways reached out and opened the one nearest to her. A beautiful, moist freshness floated in. The whole world seemed full of the rush of the rain. How all those live things must be exulting and quenching their thirst, the trees and the garden plants and the grass, all stretching out their hands to this wetness after months of drought. Nature could be very lovely, so exquisitely simple in the midst of complexity. Could a city give you any such thrill as this, only wet pavements and puddles that might be splashed on you by the wheels of the buses? Rain in a city might be no more than dried peas pattering on a tin roof. Here, it was alive. And what was happening to her tent? Did it matter? Did she care? Her small, personal cares seemed to be lost in the large, impersonal blessedness of this nature-play, this exultation of a world that was athirst.

She did not hear Ghent come into the room, perhaps because he was wearing slippers, and the duet that was being sung by the sky and the river drowned all adventitious sounds. He stood watching her for a moment. It seemed to him that she had curled herself up there as though she belonged, with her head on a cushion, and one arm stretched along the back of the sofa. He closed the door quietly, not wanting the live figure in the picture to change its pose.

She turned her head and sat up.

“I didn’t hear you.”

“Sorry. The rain is making rather a pother.”

“Yes, isn’t it lovely? I had to open the window.”

“Please stay as you were.”

She smiled at him, and let her head sink back upon the cushion.

“The whole, thirsty world is drinking. One can feel it. Aren’t you glad?”

His eyes did not light up to her smile. He drew a chair up between the table and sofa and sat down so that she could not see his face. It had seemed to her very grave, shadowed by some frustration that could not be conjured away by

any of nature's appeasements. She had the feeling that he wanted to tell her something, and for the moment she was troubled and afraid. She did not want that, yet. She wanted, somehow, to prove herself, to drink in peace and assuagement and a new faith in things, even as the trees were drinking up the rain.

"Yes, glad. But, you see, the land's not like a machine. You can't just pump petrol into a tank, and expect everything to function like clockwork."

She remained very still.

"You mean, the rain has come too late?"

"Yes, in a way. It takes one some years to build up one's stock. It is live capital, so to speak, and if it is damaged and you can't sell a part of it—— But why should I bore you with this?"

"It doesn't bore me. I think I understand. Is it very bad?"

He made himself smile.

"Oh, rather problematical. Mine's a precarious show until you get a name and a steady flow of yearly orders, and orders are not coming in very well this year. I had one of my big buyers in the other day, and I saw that he could not risk taking trees from a droughty place like mine."

She looked out of the window at the rain. Why was he telling her this? Was it that he wished to be ruthlessly honest, and to warn her that materially he was something of a broken reed?

She said: "It's very hard. I know what it is to be up against things like this."

"It rather cramps one's style. I mean, one can't make plans, or——"

He hesitated, and still looking out of the window at the rain, she answered him with quiet deliberateness.

"Should that matter? After all, life's an adventure. I'm feeling it more and more. Playing for safety, or just trying to buy it, doesn't touch one's imagination. I don't think one ought to be afraid of taking risks."

He was silent for a moment. Then, he got up, and standing beside the sofa, put out a hand.

"Thank you, for that. One funks things more for other people than for oneself."

She put her hand in his, and let it rest there for a few seconds.

“Yes, I understand what you mean.”

## XXII

**I**t was raining as hard as ever when Mrs. Maintenance came in to lay the table, for this desultory year was keeping up its reputation for irresponsible contrariness. Half an hour ago Bunter had come scratching and whimpering at the door, and when Ghent had let him in the dog had decided that Mrs. Strangeways's lap was a pleasant place, more especially so as she had been willing to tickle his chest. Sarah cast discreet glances at the little lady on the sofa, and the dog, and the weather. All three of them appeared to have settled down comfortably. Almost it was a domestic piece, with Ghent sitting astride one of the Windsor chairs and watching the rain and the dog and the lady, as though he too felt that all three were in complete accord.

But if youth was dreaming dreams, Sarah's practical mind concentrated upon the steady, drenching rain. The thunder-storm had passed, but the sky was emptying itself in an attempt to efface months of dryness. Sarah was thinking of Folly Island, and the camping site and Mrs. Strangeways's bed. Even if the tent had withstood the deluge, would its interior be a fit place for so fragile a flower on a night like this? And what was the alternative? Folly Farm was shut up and dismantled. The Chequers Inn at Farley was not the kind of hostelry to which Mrs. Strangeways could be recommended. It was all beer and darts, and its lessee was a slatternly lady whose reputation had been sacrificed both to Baron Bung and Cupid.

Mrs. Maintenance considered this pretty scene as she spread the cloth and laid the table. Marplot did possess a spare-room, but the furniture was sketchy, and the mattress on the bed——! Yes, the less said about that mattress the better. And what of the conventions? Mrs. Maintenance laid knives and forks with meticulous care, and decided, as a woman of sense, that a crisis should be allowed to transcend the conventions. She would make allowances when and where she liked. But was Mr. Peter going on mooning all the evening? Didn't he realize——?

Mrs. Maintenance cleared her throat.

“Excuse me, sir, but may I have a word with you?”

Ghent came out of his happy stupor.

“Of course, Sarah. Anything wrong?”

He followed Mrs. Maintenance into the passage, and was led by her into the kitchen. She closed the door.

“It is raining very hard, sir. Supposing it doesn’t stop? And do you think the lady’s tent is dry inside?”

“It is rather a problem, Sarah.”

“Don’t you think you had better go and look, sir?”

“Yes, it’s an idea.”

“You see, Mr. Peter, if her bed isn’t fit to sleep in, she can’t go to Folly Farm, and the Chequers at Farley isn’t fit for a lady.”

“What do you suggest, Sarah?”

“Well, we could manage for the night, sir, though the spare-room mattress \_\_\_\_\_”

Ghent looked at her with affection.

“Sarah, you’re God’s own old dear. That mattress is rather full of rocks. She could have mine for the night. I mean, the mattress.”

“She could, sir,” said Mrs. Maintenance judicially.

“I’ll give you a hand, if necessary.”

“I can manage quite well, sir.”

“I’ll take the punt and go across and see how things are.”

“Take your mackintosh, Mr. Peter. You’ve been wet once, you know.”

“Orders are orders.”

He returned to the parlour, and told both Bunter and Mrs. Strangeways that he was going upon an adventure, and that it was Bunter’s business to entertain the lady. He put on his oldest hat, a disreputable thing, and with the brim turned down, and his mackintosh buttoned to his chin, he went down through the wet world to the river. The turf squelched under his feet. For months he had not seen the valley in its present mood, hazed with rain, deep, green and tranquil. The brittleness had gone out of nature, the dry, arid tension that made the earth feel starved and unsympathetic to his feet. The world exulted. It seemed pregnant with the young, green succulent things that would spring up out of the earth. Life drank and was glad. Even the weir had a fuller and more sonorous note.

Ghent unmoored the punt and poled across to the island. Hitching the rope



to a willow, he climbed the bank, and saw that Mrs. Strangeways had left her deck-chair out in the open, and that its green canvas seat had collected a puddle of water. He saw more than that. The tent had split down one side, and when he unfastened the flap and looked in, he discovered that the rent in the canvas was directly above her bed, and that the edges of the wound were spilling a steady wetness upon the quilt. He crawled in, turned back the quilt, felt. Yes, the bedding was soaked. It would be impossible for her to sleep here.

What was to be done? Should he rescue her bedding, and take it back in the punt for Sarah to dry? And how was he to keep it reasonably dry, or from getting more wet, on the journey? He took off his mackintosh, and rolling up the mattress and bedding, covered it as best he could with the mackintosh. Well, anyhow, it would only get more wet in the leaking tent. Descending the bank he slipped on the wet grass, and arriving hurriedly in the punt, performed for five seconds an absurd balancing feat, clasping the roll of bedding with both arms. The punt rolled and complained, but Ghent managed to control his centre of gravity, and further disaster was avoided.

At Marplot Mrs. Maintenance met him in the passage, clasping that brown bundle. He had sacrificed his best jacket in the cause of chivalry, and Sarah could not scold him.

“The tent has split, Sarah. I’m afraid these things are terribly wet.”

“I’ll have to try and dry them, sir, in front of the kitchen fire. Has it got through to the mattress?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Tut, tut, mattresses take a deal of drying. Put it down, Mr. Peter, and go and change your coat. There are your clothes, too, for me to see to.”

Ghent carried the bundle into the kitchen.

“I say, Sarah, supposing you tell Mrs. Strangeways, and suggest that we shall have to put her up for the night?”

Mrs. Maintenance gave him a wise look. Yes, that was a nice and considerate suggestion, and she approved of it.

“I will, Mr. Peter. It would sound a bit more motherly, wouldn’t it, from me?”

Ghent, going up to change his coat, heard the murmur of voices below, and did not hurry the business. He had put two coats out of action, and since his wardrobe consisted of Best, Next Best, and suits that had become purely proletarian, he had to put on an old working jacket. It was frayed at the sleeves,

and barbed wire had left a ragged wound above one pocket. He did possess a dinner-jacket, etc., but in spite of Mrs. Maintenance's care, moth had got into it, and especially so into the trousers, and the little round punctures showed either your skin or your shirt.

Ghent went downstairs. In the parlour he found her stretched serenely on the sofa, still watching the rain. She turned her head on the cushion and smiled at him.

"Did you ask her to ask me?"

"In a way, I did, but she——"

"I've accepted. Your Sarah's rather an old dear. But why didn't you tell me you were going across to the island?"

"I saw no need."

"And you got wet again."

"Oh, just a little. I was ordered upstairs by Sarah. You'll have to excuse this jacket."

"I like it. Working clothes, somehow, are always right."

"Always?"

"On a man."

"Well, I've got moth in my dinner-jacket. Marplot doesn't provide much chances of self-expression for dinner-jackets."

"Homespun's more appropriate. Bunter is real homespun. Was my poor bed very derelict?"

"The tent had split, just in the wrong place. In a way I felt rather responsible."

"Oh, I don't think so. The next journey will be mine."

"You mean, you want to go across?"

"Well, yes. There are certain etceteras that even dear Sarah cannot provide."

"What an idiot I am!"

She laughed.

"Oh, no; you were so absorbed in rescuing the essentials that you forgot the silly little things that a woman has to regard as essential."

He laughed back at her.

“Right. I’ll act as ferryman, but I’ll leave the next salvage job to you.”

They were at supper, with Sarah waiting upon them, a Sarah who was in an episcopal mood, and both blessing and regularizing the occasion with her presence, when Ghent, looking out of the window, saw that the day was playing yet another trick upon them. The rain had ceased. The sky became streaked with sudden rents of blue, and as though a great lamp had been turned on, a flood of yellow light poured down into the garden. It flooded into the Marplot parlour, lighting up Sybil Strangeways’s hair, and Mrs. Maintenance’s austere, Dutch countenance. The wet world had a drenched brilliancy that flashed and flickered as a little, transient wind came down the valley, and helped the branches of the apple-trees to scatter their moisture.

“Bless us,” said Mrs. Maintenance, holding the salad-bowl against her bosom, “did you ever know such a year?”

Mrs. Strangeways turned her head to look at this transfiguration scene, while Sarah pursed up her lips as though they had let some indiscretion slip, and proffered the salad-bowl to her master.

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

Ghent was so absorbed in looking at her that he did not notice the salad-bowl waiting at his elbow. There were other wonderful things in this amazing world. Mrs. Maintenance, gazing down at him with maternal tolerance, waited benignly.

“Salad, sir.”

“Oh, salad!”

He helped himself to chives, lettuce and young radishes.

The grass paths were still patterned with little pools of rain-water when Ghent and Sybil went down to the river, minute mirrors that reflected the sunset, and were stained with the colours of the sky. Temple Manor, white below the rolling gloom of its beeches, was more than ever like a classic sanctuary. The great trees loomed black, their tops aureoled with fire. Temple Towers cocked its impudent little turrets against a mass of glowing cloud.

She said: “I suppose these paths will all be green again after the rain?”

Ghent smiled. He was looking at the soil darkened by the rain, and at his rows of trees.

“Perhaps. One wants more, of course. These deluges run away off caked ground.”

“Gentle and steady is better?”

He looked down at her with the eyes of a lover.

“Yes.”

Ghent held the punt for her, and she jumped into it with a lightness that hardly caused it to move. It was like a butterfly settling on a leaf. She picked up the pole as Ghent climbed in and pushed the punt off from the stage. This was her show, and sitting down, he suffered her to assume control, and to take the boat across to the island. Moreover, she had a pretty way of handling the pole, and he was content to sit and watch her. Already, the river seemed to be feeling the stimulus of the rain; more water was coming down, and the stream had a new aliveness. The setting sun painted flickers of light upon it, and under the willows the water was mysteriously coloured.

She ran the punt along the bank, and shipped the pole, while Ghent got hold of a willow branch. This second landing was her affair, and he left her to scramble up the wet bank and to retrieve what she needed.

“Peter!”

“Hallo.”

“There’s another hole in the tent.”

“Good lord! Hadn’t you better take all you can?”

“Come and look.”

He knotted the mooring rope to the bough, and joined her up above. She was standing there rather pensively, one hand to her cheek, surveying the scene. Her little, sensitive face with its hare’s eyes and its look of botherment, touched him profoundly.

“It’s pretty hopeless, isn’t it? What shall I do to-morrow?”

He stood close to her, as close as he dared.

“Oh, I think I can manage something. I’ll borrow a rick-cover from old John Lynwood. Don’t worry. I’ll fix you up something.”

“You are helpful, Peter.”

“Am I? Well, that’s rather pleasant.”

“This is all I have, you know, and that’s rather on sufferance.”

He wanted to put an arm round her and say: “I’m in not much better shape myself, but, dear God, everything I have is yours.” But he slipped a hand under her arm, and she seemed such a little thing, and so defenceless, that he was gentle.

“Don’t worry, Sybil. I’ll fix things up. Let’s take all we can across for the night.”

Her eyes lifted to his face. There were other lights in them.

“Thank you, my dear, thank you for everything.”

He helped her to sort out things that were perishable from those that were not, and while helping her he realized how poor her possessions were. She appeared to own one old fibre trunk upon whose lid the second slit in the tent had let in a puddle of water. The fabric was pulped, and when she lifted the lid, a great patch of dampness was discovered.

“My poor clothes! Well, it’s only the top, perhaps.”

“Sarah will dry them.”

He was puzzled by this solitary trunk. He had pictured her as possessing a whole gallery of frocks, and if all that she owned was here, then it was very little.

“Did you leave anything at Folly Farm?”

“Yes. Two trunks of clothes, including a fur coat. But they went with the furniture.”

“You let them go?”

Her hands were in the trunk, feeling its contents.

“Yes. One may as well be thorough. I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be——”

“You’re not. You’re being very merciful to me.”

He was shocked.

“Merciful! Good God, not that!”

She was kneeling down to refasten the trunk, her face as near to uncontrolled feeling as was his.

“You mustn’t kneel on that wet grass. Let me do it. I’m not talking about anything at the moment. I’ve learnt to wait, on the land, and I can wait on other things. Please don’t kneel.”

She drew her hands into her lap, and remained for a moment with head bowed and shoulders drooping. Then, she gave way to him and got up.

“Most men don’t understand.”

He bent down to fasten the trunk.

“Doesn’t that depend upon how they care and on what they want? Big things aren’t done in a hurry.”

He carried her trunk down to the punt, and she passed her other perishable belongings down the bank to him. It was he who poled back to Marplot, while she sat with her hands folded in her lap as though she had surrendered her fate momentarily to man. Neither of them uttered a word during that brief journey. They had come to the brink of human reality, and having looked into its profundities, were silent.

With the punt housed in Ghent’s rickety old boat-house, he got her trunk by one handle.

“I’ll help you with that, Peter.”

“No, I can manage. You take some of the other things.”

He swung the trunk up on to his shoulder. It was an easy weight for a man who could carry a sack of potatoes, and she followed him up the bank with a dressing-case, and a bundle made up in a damp towel. The sun had set, and a greenish twilight covered the earth. They were met by Bunter, who came out to bark at Ghent’s unusual burden.

“Haven’t you seen luggage before, my lad?”

Bunter bounced up and down, emitting playful growls.

Mrs. Sarah was lighting the lamps, and was carrying one out into the passage when Ghent manœuvred himself and Mrs. Strangeways’s trunk in at the back door.

“Afraid there are more things to dry, Sarah.”

Her old face, warmed by the lamplight, showed no displeasure.

“I’ll get the towel-horse out in front of the fire.”

Ghent blessed her in silence, but Mrs. Strangeways was not silent.

“Sarah, I can’t cause you all this trouble. We’ll wait till to-morrow, and give the sun a chance.”

“It’s no trouble, m’am. I’ve got the fire going.”

“You are a dear.”

Ghent carried the trunk into the kitchen, and placed it on the kitchen table, and Mrs. Strangeways opened it, and took out the damp things.

“I think the rest are all right.”

“Will you have the trunk upstairs?”

“What are the stairs like?”

“Oh, quite easy.”

Ghent closed the trunk’s lid, and carried it up to Marplot’s spare-room. It was in darkness, and he put down the trunk, felt for his matches, and striking one, saw that Sarah had put a candle by the bed. Ghent lit the candle, closed the door, and going below, found Sarah and Mrs. Strangeways laying sundry damp garments on the towel-horse in front of the fire. Ghent watched them for a moment, realizing that these two women were happy with each other, and for that he blessed them both. Sarah’s kitchen might be nothing but a drying ground, but Sarah was shedding no tears.

He spoke to Mrs. Strangeways.

“Your room’s ready. I dare say you would like to turn in. I have to take Bunter for his nightly prowl.”

She gave him one swift glance.

“Yes, I think I will, when I have helped Sarah.”

“Well, good night.”

“Good night.”

Later, Ghent, wriggling himself into the contours of that rocky mattress, felt that life, in spite of its frustrations, could be wonderful and good.

## XXIII

**H**ow much or how little the Decalogue matters to us moderns might be argued in perpetuity, but our morality in its highest manifestations may be found to consist not in a denial of appetite, but in a subtilizing of its flavour. The thing is to desire the soul of the cake, instead of grabbing the crude substance, and gorging oneself on almond paste and sugar. There is an exquisite rightness in saying no, in thinking in terms of tenderness instead of in those of turgid sex-satisfaction. The no endures, the mere splurging yes spills itself into quick and sated fatuity.

The Crabtree world would not have believed that Ghent and Mrs. Strangeways did not sleep with each other on that particular night.

Had the Crabtree world been told that Mrs. Strangeways had not troubled to lock her door, and that Ghent had not even discovered its unlocked state, it would have sniggered and called Ghent an unenterprising young ass. It would have hinted at the lady's chagrin, and at her secret scorn, believing as it did that women, while dressing up in virtue, like to be stripped and tumbled. "Silly young poop, what's a woman want from a man? The only thing she asks is that the stairs may not creak!"

So much for a crude psychology that cannot think in terms other than those sacred to Pompeii. Strangely enough, Mrs. Strangeways was not that sort of woman, nor was Ghent tempted to treat her like ripe fruit conveniently served up to him by circumstance. She woke to find the sun shining into her window, and she would have been shocked had anyone suggested surprise at her being alone. She wanted to be alone, while savouring that exquisite sense of security which God gives to those who show signs of becoming wise and thrice-blessed children.

Ghent was out and about long before she was awake, and looking into the eyes of a very tranquil morning. The sun shone on a green and refreshed world, but to Peter Ghent its very serenity was ironic. Folly Island, floating in mid-stream, posed him with the day's first problem. It was her sanctuary, and she might wish to return to it, and he had a feeling that she was wiser than he knew. Most certainly she could not remain at Marplot, nor would he wish her there unless and until she could call it both his and hers. Yes, the tranquil eyes of the morning were ironic, and Marplot itself no sure refuge. In three months



or so he might find himself sold up, and as poor in worldly possessions as she was. Beautiful things cost money. Also, on this very exquisite morning, he knew that he loved the place, and loved it all the more dearly now that he seemed so likely to lose it.

Ghent decided to walk over to Chesters before breakfast and ask John Lynwood if he could lend him a rick-cover. He had not taken his old car out for a week, for even the price of a gallon of petrol was becoming prohibitive. And all that coal Mrs. Maintenance had had to burn for the drying of a mattress, bed linen and clothes! He had less than a hundredweight left in the coal-shed. However desperate the position might be he could not cadge money from poor old John, though he might borrow a rick-cover. So, calling Bunter and setting off for Chesters, he met the postman in the lane, and was presented with a solitary letter.

The envelope looked promising. It had the feel of an order, and Ghent did not notice that the postmark said Loddon. He slit the envelope and pulled out a typed letter, and one glance at it disillusioned him. The letter had come from the office of a firm of estate-agents. It said:

Dear Sir,

We understand that you contemplate disposing of your property and business. We have a client who may be interested in a purchase. If our information is correct, we shall be pleased to send a representative to call on you and discuss terms. May we assure you that our client's offer will be a firm one.

Yours faithfully—

Ghent crumpled up the letter and stuffed it into his pocket. Was this a Crabtree gesture, or had the precariousness of his financial position become public gossip? And did it matter? Bargain-hunters were on the prowl. But, damn it, whatever happened he would not sell to old Crabtree! Yes, but though he might be stubborn even in defeat, that sly old devil would know of half a dozen ways to circumvent him. Crabtree might put up a man of straw as a buyer, or take the property over from the liquidator should he, Ghent, go broke. The official world would have no qualms about selling Marplot for the benefit of the creditors, to anyone who offered ready cash.

He found John Lynwood at breakfast, a John who had eyes for his friend's worried face. Had Peter come to borrow money? He hoped not, for he had none to lend, and between friends such obligations can be unfortunate. Ghent had put his head and shoulders through the open window, and his eyes looked

straight at his friend.

“Can you lend me a rick-cover?”

Lynwood was conscious of relief.

“Well, yes, I could, a small one. Come in and join me, old man.”

“Thanks, I’ve got to get back. I could take the cover with me if you’ll tell me where it is.”

“I’ve nearly finished. I’ll come out with you. Nice rain. Ought to help.”

Ghent glanced vaguely round his friend’s room.

“Yes, a bit too late for me, though. Too much damage done already.”

“Can you hold on?”

“I doubt it. Orders are poor this year.”

Lynwood emptied his cup.

“I’m sorry, old man. If I could act as banker——”

Ghent looked at him sharply.

“I shouldn’t ask you. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Short of ready money?”

“That’s it. Wages. Can’t expect the bank——”

“Why don’t you mortgage?”

Ghent was silent for a moment.

“Another collar round one’s neck. You know what a mortgage means to men like us. The beginning of the end, often. No, I’d rather go bust, with the place my own.”

Lynwood pushed his chair back.

“Yes, I know. I might manage you fifty.”

“Nothing doing, old man; thanks all the same. I like you too well for that.”

“Will a small rick-cover do?”

“Yes. I may want it for a week or two.”

“No hurry.”

And Lynwood, in his wisdom, did not ask Ghent why the rick-cover was needed.

With the roll of green canvas over his shoulder Ghent started back for Marplot, and by the Roman amphitheatre some impulse made him turn aside and climb the bank which was all flowery with purple hardhead and yellow ragwort. Looking down into the green hollow he thought of that spring morning weeks ago when he had seen Mary Lynwood sitting under the thorn trees. How much could happen to you in a few weeks! Love and death and disaster might be near you in a place that would seem dull and eventless to a cinema-minded world. If gladiators had fought on that Romano-British amphitheatre, he too was confronted by a gentleman with a trident and a net, a cunning and implacable old curmudgeon who would not attack until he was assured that your sword had neither edge nor temper.

It was about nine o'clock when Ghent and Mrs. Strangeways crossed over in the punt, with John Lynwood's rick-cover, a coil of stout fencing-wire and a length of old rope. Ghent proposed to sling the rick-cover over the damaged tent, for the rick-cover alone would have no ends to it, and would be no more than a draughty tunnel. He sprang ashore with the cover over his shoulder, and Sybil, having made the punt fast, followed with the rope and wire. Ghent flung his bundle down, and scanning the site, saw that two convenient willows would serve as poles, and that with a couple of rough struts to support the wire, he could sling the cover between the trees. Also, pegs would be needed to which the edges of the cover could be lashed, and getting back into the punt he poled back to Marplot, leaving Mrs. Strangeways on the island.

When he returned he found that she had emptied the tent of stores and hardware, and was testing the oil-stove to discover whether water had got into it. Also, she had turned up the flies of the tent so that the ground should have a better chance of drying. Ghent had brought two chestnut posts, a spade, and a few improvised pegs back with him, and sinking the two posts in the ground, he fastened the wire to a willow.

She stood and watched him, like an interested child, observing some wise creature working out a puzzle.

"Can I help?"

"In a minute."

He carried the end of the strand towards the other tree, and the wire, with characteristic cussedness, twisted itself into loops and kinks. She hurried to help him, straightening out the loops, while he kept up a gentle tension on the strand. With the end round the second tree, and his foot against the trunk, he pulled the wire as taut as possible.

“Got to cut it, here. There are some wire-cutters in my pocket.”

Since he had both hands engaged, she drew the cutters out of his jacket pocket.

“Shall I do it?”

“I doubt whether you can.”

“I’ll try. Where?”

“Just here.”

But the stuff was too stout for her, and holding on to the wire with one hand, he took the cutters in the other, and cut the wire while she held it. More tension, two turns taken round the tree, and the free end fastened, and the thing was done. Ghent had some stout twine in his other pocket, and forcing the taut wire on to the tops of the chestnut posts, he lashed it in place. Then he spread the rick-cover on the ground, and each taking a corner they lifted it on to the wire and drew it over, and driving in the pegs, ran lengths of line through the eyelet holes and hitched the cover to the pegs.

She stood up, looking flushed.

“That’s lovely. I could stand any sort of deluge now.”

But Ghent had not yet completed the job. He took the spade and dug a small drainage trench along the edge of the rick-cover so that any water that spilled off it should be carried away.

“All ready for habitation. By the way, have you anything to put under your mattress?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I believe I’ve got an old ground-sheet somewhere. Sarah says the bedding is quite dry. We had better fetch it across.”

“Oh, I can do that. I have taken up such a lot of your time.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. Besides, it’s such fun doing things. Like being a kid again.”

He smiled at her happily.

“Life’s pretty good when you can feel like that.”

Lady Melissa, having looked into the bland eyes of the morning, was

moved to wonder how Folly Island had withstood the night. It was a refreshed and sparkling world upon which she gazed, and as she looked down upon the river and Ghent's nursery, she smiled to herself and remembered a letter that she had received that morning. But if her sympathy was enlisted on the side of youth, it was an active virtue and did not merely stand and stare.

Crossing the terrace and entering the house by the french window of the library, she rang for Sanderson, and sat down to answer Sir Gavin Marwood's letter. Here was opportunity. Oh, very much so, if Sir Gavin liked as she wished him to like, for she believed that the good things of life should go by liking. Why fructify the prig or the cub or the Crabtree? To Sanderson, who came to answer the bell, she gave the morning's orders.

"Oh, Sanderson, tell Thomson I shall want the punt in half an hour. And the car this afternoon at three. I am going in to Loddon."

"Yes, your ladyship."

"And Sanderson, I want a basket of raspberries and a bottle of the old Marsala."

The combination may have seemed a strange one to Sanderson, but he repeated the order as though responding in church, "A basket of raspberries and a bottle of old Marsala. Very good, your ladyship."

"In the punt, Sanderson, not in the car."

"Very good, your ladyship."

The Temple Manor boat-house was a mere thatched affair, housing a punt and a skiff, and Lady Melissa, looking across the water as Thomson poled out the punt had a full view of the Crabtree boat-house sitting like a large white hen upon a whole clutch of boats. This river kiosk had been one of Crabtree's ideas, inspired by a Mediterranean cruise and glimpses of the Bosphorus. Yes, he was a man of ideas, hence this large white kidney of a river-house, with its mock minaret, and dome of bright green tiles, and windows full of coloured glass. Mr. Crabtree even had planted a row of cypresses along the water's edge.

He had been very proud of this inspiration.

"What do you think of that, Mother?"

Mary Crabtree had not been able to think anything of it at all, save that it must have cost a great deal of money.

"Bit Byzantine, what!"

Had Mr. Crabtree been to Egypt, the result might have been a miniature Luxor dumped by the river. The Crabtree family and its bright young friends made great fun of the Byzantine boat-house. "Say, what's the idea? Does the old man keep his harem here?" Which was a gross slander on Mr. Roger Crabtree, for the place housed only one motor-boat, an electric launch, three punts, and a skiff.

Lady Melissa, looking across the river, acknowledged a preference for St. Sophia. Even a high-powered motor-boat which scorned all river regulations as to speed, was less disturbing than a stunting aeroplane. She noticed some activity across the water. The motor-boat had been brought out and was lying at the landing stage below the large concrete coffins full of red geraniums. The Union Jack had been hoisted on the white flagstaff above the green tiled dome. Mr. Crabtree was always patriotic, save when paying his surtax. Lady Melissa could remember a deplorable evening at Loddon when Mr. Crabtree had risen on a political platform and delivered an oration on the woes of the surtax-payer.

The Temple Manor punt passed down stream to take the bank under the willows of Folly Island. Thomson, having moored the punt, was told to disembark and discover whether Mrs. Strangeways was at home. She was. She came to the top of the bank, and welcomed her visitor.

"May I come ashore?"

Mrs. Strangeways laughed.

"On your own island! Oh, please do."

Lady Melissa, assisted up the bank by Thomson, remembered the raspberries and the Marsala.

"Bring those up, please, Thomson."

"Very good, your ladyship."

"A little fruit, my dear, and a bottle of wine. Well, and how did you survive last night's deluge?"

"I didn't. I'll tell you the story, later. Oh, thank you so very much. I'm a perfect pig about raspberries."

Mrs. Strangeways took the wine and the fruit from Thomson and, placing basket and bottle under cover, arranged the deck-chair for Lady Vandeleur. Thomson was told to take the punt down to Marplot and deliver a letter there, and to return in half an hour. Presumably, there were things that Thomson was not designed to hear.

“Now, why not be a perfect pig, my dear? There’s no fruit like fresh fruit.”

Mrs. Strangeways, recovering the basket and a cushion, and sitting at Lady Melissa’s feet, both in the spirit and the flesh, proceeded to pop raspberries into her mouth. They were dead-ripe and full of natural sugar, and her enjoyment of them was that of a healthy and charming child.

Lady Melissa was interested in the camping site. The tent within the tent struck her as being an ingenious idea, and its erection beyond the powers of woman. Someone had come to the rescue of Folly Island, but when and how should not be discovered by a direct approach.

“Won’t you have some too?”

“I’d love to, but fresh fruit of the pipped variety gives me rheumatism. Well, we had our rain.”

Mrs. Strangeways, with the basket in her lap, smiled at a raspberry as she trapped it between finger and thumb.

“Yes, I should have had, I suppose. I mean, rheumatism. The poor tent split, just over my bed.”

“What malice!”

“But I wasn’t in it. Mrs. Maintenance took me in. I’m afraid her kitchen was nothing but wet mattress, etc. In a way, there was no alternative.”

“One should never apologize for the inevitable.”

Mrs. Strangeways’s face looked bothered.

“I’m not. One doesn’t worry about one’s reputation when there are other things. And, you see, Peter’s so different. One can trust him. If I hadn’t let them be so terribly kind, I should have felt——”

“That someone wasn’t trusted?”

“Yes, how you do understand! And this morning, Peter rigged this up for me. You don’t mind?”

“I think it was an inspiration. Are you sure your things are quite dry?”

“Oh, quite. But I wish I could have an inspiration. You see, he’s so up against things, poor lamb. And so good about it.”

She picked up a raspberry, and with immense solemnity slipped it between her lips. Her little face was turned to Lady Melissa. It seemed to float in its wreath of hair like some pale and poignant flower, emitting emotion as it might have exhaled perfume. She was not at all conscious of her self, of how

she looked, or of what her pose should be, and Lady Melissa, observing her, felt that this face was without a shadow.

“The battle of Crécy. But that conveys nothing to you, I expect?”

Mrs. Strangeways picked up a raspberry, and sat considering it as though she held a precious stone.

“My history is a little passé. No, I’m afraid I don’t see the point.”

“No matter. Heads bloody but unbowed. Leopards of England, is not that Mr. Roger Crabtree’s motor-boat?”

The fluidity went out of Mrs. Strangeways’s figure. Her slim back straightened.

“Yes. I knows its yap. He can’t be stopping here.”

“I know of no reason for such self-restraint.”

“I was terribly rude to him.”

“Even sandpaper, my dear, has no effect on some skins.”

Mrs. Strangeways sat listening. She heard the boat’s engine shut off, and the prattle of water among the water-weeds.

“He is——”

She looked at Lady Melissa with startled eyes, for Lady Melissa was taking off her hat.

“Give me a cushion, my dear.”

And suddenly, Mrs. Strangeways understood. She grabbed a cushion from the tent, and passed it to Lady Vandeleur, who tucked it under her head, and posed herself with serene languor.

“Your back to the river, my dear.”

Mrs. Strangeways relapsed upon her cushion, eyes asparkle, her little nose crinkling with mischief.

“Ah, yes,” said her visitor in deliberate tones, watching the top of the bank, “we were discussing Crécy. If you remember, our good King Edward had posted himself on a hill. I believe there was a windmill on the hill.”

“Yes, I seem to remember something about a windmill.”

Lady Melissa, lying well back in her chair, saw the crown of a Panama hat top the green bank. It was a somewhat professorial hat, suggestive of nets and



butterflies, but the face that followed it was not academic. Lady Melissa, suddenly silent, observed that face with an air of serene yet unwelcoming displeasure. Had she used lorgnettes, the effect could not have been more pointed or chilling.

Mr. Crabtree's ascent was arrested. The line of the bank bisected his figure at the level of his watch-chain, leaving his thick and common little legs unseen. For the matter of some seconds he stood there and stared, as though suspended in space. For a man of ideas his intelligent reactions appeared negligible. He did not even clutch at his hat and joggle it. Lady Melissa continued to observe him with dispassionate detachment, and suddenly he made a kind of gurgling sound, which, rendered into human speech, passed for the salutation, "Company, I see. Won't intrude. Good morning."

He disappeared. The engine of the motor-boat resumed its chatter, and Mrs. Strangeways, sitting devoutly at my lady's feet, was moved to gentle laughter.

## XXIV

That thunder shower was followed by a fortnight's dry and windy weather, and again the soil became as dry and as hard as brick. Even the willow-trees seemed to feel the melancholy unrest of this shabby summer, for their leaves were grey with the wind, and the river itself fretful and unhappy. Ghent, beating the plantations for a marauding rabbit, with his gun at cock, was moved to question the wisdom of the prophets. "Gaze upon the loveliness of the lily, and possess your soul in peace." Yes, comforting counsel if you possessed a balance at the bank, and no love-dream clamouring for consummation. That very morning he had received a letter from the manager of his Loddon bank. It had suggested, a little peremptorily, that when Ghent was next in Loddon the manager would like to interview him.

Was the gentleman growing windy? Had some central authority ordered the curtailing of overdrafts? Ghent's overdraft had become very much a reality, with a tax of eight per cent added to it. No doubt the manager was not deaf to local opinion, and had heard those significant rumours that cause your cautious financier to call for security. Ghent, in whom the beauty of things and the baulking bitterness of them were clasped in conflict, made his way to the boundary fence to discover whether some hole in the wire had given admittance to the destructive coney.

Slipping through the rhododendrons he heard a sound that caused him to uncock his gun and stand still. It was a metallic sound, the click-click-click of wire-cutters, and when Ghent was satisfied as to the nature and the direction of the sound, he put his gun down, and parting the rhododendron foliage, peered through this squint-hole. He saw, on the other side of the wire, amid the thistles and ragwort, a hat and a pair of shoulders. Someone was bending down, snipping at the wire fence. Ghent's face went grim. Surely he had enough to contend with, without the incredible malice of an evil old man being inflicted upon him? That it was old Crabtree who was using those metal-shears he had no doubt at all. Well, he would give the old scoundrel a lesson. He recovered his gun, backed noiselessly through and away from the hedge, keeping his eyes on a point beyond which the spoiler was functioning. He still could hear the snip-snip of the shears, but the man who was using them appeared to have heard nothing. Man, indeed! This was the act of a malignant little urchin. Ghent raised his gun and pointing it at a place about five yards up

the hedge, he let both barrels blaze.

Silence. The snipping of wire had ceased. Nor was there any angry bellow from beyond the hedge. Ghent, keeping up the by-play, shouted to an imaginary dog.

“Find him, Bunter, rabbits, find him.”

He pushed tumultuously through the hedge as though in pursuit of a wounded rabbit, and he was in time to see a little, squat figure legging it up the hill, to vanish behind a tangle of birch and bramble. Ghent had flushed his bird, old Crabtree himself, and ejecting the spent cartridges from his gun, he wished that the Law allowed you to pepper the rumps of such mischievous old louts.

He saw no more of Temple Towers, and walking along the wire, he came to the place where Mr. Crabtree had been so busy. A strip nine inches wide had been cut out of the netting, and lay turned back upon the rough grass. Ghent put his gun down, and kneeling and taking some twine and a knife out of his pocket, he lashed the tongue of wire back over the bolt-hole.

Well, well, old Crabtree was not likely to repeat that sort of trick.

But the malice of it, the petty, malignant littleness of the thing!

Assuredly, man could be a strange creature, both god and fraudulent ape.

Mrs. Strangeways had heard the reports of Ghent’s gun. She was sitting in her deck-chair under the shelter of the green rick-cover, for a chilly breeze was blowing down the river. The pendant foliage of the willows waved to and fro over water that was like ruffled lead. The sky was a melancholy grey smudge. Nor was her mood much happier than the sky. She and her affairs were feeling the drought, oh, very much so. Her petty cash had shrunk to the sum of two pounds, seven shillings and threepence. She had no rent to pay, but milk and eggs and tea and bread and butter did not fall like manna from the skies. Mrs. Maintenance took in these necessaries for her from the baker, the grocer, and the milkman, and daily she ferried across to collect her supplies and to pay for them.

What did you do in such a crisis? Pawn something, or sell something, if you had anything to sell, or walk the streets and solicit? How quaint life was! Had she consented to the seduction of Temple Towers, all sorts of favours might have been forthcoming. But what a nasty business! Well, what was she to do? Take a third-class ticket to London, and sell some of her jewellery, and

be fobbed off with a quarter of its value? What a pity that she was such a useless creature. She could not cook; she knew nothing about children, in fact, she disliked other people's children; she was a somewhat inefficient typist, and knew no shorthand. In the old days she might have attached herself to some old lady as a companion, and taken the dog out, and read the paper and Marie Corelli to a patroness in a shawl and cap.

If only Peter——?

And then she saw him walking back beside the river with his gun over his shoulder. How near they were in the essentials, and yet how far apart! He had become strangely inarticulate during the last ten days, and so like a good child trying not to look at the forbidden cake. He was so sensitive about things. He suffered from too much integrity. Yes, obviously, he was not going to ask a woman to share possible disaster, and all its small and sordid implications. Or, was it that he was shy of her self-imposed aloofness, her plea of "Touch me not", and still saw Folly Island as her sanctuary?

Dear, beloved simpleton! Did he not know that she would throw herself into the river if he were to ask for that sacrifice, or strip off her frocks and burn them, or go down on her knees and scrub floors, or grub up weeds in his precious nursery? Was she being sentimental? Not at all. It was just that she loved him more than she loved herself, because he was just what he was. She could be both mistress and mother. She wanted to take his head in her lap and say: "My darling, don't worry. What does anything matter? We'll make things come right somehow. I don't mind what I do, or where I live or what I wear. All that I know is that I love you."

She stood up and waved to him.

"I am coming across to see Sarah."

A moment later she was in the punt, and Ghent stood and watched her, and remembered that he had to tell her that John Lynwood had asked for the return of the rick-cover. She was poling the punt towards his boat-house, and he followed it along the bank, a man made more shy by his sense of frustration. Putting his gun down he caught the nose of the punt as it slid in, and held the boat against the stage.

"Did you shoot anything?"

She shipped the pole, and putting a hand on his shoulder, stepped out.

"I nearly shot old Crabtree."

"No!"

“He was cutting a hole in my wire fence.”

“What on earth for?”

“To let rabbits into my place.”

With her hand still on his shoulder, she stood looking down at him.

“Just out of spite?”

“Yes.”

“But how incredible!”

“Incredible, but true. He didn’t hear me, and I let off both barrels into the hedge. He scuttled like a rabbit.”

“Peter, are men like that?”

“Seems so, doesn’t it. But I think the laugh was with me.”

She took her hand from his shoulder, for though he spoke of laughter, there was no laughter in his eyes.

“The old wretch! I wish I could——”

He tied up the punt, recovered his gun, and waited for her to climb the bank.

“Oh, by the way, I’m afraid John wants his rick-cover.”

“Does he? Well, I’ve——”

“He can’t help wanting it. Harvest, you know, and if it should rain, stacks have to be protected.”

“Of course. Shall we take it down to-night?”

“To-morrow would do. We must try and patch up the poor old tent.”

“No, I would rather take it down to-night. I wonder if I can manage.”

“Oh, I’ll come and help you.”

Mrs. Maintenance had Mrs. Strangeways’s stores ready for her, neatly packed in a basket, a pound of sugar, a quarter of a pound of tea, a pat of butter, two tins of milk. And would Sarah mind if she paid for them to-morrow?

“I’ve left my bag and purse on the island.”

Sarah suggested that it would save trouble if Mrs. Strangeways settled at the end of each week, and Mrs. Strangeways accepted the suggestion. She

found Ghent waiting for her by the Camperdown Elm, and he took the basket and carried it down to the punt.

She looked at the grey sky.

“I don’t think it will rain to-night.”

“No, these miffy days don’t produce rain.”

She stepped into the punt, feeling that he was badly depressed, poor lad, and that nothing that she could do would alter the march of circumstance.

“You can pole, Peter.”

“All right.”

She sat down with the basket at her feet, and he picked up the pole and pushed the punt out into the stream. And it seemed to her that he had no heart in the thing he did, nor in the business that lay before them. He was going to help her to dismantle one of the last of her defences just when he was feeling baulked and frustrated, and unable to play the part of hero.

His back was turned to her, and suddenly he asked her a question, as though he was putting it to the sky and the river.

“I say, how much money have you got?”

The suddenness of it left her breathless for a second. It was like dashing cold water in her face.

“Oh, enough to manage on for a while.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me, Peter.”

“Look here, you needn’t pay Sarah for those things.”

“Of course I shall.”

“Why bother? It can all be settled when I sell up the place.”

Was it as bad as that? She had not known him bitter like this before, and with the self-confessed bitterness of defeat. She picked up her basket and clasped it as he ran the punt under the willows, shipped the pole and fastened the mooring rope to a tree. He seemed to be a long time knotting off the rope, and when he turned to face her he had the look of a man who was ashamed.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to blurt out like that.”

She sat looking up at him with significant steadfastness.

“Haven’t I some right to know?”

“You?”

“Yes, my dear. What hurts you, hurts me.”

His eyes met hers for a moment in a quick, deep glance that was revealing. Then, almost roughly, he took the basket from her, and holding to a bough, steadied the punt against the bank.

“That’s good of you, but I’m not going to unload my troubles on you.”

She rose, and passing close to him, stood on the bank.

“Well, then, why should you carry the basket? I’ll take it.”

“No; my privilege.”

She put out her hand for the basket.

“You are making it rather hard for me, aren’t you?”

“Hard?”

“Yes. You needn’t be merciless to me.”

He gave her the basket.

“That’s the last thing I want to be. But don’t you understand that a man who’s in Queer Street, can’t——”

“You don’t seem to understand much about women, Peter.”

“I? Well, perhaps not. You see——”

She was standing above him, and she put out her free hand.

“Have I to help you up? Oh, my dear, how very blind you are.”

He looked at her hand, and suddenly he took it, and bending his head, put his lips to it.

“I feel such a rotter, Sybil. A silly idiot, failure.”

“You’ll never be that.”

She kept hold of his hand, and climbing the bank, drew him after her. She put down the basket. She was looking into his face, conscious of all that it revealed to her, and all that it tried not to reveal.

“Peter, don’t you know that when one cares one wants to share things?”

“What things?”

“Oh, you know. Caring is not much use, is it, unless it’s for better and for worse, in sickness and in health? My darling, I want to help you.”

Peeping Toms do not always behold that which is piquing and pleasant, and Mr. Crabtree, who had a fondness for erecting a brass telescope upon the Temple Towers terrace and turning it upon the world below, trained his optical gun upon Folly Island. And immortal Zeus was not pleased. He beheld two base mortals in a provoking tableau, the woman sitting on a cushion, and the man lying on the grass with his head in her lap. She was stroking his hair.

That young pup of a Ghent, and Mrs. Strangeways!

“Damn it,” said Mr. Crabtree, fiddling with the eyepiece, and still feeling that his dignity had not retreated with honour from the barrels of Ghent’s gun. “Damn it, I wish I had old Mother Vandeleur up here. Interesting for her to see her little pet playing with a tart.”

Mr. Crabtree kept his eye applied to the telescope. He was a spiteful and a vulgar-minded old man, and since youth had procured the lady, he could solace himself by exulting over their disgusting frailties. He wanted to see more, much more. But Mr. Crabtree was disappointed. He wanted both to gloat and to be shocked, and neither reaction was allowed him.

Why didn’t they get on with the business?

And then he heard a voice, his wife’s.

“What are you looking at, Father?”

She had slithered upon him in her slippers, and her husband removed his eye from the telescope, and snarled at her.

“Nothing that would interest you, Ma. I wish you wouldn’t wear those damned things.”

“What things?”

“Sneakers. Yes, by gum, you can have a look if you like. Do you good. Wait a bit, let’s see if they’ve got going yet. Disgusting, I call it.”

He adjusted himself again to the telescope, squinted, and after a moment of silence, slewed the telescope irritably in the direction of Farley village.

“Nothing doing. Poor sort of peep-show, after all. Want to look into the vicar’s back garden?”

“No, I don’t think so, Roger. But what were you looking at?”



“A couple of cats on a wall.”

“Cats! But cats don’t——”

“Oh, don’t they!”

“I don’t think it’s at all nice, anyway, at your age.”

“You leave my age alone. You can take it from me that cats are better than snails.”

Her hand was ruffling his hair. She was not looking at him, but across the river at his rows and rows of trees, and at the chimneys and roof of Marplot. Her face had an exquisite serenity. Almost, it was the face of a woman who dreamed, while discovering her dream in reality.

Ghent looked up at her.

“Aren’t you being rather reckless?”

She did not answer him for a moment, and her eyes remained fixed upon that little world across the water.

“No. Completely calculating! After all, safety first doesn’t go with adventure.”

“Can recklessness be calculating?”

This time she smiled and looked down at him.

“Somehow, yes. I calculate that I am taking my risk as I want to and even if Adam and Eve——”

“Were turned out of the garden?”

“Yes, but we won’t be. I’ll not admit it. We’re going to make good, somehow. Oh, my dear, I wish I had a thousand pounds to give you.”

“I don’t. Do you know, I feel different about things now.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Darling,” and she laid a hand upon his forehead.

He closed his eyes, and lay like the happy warrior to whom peace and a new strength have come.

“You’ll be awfully poor, Sybil.”

“I think I know more about poverty than you do, dear man. If one’s feeling poor, no balance at the bank is going to make you feel rich. And I shall be feeling rich.”

“Shall you?”

“Of course. I’ve learnt so much in the last few weeks. I seem to have shed a skin. Do you remember saying that life on the land is real?”

“It’s real enough; sometimes a bit too real.”

“Can anything be? It comes to this, if one lives on tinned stuff, one’s finking one’s cooking.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at her steadfastly.

“Yes. But what about being bored? It is going to be a struggle. Not much variety. A little shopping in Loddon. A cinema now and again. And winter, you know. Winter’s a bit grim in England.”

She bent over him.

“You don’t quite understand yet. We are going into this thing together, Peter. I don’t want to read what the very clever people have to say about life. I want to live it. They seem to make such a supercilious mess of it. I’m a very simple creature, really. I want simple things. I know that now. I want to live, not to be a critic.”

He smiled at her, and putting up a hand, pinched her chin between thumb and finger.

“Is that the idea? You want to back your man?”

“For better or for worse, in sickness and in health. Oh, my very, very dear, it can all be so good. Why should one funk anything when we can face things together?”

He sat up suddenly, and opening his arms, held her.

“My God, I feel as strong as a horse. I’ll make life good and safe for you somehow.”

She gave him her lips.

“Of course you will. Let’s be reckless.”

“Reckless?”

“Yes, let’s get married, Peter. But fancy my asking you! What I mean is I want to feel that your fate is just utterly mine.”

He kissed her again.

“Well, that settles it. And now, what about poor old John’s rick-cover? It’s going to be rather superfluous very soon. Marplot’s still got a roof.”

She jumped up, pulling him with her.

“Oh, Peter, will poor Sarah be very upset?”

“It takes a lot to upset Sarah. She’s always been preaching marriage to me in her funny old way. Sarah is all right when she likes.”

“Do you think she likes me?”

He put his arm round her.

“Could anyone help it?”

## XXV

Lady Melissa had suffered Sir Gavin Marwood to go by himself round the Temple Manor gardens, for she knew that he abominated personally conducted tours just as much as she did. Moreover, Sir Gavin's political career had entailed so much social insincerity that now that he had retired he had become quite sincerely unsocial. He had let it be known that he had retreated for good and all into the country, to escape from that other ridiculous England which, with others, he had attempted to govern. Being the most sincere of men he had been marked down for accusations of insincerity by a revolutionary press that would have cut the throat of an archangel, had Gabriel or Michael refused to accept all its catch-cries and its humbug. Sir Gavin had christened the Leftist Intelligentsia "The Wows." They amused him, but he had no desire to confront crises in their company. Such brilliantly loquacious people were apt to take refuge under beds when danger threatened their hypersensitive egos. When storms blew up, and nature's bitter moods had to be confronted, Sir Gavin would have preferred a plain man as his comrade.

He was both benign and a cynic, but with a cynicism that could chuckle, for how could you be anything but cynical in a country whose demagogues screamed "Liberty," and "Down with Wage Slavery," and were prepared to impose a far worse tyranny upon all and sundry. Let a solitary railway employee desire to be a free man, and his dear brothers will rush out on strike to blackmail the blackleg into surrender. Yes, the Wows had peculiar ideas about Liberty. They snarled at Hitler, while lusting each to be a little Hitler in his own small section of the community. So, Sir Gavin had taken refuge in the country. He had a country mind, and he continued to be persuaded that the countryman was more sane than his urban cousin. England was getting herself in a devil of a mess, and lacking future social enlightenment, Sir Gavin could not foresee any solution of the problem. It was not that he had shrugged his shoulders and abandoned the business. He was old and he was tired, and perhaps a little disillusioned, and he saw no hopeful sign in the heavens. Therefore, he had chosen to retire from a world where animal, crowd noises were on the increase, and base and sinister motives were ascribed to anything you said or did. The smugness of the Wows had disgusted him. Trees did not shout catch-cries at you, and if you elected to breed super-delphiniums, you could not be accused of insulting democracy by expressing a belief in the

reality of super-men.

Lady Melissa saw Sir Gavin's large white head appearing on the steps of the terrace. He had a magnificent head, rather like the head of a lion with a mane of silver. As a young man his blue eyes had expressed a certain impudence, but now they contained a serene twinkle and were kind. No man had been more capable of devastating wit in trouncing a political opponent. He had confessed to a passion for removing the symbolical sackcloth that Wows in particular love to wear.

His shoulders were as massive as his head, and no man held himself more proudly than Sir Gavin, but with the genial pride of one who was so big that he forgot to be little. The jackals of this world barked either with him or at him, he cared not which. He had left the jackals behind, and if they howled, which they did, he did not hear them. Had he read the Leftist Press he would have discovered innuendoes which suggested that even his retirement had some sinister inspiration. Had he taken to growing onions the Wows would have discovered in that very simple operation a deep and malignant odour of intrigue.

Lady Melissa waited, smiling. And Sir Gavin came smiling to her up the steps as though he was not too old to lay an offering at the feet of an old lady. Besides, she possessed the spirit of eternal youth, as he did. The young can be so dreadfully decrepit.

Said he: "I suppose you had some motive in sending me to look at that border?"

"I had. Provocation."

"Nothing of yours, dear lady, could make me jealous."

"Have you renounced all envy?"

He laughed.

"I have left that to my late political opponents. Were you responsible for that border?"

"Not quite. Mr. Ghent made it for me two years ago."

He stood straight and square, looking her in the face.

"Ha, the protégé! I must go and see that young man. Are you completely dispassionate in your recommendations?"

"Never."

"How refreshing. I adore blank prejudice. So many dear ladies have

offered to sell me pups, but you——”

“I am prejudiced, where I like.”

“Splendid! But tell me, is your lad a Wow?”

“I think not.”

“He does not suffer from thwarted appetites and the illusion that if the world were turned topsy-turvy, he would emerge somehow as a small tyrant?”

“Oh no, he happens to be in love.”

“Then I can forgive him anything.”

“And he is hard up.”

“Poor but proud.”

“Oh, damnably proud, my dear.”

“That virtue is so excessively rare that one is tempted to question its existence. With so many people vanity cries ‘Damn your beastly money,’ and then murmurs seductively, ‘Cheque, please.’”

As Lady Melissa had told Peter Ghent, Sir Gavin Marwood had bought Thursby, an exquisite study in stone that had been built about the year 1610. Thursby had belonged to the Latimers since the day of its birth, but the Latimers had grown poorer and poorer, until the last of them had wriggled from under the boot of the Tax Gatherer, and escaped to a bungalow somewhere in Cornwall. Meanwhile, Thursby itself, the great house, the gardens, and the park had been growing poorer year by year, until roofs leaked and outbuildings fell down, and the garden had gone native. Mr. Roger Crabtree had been sniffing at Thursby, scenting a possible bargain and a site that might offer a more social elevation than Temple Towers, but while he was sniffing, Sir Gavin had stepped in and rescued Thursby from the man of ideas.

Sir Gavin was very rich, far richer than Mr. Roger Crabtree. As a cultured amateur he had some knowledge of gardens, but Thursby was rather beyond the happy potterings of an amateur. The gardens had gone back to nature. Nothing but clearing and replanting, and replanning would recover them from a state of dishevelled decay. Shrubs were overgrown and scraggy, roses smothered, terraces and borders thick with weeds. The lawns were starved and rabbit-sour. Many of the old trees needed felling. But, at the same time Sir Gavin had a fierce distrust of the professional planner who dished you out lily pools and rose gardens and pergolas like suites of furniture. Thursby demanded enthusiasm, vision, and the individual touch. The old and the new

Thursby needed delicate blending.

Peter had broken the news to Mrs. Maintenance, who had received it with placid resignation.

“You won’t want to leave us, Sarah?”

“No, sir, it’s not quite as bad as all that.”

Ghent had looked at her whimsically.

“No, not quite so bad for me.”

“You mustn’t take me up wrong, sir.”

“I won’t. Mrs. Strangeways is coming to see you this morning. I know she’ll be terribly pleased if you’ll stay.”

He had gone out to post a letter, which contained a request for a copy of his birth certificate; and half an hour earlier Mrs. Strangeways had posted a similar request to the registrar of a south-coast town. Neither of them had enclosed any money for the necessary fee, for neither of them knew that a fee was necessary. They were, what Mrs. Maintenance believed them to be in spite of scandal, a pair of perfect innocents.

Peter had returned to the office, remembering that the rather unpleasant letter from his bank-manager called for a reply. Well, he would write and say that he might be expected in Loddon during the week. But, damn it, an overdraft was a nice wedding-present! He did not hear the gate-bell ring, but George, who had been at work in the Shop Window, poked his head into the office.

“Visitor, sir.”

“Who?”

“A gentleman.”

“Anyone we know?”

“Never seen him before, sir.”

“Did he give a name?”

“No. Said he wanted to look round.”

Poor Peter was living in that state of sensitive suspicion, when a man who is hard up hopes for good news, but rather expects it to be bad. Any casual stranger might have some sinister motive in exploring the nursery, so Ghent

left his letter to the bank unwritten, and went out to confront the visitor and his business. He found a gentleman in a grey tweed suit, sitting on the seat, with his hat reposing beside him. The gentleman was a complete stranger to Ghent, but that was not the measure of his singularity. Peter had a feeling that he had seen that massive white head and jocund face before. But where, and when? His visitor smiled at him, and the smile did not suggest that his motives were surreptitious.

“Mr. Ghent?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I thought I would like to look round.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

Meanwhile, the stranger was looking very hard at Ghent, but with a pleasant scrutiny that did not become a stare. Nor did Ghent mind being looked at in this way. He was continuing to question his memory as to the familiarity of this memorable face.

“You’ll excuse me, sir, but have you been here before?”

“No, Mr. Ghent.”

“Well, that acquits me of discourtesy.”

He was smiling at his visitor, and the gentleman on the seat smiled back at him. This was a likeable lad, who had manners, and who looked you straight in the face, and who yet was sensitive. Bovine candour is not pleasing to the gods.

“Would you like me to show you round, sir?”

The visitor rose.

“I should. Charming little piece, this. I suppose you do constructional work?”

“Yes, when I can get it.”

The gentleman in grey looked at him paternally.

“Creating, what?”

“Yes, it’s rather fascinating, sir, to take something that is nothing, or just blah, and dress it.”

“Like cultivating the village maiden!”

“Oh, I’m afraid she’s rather mass-production, sir.”



“Same all over the world, Mr. Ghent, Bulgaria, Texas, Tooting and Berlin. Same sort of stockings, same sort of hat, same messy mouths. I hear you specialize in trees.”

They were passing the Camperdown Elm and the Weeping Beech, and the visitor paused to look at them.

“Quite the crinoline period, Mr. Ghent. It’s a pity the other sex now puts everything in the shop-window. The whole art of life consists in leaving something to the imagination. Well, let’s look at your trees.”

Ghent was frowning to himself.

“I ought to tell you, sir, that we have had a bad season here.”

“Drought?”

“Yes. There are a lot of trees I couldn’t send out. Wouldn’t be fair.”

“To the customer or the trees?”

“Both, sir.”

The visitor was observing Peter’s bothered face.

“I see. But I suppose you have trees that are saleable?”

“Oh, yes, sir. If you should want trees, I would advise you as to what I could supply you with. It is no satisfaction to me to send out rubbish.”

Was the lad a prig? No, most certainly not. He was a craftsman with the conscience of a craftsman, not a carefully trained commercial liar. Mr. White Head knew that when the ordinary trader begins to prate about honesty, he may be preparing to sell you a pup. It was not a modest age, and not always a very truthful one.

The gentleman strolled on.

“How long do you keep trees in a nursery, Mr. Ghent?”

“How long? Oh, anything from one to ten years. You see, a youngster may be three years old before he is put out in a plantation. And if they get too old they are apt to become unsaleable, unless they have had special treatment.”

“Lot of capital lying idle.”

“Yes, that is one of the troubles, sir. You have to lock all sorts of things up in the land.”

“Labour, and cash, and love.”

Ghent gave his visitor a quick and vivid glance.

“Yes, love, sir. That’s true.”

Mr. White Head had surprised him, and there was a subtle and mutual pleasure in the feeling.

Peter, of course, was wondering who his visitor was, and whether anything helpful would come of this pilgrimage. So many people wandered round his nursery, and asked the names of things and made notes, and were never heard of again. Some people asked for one of his precious catalogues—he had about a baker’s dozen left in the office—and sent him no order. Yet, you had to cast your bread upon the waters, even if it did not return to you stale or mouldy. Nor did he make a habit of asking his visitors for their names and addresses, and however strong his curiosity might be he had no intention of trying to pin Mr. White Head down on paper.

When they had completed the round, and his visitor had asked a number of intelligent questions which betrayed an interest in the life of a tree, Peter led him to the door of the office, but did not attempt to lure him inside.

“Would you care for a catalogue, sir?”

“I should, Mr. Ghent.”

Peter produced the catalogue and walked with his visitor to the iron gates. Mr. White Head was expecting to be asked for his name, but Ghent did not ask for it. He opened the gate and smiled his visitor out.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ghent. I think you will hear from me.”

Ghent closed the gate and strolled back to the office, and his visitor walked down the road to where a small saloon car was parked beside the hedge.

“Temple Manor, Smith.”

“Very good, sir.”

Sir Gavin Marwood entered his car.

In “The House” Sir Gavin Marwood’s genial moods had become legendary. His political opponents had had cause to know that when that great white head appeared with a smile under its bushy brows, storms were brewing for somebody. Sir Gavin, like most born fighters, could smile when he handed out devastating punches. There had been occasions when a jackal had taken one look at the old lion, and becoming conscious of inward qualms, had slunk off elsewhere to relieve them.

Smith chose to drive his master to Temple Manor by way of Badger's Lane, and in the very narrowest part of the lane Sir Gavin's small run-about was confronted by the Crabtree Rolls. Sir Gavin also possessed a Rolls, but it was not painted yellow. Scattergood, knowing his master's prejudices, and also that the old ruffian was in a nasty temper, stuck to the middle of the road as he crowded down upon the little common car. Sir Gavin's chauffeur had to swerve on to the verge, with two wheels close to the ditch.

Even so, space was limited, and the Rolls had to pull up, and Sir Gavin was presented with a picture of Mr. Crabtree making rude and emphatic gestures which indicated that Smith was to get off the earth. The two chauffeurs, leaning out, oiled their way slowly past each other, watching mutual mudguards. Sir Gavin's window was open; so was Mr. Crabtree's, and Sir Gavin leaned out, and raising his hat, was sarcastic.

"I see you like more than your share, sir."

Mr. Crabtree glared at him.

"You mind your own business, and I'll mind mine."

"Thank you," said Sir Gavin, smiling. "I see that good manners are not included."

"All right, all right, take your little tin pan home."

"Delighted, I'm sure. Good morning, sir."

The two cars crawled on, Mr. Crabtree convinced that he had effaced the other fellow; Sir Gavin amused, but quite ready to remember the incident.

"Who is the gentleman, Smith?"

"Haven't an idea, sir."

"The local Phœbus in his sun-chariot."

Smith had no knowledge of Greek gods, but he did know a cad when he saw him.

"Swallowed a lot of money, and 'asn't digested it, I should say, sir."

"A very good description, Smith, very good indeed. I wonder if he would have been so churlish to us had we been in the Rolls?"

At Temple Manor Sir Gavin found Lady Melissa going over the flower-borders with a basket and scissors, snipping off dead flowers, and saving some especial head for seed. It was a task that she enjoyed, but it could be a source of irritation to her head-gardener who loved to tie up clumps of aster and

helenium and phlox as though they were Victorian young ladies whose waists had to be constricted. Lady Melissa would snip the twine and set their green abdomens free.

She turned to welcome Sir Gavin, and her eyes said “Well?” And Sir Gavin, who knew what she wanted him to tell her, became mischievous and eluded the subject until she snipped her scissors at him and shook her head.

“I won’t have you being feline.”

“Dear lady!”

“Leo, if you like. Did you go to Marplot?”

Sir Gavin offered to carry her basket, and she allowed him that honour.

“May I begin at the end, instead of at the beginning? Coming here we met in a lane a portentous person in a canary-coloured Rolls.”

“My dear neighbour, Mr. Crabtree. I think you have been rude to his house.”

“Oh, Pepper-Pots! He was very rude to me. And what is his particular significance?”

Lady Melissa made some attempt to explain Mr. Crabtree to Sir Gavin, and she added the information that his passion of the moment was the bankrupting of young Ghent. He would put his paw upon Marplot. Yes, Mr. Crabtree was really a rather impossible old beast, but he was also a dangerous one, and not easily flouted.

“Is that so?” said Sir Gavin. “The thing intrigues me. Why does he want the lad’s land?”

“Why do the Crabtrees of this world want anything? Because it is somebody else’s; because of the passion to exert power; also, because young Peter has stood up to him. The old idiot suffers from the illusion that we are a gang of snobs and ostracize him.”

“And the explanation is so simple.”

“Quite. We just don’t like him. So, you did see my tree man?”

“Yes, and liked him.”

Lady Melissa’s eyes lit up.

“No Wowishness?”

“He did not ask for my name. He did not tout for an order. Indeed, he

almost put me off buying trees.”

“Why?”

“Because they are not safe to be sold, or some of them. Drought-sick. Badly worried about things, poor lad, I should say. Nice smile. Looks you straight in the face with the gravity of a young prophet.”

“Did you tell him who you were?”

Sir Gavin puckered up his eyes.

“No, I didn’t. But I gathered that he felt that he had seen me before.”

“On paper.”

“Yes, on paper, presumably, but I don’t think the associations connected.”

Lady Melissa tossed her head like a girl.

“You wicked old man! If you must be so puckish, you must realize——”

“That one’s responsible for one’s mis-chee-viousness?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I think I shall be. Do you remember the legend of Una and the Lion?”

“You are a lamb of a Lion, Gavin, and I’d like a lock of your hair.”

## XXVI

**M**rs. Strangeways was breakfasting on the island when she became aware of Ghent standing on the opposite bank, waving to her with something white in his hand. Surely it was not the newly-arrived copy of his birth certificate? And if it were, the document could not be expected to produce such evident excitement! Or might it? She was sitting on a cushion with a plate of bread and butter and marmalade in her lap, and her second cup of tea waiting to be emptied.

She raised the cup to him, and swallowed. You could not hail your lover with your mouth full.

“What is it, Peter?”

“Something to show you.”

“I’m still feeding.”

“I’d swim across, but this piece of paper would get wet.”

“Mayn’t I finish?”

“Of course. I’m a selfish beast. But it is rather exciting.”

“Is it really?”

“Rather.”

She put her plate aside.

“Then, I’ll come across now. Second cups can wait.”

She climbed down the bank into the punt, unmoored it, and poled across. He came down to the water’s edge, and when the nose of the punt ran in among the willow-herb and loosestrife, he sprang on board, and passed her the letter.

“Give me the pole. You can read.”

The exchange was made, and she sat down with the letter in her hand, while he poled the punt across to the island.

She read:

DEAR MR. GHENT,

You may have heard that I have purchased Thursby. The gardens are in a very derelict state, and will need complete reconditioning. Lady Vandeleur has given me your name, and states that you undertake such work.

Perhaps you will call on me and inspect the place. I shall be in any morning this week.

Yours truly,  
MARWOOD.

She was as excited as a child.

“Oh, Peter, not the Marwood?”

“Yes, the great Sir Gavin.”

“And is Thursby a big place?”

“Huge. If I could get that piece of work——”

“Oh, my darling, how splendid! Of course you will get it.”

She jumped up and fell upon him, in more senses than one, for Peter, after a last thrust with the pole, had turned to her, forgetting that the island was looming over them. The nose of the punt rammed the bank, and the impact and her sudden falling against him, nearly sent him into the water.

“Hallo! Hold up.”

“Oh, my darling, I’m so glad.”

He held her with one arm, and looking down into her little flushed face, was moved to think how good life could be when your dear comrade became as excited about your affairs as a child on Christmas morning.

“You lovely thing.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, in every way,” and he kissed her, “but we haven’t got the job yet.”

“We. I love that. But why shouldn’t we?”

“Well, why not? Come along. You haven’t finished your breakfast.”

“Bother breakfast. I simply couldn’t eat another mouthful. Let’s read it again.”

He moored the punt, and armed her up the bank, and they stood together,

under a willow, she holding Sir Gavin's letter.

"You've never seen him?"

"No, except in photographs."

"Yes, like an old lion, but a kind lion. Lady Melissa must have—— Oh, bless her. You see he says any morning."

"Yes."

"When shall you go?"

"No time like the present."

"This morning?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, Peter, couldn't I come too? I could sit in the car."

"I don't see why I shouldn't take my fiancée! Rather a good advertisement for the firm."

"Do you think so?"

"Do I think so!"

"You are a darling. You can call me your secretary, if you like."

"I'm damned if I will. Nothing so dull. Does a man look at his secretary as I'm looking at you?"

"I hope not, young man."

"Well, that settles it," and he kissed her.

Thursby was a period house in stone, very old and grey and lovely, with high chimneys and carved gables. It stood on a little plateau, very English in its mood and in its setting, and looking down upon parkland, great trees, bracken, yews, and ancient thorns. Neglect, or rather the lack of means to maintain the sweet texture of the place, was obvious everywhere. Scaffolding was up round one of the chimney stacks. The lawns were rough and starved, and pocked with rabbit scrapes. Snow had broken the bough of a Cedar of Lebanon, and the dead brown thing still hung there. As he brought his car up a drive that recently had been dressed with weed-killer, Ghent saw no flowers save the yellow cat's-ears in the starved lawns. A derelict shrubbery on the west of the house seemed to struggle like a crowd of wild creatures fighting for room and air.



Ghent stopped the car opposite the stone porch, on whose tympanum was carved a coat-of-arms and the date—1610. He was strung up and nervous, and so afraid of doing the wrong thing.

“Do you think it will matter, parking here?”

“Of course not,” said she. “Oh, my dear, isn’t the old place lovely!”

He left her in the car, and turning to smile at her, rang the bell. A manservant answered it. Was Sir Gavin Marwood in?

“What name, sir?”

“Mr. Ghent.”

His name appeared to be a password, for the manservant believed that Sir Gavin was on one of the lower terraces with a book and a chair. He led Ghent round the house, and across the upper terrace to a flight of broad stone steps that were green with grass and weeds.

“There is Sir Gavin, sir, coming up.”

Ghent did not answer the man. He just stood and stared, for the white-headed gentleman who was ascending the steps of the second terrace, was his visitor of two days ago.

Sir Gavin came up smiling to welcome a young man who was not quite sure whether he ought to smile or stand upon his dignity.

“Good morning, Mr. Ghent. Thanks for this promptness. I shall have to ask you to forgive my incognito.”

Ghent’s stiff young face softened.

“Maybe it was my fault, sir. I ought to have been able to put a name to a \_\_\_\_\_”

“Household face, my lad! I am wondering whether you are suspecting me of wholesale vanity.”

“Hardly that, sir.”

“And of expecting the whole world to cry ‘Hail,’ when one strolls in Hyde Park. No, just a little puckishness, but propitiously so. Well, here’s Thursby.”

He stood beside Ghent, on the topmost step, and looked over the domain that was his. Dressed in velvet and lace he could have been no more adequate as the central figure on the stage. His white head was almost the head of a cavalier. Even the landscape itself might have been the England of three hundred years ago, with no new building to show like a raw wound in the

greenness.

“I suppose it is selfish to like it like that, Mr. Ghent, but I do.”

“Well, one does, sir,” said Ghent, looking into the distance, “if one hasn’t a brick and mortar mind. Besides, to be honest, I don’t see that there is any sin in feeling like that. If you plumped half Battersea in bungalows down there, they’d be dreadfully bored, and the result would be beastly.”

Sir Gavin chuckled.

“Well, let us be Elizabethan. Moreover, haven’t we countrymen a right to wish the country to be country? There is such a lot of humanistic humbug talked on platforms. Now, I expect you would like to look round.”

“I should, sir.”

“By yourself?”

“If I may. You have to tread softly in a place like this, and stand and stare. But perhaps, if you want me to work out a scheme——”

“I think so.”

“You might go round with me first, sir, and give me any impressions you have. I mean, everybody, and you in particular, has likes and dislikes.”

“Carnations and the common sycamore.”

Ghent laughed.

“I don’t think Thursby would require either.”

They strolled across the grass towards the house whose weathered stone and high chimneys were backed by the contours of old trees.

“Any ideas here, Mr. Ghent?”

Peter paused and stood at gaze.

“I think it was meant to stand like that. One couldn’t fuss it. Just grass, and of course, the parterre idea on this upper terrace.”

“A casket on a green cushion. The turf is rather hopeless.”

“You’ll have to wage war on the rabbits, sir, or wire them out.”

“Would you returf or sow?”

“I don’t think I would do either. Very expensive, too. I rather believe in leaving the natural turf. It’s amazing what you can do with feeding, watering and weeding. Of course, the seed-merchants wouldn’t tell you that.”

“No,” said Sir Gavin, twinkling; “bad for business. Well, what is your process?”

“A dressing of good loam and Sorbex in winter. A dose of mixed artificial in April, and again in July. Rolling with a spiked roller. Watering in dry weather. No close cutting for the first year.”

“Stimulating the local inhabitants?”

“That’s the idea, sir. What grows here is probably meant to grow. But war on the rabbits. I think I’d wire the whole garden, if I were you.”

They had turned the corner of the house, and so came upon Ghent’s old car, and its solitary occupant. Sir Gavin saw a lover’s look light up Peter’s face.

“Oh, my fiancée, sir. I hope you don’t mind. She wanted to see the house.”

Now, Sir Gavin had an eye for a pretty woman, and a liking for young lovers who were decorative. He was not jealous of the young. He took Ghent by the arm. “Come and introduce me.” And Mrs. Strangeways, standing up in the old car, and looking shy and glowing, was certainly a quite charming addition to the landscape.

“Mrs. Strangeways—Sir Gavin Marwood,” said Ghent.

Mrs. Strangeways gave Sir Gavin a salutation that suggested a little curtsy.

“Please, may I get out?”

Sir Gavin opened the door for her, and his eyes were jocund.

“Most ungallant of you, Ghent, to leave the lady shut up here.”

Peter laughed and blushed.

“Oh, well, sir, you see, attention to business.”

Sir Gavin had chairs brought out to the terrace for himself and Mrs. Strangeways, while Ghent went off to inspect the gardens. He found three broad terraces, one below the other, and in the green hollow below a weedy little lake surrounded by alders and straggling old sallows. There were a few good trees here, Lawson cypress and sequoia, and the garden ended in a ha-ha and the park. A path led him along below the hillside to a garden house, and what appeared to be the remains of a moat in whose black mud water-weeds flourished. Above the moat Ghent discovered an immense walled garden, boxed, and full of fruit trees that were senile, and suggesting gouty old men. A

large wired fruit-cage had fallen inwards upon the bushes. A blue door in the wall was half off its hinges. North of the walled garden neglected shrubberies and plantations surrounded the outbuildings.

Ghent judged the gardens to be about twelve acres in extent, and there was hardly a square yard that did not need renovating. In fact, the whole place cried out for help. It asked for hundreds of flowering shrubs and trees, herbaceous plants by the thousand, mountains of dung and fresh loam, lime, gravel. Almost the capital expenditure that would be required for the transfiguration frightened him. It would run into thousands of pounds.

Returning, he found Mrs. Strangeways and Sir Gavin drinking sherry on the terrace, and obviously enjoying each other's company. Sir Gavin, observing Ghent's grave face, poured him out a glass of wine.

"Well, spied out the land, Ghent?"

"Yes, sir. Do you mind if I look down from the top of the steps?"

He walked away with his glass of sherry, and standing by a brick pillar, gazed upon the scene, and became lost in dreaming how it could be dealt with. What a superb setting, that little lake transfigured, the green hollows below brilliant with rhododendrons and azaleas and all manner of flowering shrubs, the terraces sheeted with colour!

He heard Sir Gavin's voice beside him.

"Well, my lad, just a little scared?"

Ghent turned with a quick smile.

"In a way, sir, yes. It's rather a vast job."

"Roughly, what do you think it would cost?"

"That would depend——?"

"On our ambition?"

"Quite, sir."

"Well, to do the job thoroughly."

"I hardly like to——"

Sir Gavin chuckled.

"Afraid of frightening me, Ghent? How far would five or six thousand pounds go?"

He saw young Ghent's head rise with a little jerk.

“Do you mean that, sir?”

“I do.”

“Well, of course, one could make a lovely job—— I mean the man who gets it could.”

“Supposing you draw out a plan in the rough,” and then, sensing Ghent’s embarrassment, and understanding what might lie behind it, he took the young man by the arm.

“Look here, my lad, that means time, and the commitments would seem considerable. Perhaps you are worried——”

“I’ll be quite frank, sir. I’ve had a bad year, and financially—— No, I don’t want to plead that sort of thing. But what I mean is, if I have a chance, I could and would afford the time to plan for you, on the understanding that you commit yourself to nothing. No charge for the plan, or estimates.”

“You would take that risk?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Sir Gavin gave his arm a playful shake.

“Mr. Ghent, you are a very poor business man. But I think I like that kind of innocence.”

As they drove away from Thursby Ghent was very silent, and his face was so problem-ridden that she, loving him with understanding, left him in peace. She wanted to prattle like an excited child, but she sat almost demurely, with her hands in her lap, her honey-coloured hair blowing about her little face. But inwardly she was laughing, laughing, laughing, and her spirit was like a lark fluttering and throbbing with song.

Not till he had brought Old Oliver, wart and all, out on to the high road did Ghent speak.

“By God, what a morning! I wonder if I can get the job? I’m going to start work directly I get back.”

“Plans, darling?”

“Yes, in the rough. I’m going over again to-morrow to measure up. My God, if only I can pull it off.”

She looked with sly tenderness at his stiff face. Didn’t he realize, dear lamb, that the prize was his, that Sir Gavin liked him rather tremendously, and

that when a man like Sir Gavin liked you——? Well, well, and she too had got on very well with the great man. But she did love her lover's innocence. Life with him would always be the eternal adventure.

“Do you have to colour your plans?”

“Yes, it makes them look more attractive.”

“Well, couldn't I do that? I can play about with a brush.”

“I say, that's an idea!”

“And you are going to be frightfully busy. Have you a typewriter?”

“Of sorts.”

“Well, I can type. I can deal with all the correspondence. And though you mightn't believe it, I can keep accounts.”

He looked at her devoutly.

“You're marvellous! But do you know what it would mean to us, if——?”

“Quite a lot of money, I suppose?”

“My fees at ten per cent would run to about six hundred pounds, without counting my profit on trees and shrubs supplied.”

“Oh, Peter, how splendid!”

“But we haven't got the job yet. I say, but I must turn in at Temple Manor. I want to kiss her dear, blessed hands.”

Lady Vandeleur often asked herself why the intellectual Drearies would not allow you the pleasure of giving pleasure to others, but must pillory you as an egoist swollen with patronage and power. There appeared to be nothing spontaneous about the Drearies. They made of everything a study in still life, and a rather nasty study at that, rotting fruit and crabs that were decaying and malodorous. Life and its loveliness eluded you when you began to sniff over it and pull it to pieces, for Lady Melissa believed that life was a miracle not a morgue.

She was writing letters when those two young things were shown in to her, and somehow their happy, vivid faces were so satisfying and worth while. Mrs. Strangeways did not stand upon ceremony, but was spontaneous as a bird.

“Oh, thank you, for everything. May I kiss your pretty white hair?”

Lady Melissa returned the kiss, planting it on a soft, warm cheek.

“Well, what have you two children been up to?”

Ghent stood on the other side of her table, rather like a young man who was moved to make a speech, and couldn't.

“I've been to Thursby.”

“Oh, to Thursby.”

“The most marvellous job. If I can get it, we shall owe it to you.”

“Not a bit, my dear. Kissing may go by favour, but unless you are up to your job kisses don't carry cheques.”

“I hope I'm up to the job. I'm just a bit——”

“Of course he is, isn't he, Lady Vandeleur? He is going to make a marvellous garden there.”

Lady Melissa looked at them both, and smiled.

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Ghent, “we're going to be married. I didn't think she ought to take such a risk.”

Lady Melissa laughed.

“Marriage is a devil of a risk. But if you can make as marvellous a job of it as you—— Well, come and kiss me, Peter. You're not on sentry-go.”

He came round the table, and she put up her face, and his lips touched her forehead.

“Thank you, for everything.”

“I'm getting my pleasure, so we can cry quits. But, Sybil, my dear, you can't very well be married from a tent on an island. But, of course you can.”

“It is going to be very quiet.”

“Well, why not be married from here?”

“Do you really mean it?”

“No, of course, I am just being polite!”

“You are. But there is not going to be any honeymoon. Is there, Peter?”

“Well, if I get the Thursby job, we shall be up to the eyes——”

“In love,” said Lady Melissa, under her breath.

## XXVII

Mr. Crabtree was opening his morning letters at the Temple Towers' breakfast table, and since most of them were charitable appeals, he tossed them on the floor. "Gosh, you'd think this country was nothing but an asylum, and a home for lost dogs. Nothing but crocks and unemployables!" His habit of strewing the floor with circulars and discarded letters was a source of annoyance to poor Mary who had one of those patient, tidy minds, and who years ago had made the experiment of placing the waste-paper basket beside her husband's chair, only to find that it somehow failed to give him satisfaction. But Roger Crabtree did receive one letter that pleased him, a communication from a back-street solicitor in Loddon who had stepped into the shoes of Messrs. Snape & Sowerby. This gentleman had been playing the ferret in Mr. Crabtree's interest.

"Ha, I thought so, young Ghent's pretty well done for."

And was that a cause of satisfaction?

"I should say so. Damned young pup. I want that place of his, and I'm going to get it."

"What for, Roger?"

"Nice little building estate. Old Ma Vandeleur won't like it."

He had another piece of news for his wife.

"Well, well, Marwood's taken Thursby. We ought to call on him."

"I thought you rather wanted Thursby?"

Apparently, Mr. Crabtree did not mind having his eye wiped by so great a man as Sir Gavin Marwood.

"No. Just an idea of mine. Glad for Marwood to have it. Yes, we ought to go and call, Mother. He doesn't belong to the old gang. Man of ideas, like me. Expect we'd see eye to eye on most things. Coming in to Loddon this morning? I'm taking the Rolls."

"No, Roger; we're making jam."

"There's no need for you to make jam, is there?"



“But I like it.”

“Well, that’s funny. Rich people like us don’t have to make jam. By the way, I’m getting fed up with that fellow Scattergood.”

“What’s the matter with Scattergood?”

“Dumb-saucy. Discontented swine. I believe the fellow’s a Bolshie. For tuppence I’d sack him.”

“He has a wife and children, Roger.”

“Let him think of that!”

Ghent, feeling that the moment was more than propitious for the interviewing of bank-managers, drove on from Temple Manor to Loddon, taking Mrs. Strangeways with him. There was the conventional question of a ring, but though the buying of rings when your balance was overdrawn might be an act of gallantry, it did not strike Ghent as being sound economics. Yet, he was a little worried about it, and no man likes to feel mean.

“If the Thursby job comes off, there is something I want to buy you.”

She was quick to understand him.

“I don’t want anything, Peter. You’re worrying about a ring.”

“Not worrying.”

“Well, all we need is a gold one, isn’t it? So simple. You see, my dear, baubles don’t matter when one’s got the real thing.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that.”

“I won’t have you wasting our money.”

He laughed.

“All right, Mrs. Ghent, you are going to keep the accounts.”

Ghent’s bank was in Loddon High Street, and as he brought his old car up to the pavement, he saw in front of him the portentous yellow rump of a vehicle that was familiar. Old Crabtree’s Rolls! And did they share the same bank? None the less he parked his car behind Mr. Crabtree’s, and drew Mrs. Strangeways’s attention to it.

“Know that chariot?”

She did. She crinkled up her nose.

“Yes, dear, I can smell it.”

“Rather singular! Do you believe in omens?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, is this one good or bad?”

“Good. Hall-marked, I should say!”

“My sweet, I do love your spirit.”

“So do I!”

And then the swing doors of the bank opened and Mr. Roger Crabtree emerged, looking rather as though he had swallowed a wad of ten-pound notes. He saw the two in that ramshackle old car, and received the impression that they were laughing at him, which was not true. They were laughing with each other. Mr. Crabtree did not salute Mrs. Strangeways. He turned abruptly to his own car, only to find that Scattergood was not in evidence. Scattergood had sneaked off to buy cigarettes. Mr. Crabtree got into his car, slammed the door, and waited ominously for his man.

Scattergood came strolling down the pavement. He had a kind of meditative smirk on his fallow face, but when he saw the figure in the limousine, the smirk died away. Mr. Crabtree was making significant movements with a hand.

Scattergood opened the door.

“What d’you mean by keeping me waiting?”

“I’d only just gone up——”

“Don’t argue. I don’t pay you to argue. Haven’t I told you before not to leave the car?”

Scattergood’s sulky face concealed murderous thoughts.

“Well, a man must relieve himself sometimes.”

“I don’t see the necessity,” said his master. “Always some excuse, haven’t you? Home.”

Ghent had entered the bank, after turning to wave half ironically to Sybil. How one’s fortune could change its face within twenty-four hours! A friendly cashier smiled at him from behind the counter. No, Ghent did not require money; he had come to see the manager, and was the gentleman disengaged? He was, and recovering from a surfeit of Mr. Crabtree, a Mr. Crabtree who had had the impertinence to ask questions as to the state of another client’s bank

balance. And here, strangely enough, was the client in question.

“Good morning, Mr. Ghent. Please sit down.”

Ghent sat down, and his happy face troubled the other man.

“You received my letter?”

“Oh, yes. I thought I would come along and let you know that I hope to be on the right side very soon.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Orders coming in?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, and between ourselves, I think I may be getting the contract for restoring the Thursby gardens.”

“Thursby?”

“Yes, I saw Sir Gavin Marwood this morning, and I am getting plans out at once.”

“I’m very glad.”

The manager’s face had taken to itself a dreamy look. Did Mr. Crabtree know this? But of course not. Arrogant old bounder! If Ghent’s news was valid, then Mr. Crabtree was exulting prematurely over Naboth’s Vineyard.

“I suppose it will be quite a big affair, Mr. Ghent?”

“Thousands of pounds. It will mean quite a nice sum to me. And a certainty, you know. I’m to work on a percentage.”

“That’s comforting.”

“I suppose you won’t be worrying about my account?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Ghent. Do you wish to draw any money now?”

“I haven’t a cheque book on me, but I’d rather like a small sum.”

“We can easily arrange that. How much would you like?”

“Ten pounds.”

“I’ll get you the money, and you can sign a debit slip.”

Surely, the sun was shining when your bank-manager went in person to fetch your money!

Ghent found Mrs. Strangeways sitting in the car, and happily watching the life of Loddon as though she found it far more interesting than Bond Street. Ghent gave her a shy, lover’s smile. He had a little shopping to do, and would

she care to wander along with him? He opened the door, and she slipped out, touching his arm as she did so.

“No baubles, my dear. You’ve got a naughty face.”

“I’m feeling like that. You are not going to begin ticking me off, before the bell goes?”

“Well, we will see. Young men who go into banks and come out smiling \_\_\_\_\_”

“Must have a good reason for it. Come along, Heart’s Ease.”

But nothing that he could do or say would persuade her to help him spend his money. You might lure a woman to a jeweller’s window, but you could not compel her to choose. Now, surely she liked that ring with its sapphires and marquise setting? No, she did not like it. She exercised gentle pressure against him with her arm, and made him move away.

“I shall like nothing, Peter, until that contract is signed.”

“But there may be no contract.”

“How do you mean?”

“A man like Sir Gavin may give you a verbal promise.”

“But is that sufficient?”

“Oh, better than most insurance policies. There won’t be some cunningly-worded clause which enables the insurer to sneak out of his obligations.”

“But I think you ought to have something in writing.”

“I shall not suggest it. If Sir Gavin likes to suggest it, well and good. As a matter of fact I’d have more faith in his spoken word than in any business contract.”

“Isn’t that rather innocent?”

“No, real wisdom. A man like Sir Gavin doesn’t let you down. If it were old Crabtree I know he would try to do me, contract or no contract.”

“I do like you, Peter. You do believe in something.”

“Yes, in you.”

“Oh, my dear, I’ll try never to let you down.”

“Same here. Now, if you won’t let me spend money, we had better rush back and get busy.”

It was a happier Ghent who called Bob and George into the office after the dinner hour, and who spoke to them simply as man to men.

“You two chaps have backed me up like good sports. You probably know that I was worried about things. I was, but something has turned up that will mean, if it comes true, that we are out of the wood.”

Then he told them of Thursby, and the comprehensive reconstruction that would be needed there, and of the problems that would have to be met, especially the provision of extra labour. He, Ghent, would need at least a dozen extra men, and where were they to come from?

“Any ideas, Bob?”

Fanshaw rubbed his chin.

“Going to run the nursery too, sir?”

“Of course. This is going to save the nursery. And we may have to expand.”

“Hasn’t the gentleman any gardeners?”

“Yes, he will have, but the job is ours.”

“How long will it last?”

“It might last a couple of years. Yes, and lead to other contracts.”

“I might get one or two chaps out of Farley.”

“There’s the Loddon Labour Exchange.”

“Wouldn’t engage anybody from there, sir. This’ll take some thinking about.”

“I shall want you to act as foreman, and George can be in charge here.”

“I’ll look around, sir.”

And then Bob and George exchanged glances.

“Has the gentleman got his own men yet?”

“I’m not quite sure, Bob. Why?”

“How many would he need, sir?”

“Five or six. You’re not going to apply, Bob, are you?”

“You’ve got me wrong, sir. What I was meaning was, if we got some good chaps and the gentleman agreed to take ’em on when the job was finished it

might be easier to find 'em.”

“Someone in mind, Bob?”

“I might have. I'll keep my mouth shut till I'm surer. If you could find out from the gentleman——”

“I'll take it up, Bob. We haven't got the contract yet, but I'm hoping.”

“You go on hoping, sir. That's half the battle.”

Then Bob and George went off to their work, rubbing shoulders, with their tongues busy, and since they were working close to each other, their tongues remained active, especially George's. George appeared to have found a joke of his own which did not grow any the less jocund through repetition, and George would usually end with the question: “That'd make the old blighter dance a bit, what?” and Fanshaw would grunt approval. Meanwhile, Mrs. Strangeways had returned to the island, and Ghent had taken out the car, and driven over to Thursby with a measuring tape and a note-book.

The sun was out, the sky clear, and to Ghent Thursby appeared even more wild and lovely and old English. Thank God, for a few dukes and rich men, or the wildness and the beauty would be lost to the land! Ghent, having visited sundry Municipal Gardens, had no illusions as to the stereotyped tameness of the democratic mind. Your urban workingman may be the best of fellows, but he is not—in the main—creative in the æsthetic sense, nor can he be accused of idle dreams in colour and in song.

Ghent spent two hours in measuring up the gardens, using a five-inch nail to hold down the clip-end of his tape. He was at work on the lower terrace when he became aware of Sir Gavin descending the steps, hatless and wearing a tussore coat.

“You haven't wasted much time, Ghent.”

“No, sir. A proposition like this——”

“Isn't Euclid.”

“No.”

“More like the impetuosity of the lover. Much more to do?”

“No, sir. I just wanted to get the proportions of these terraces. They are the main challenge. Such a vista! Would you prefer turf or stone?”

“A little of both, Ghent, I think.”

“Just for working into the plan I shall submit. The grey and green of old

stone and grass are always rather lovely.”

“I agree. Can I give you a hand?”

“Thank you, sir, I think I have just about finished for to-day.”

“Then come in and have some tea.”

“I’d love to, sir.”

Ghent did not know that Lady Melissa had called up Sir Gavin on the telephone. “Is all well with the world, Gavin? Is God in his heaven?” and he had teased her: “If you are referring to me.” “Of course I am.” “Then, I more than think so. I am quite settled in my own mind as to your protégé’s integrity. As to his taste——?” “My dear, the young things have been here. They are, as they should be, so very happy.” “Then may his taste be happy too.”

Ghent, following Sir Gavin into the Thursby parlour, found the dimness of the oak-lined hall giving place to much light. The pine panelling of the great room had been painted in cream and gold. It had two superb Persian carpets on its floor, and in the south wall a large window had been cut, long and low, and giving the impression that the room was joined to the garden. In front of the window and facing it stood a vast sofa covered in pale blue brocade and sitting on the sofa was a little old lady with a head like a gipsy, and blackbird’s eyes.

“Mr. Ghent, this is Sister Anne.”

Sister Anne was all shrewdness and sparkle. She had a tea-tray at her knees. She patted the sofa, indicating that Peter should sit down beside her.

“Will you ring, Gavin.”

Sir Gavin strolled across to the fireplace, pressed a bell, and returning, smiled at the young man on the sofa. If Sister Anne, who was something of an old witch, and who cast horoscopes, and intuitive nets for the entangling of souls, liked the Vandeleur protégé, then his own impressions and prejudices would be justified.

“I suppose I ought to apologize for this window, Mr. Ghent.”

“Why, sir?”

“Well, the elimination of the mullions and transoms of two original windows, also a section of the wall.”

“I think it’s lovely, sir. You can sit here and see England.”

Sister Anne chirruped at them.

“Is it that we are more or less out of doors than our ancestors, and look out

of windows less than we look into them?”

“Aren’t you getting rather mixed, Sister?”

“No, sir, I think I know what Miss Anne means,” and then Ghent blushed.

“That’s more than I do,” said Sir Gavin, “when she talks about trines, and oppositions, and declinations.”

“What do I mean, Mr. Ghent?” said the old lady.

“That the old people were more out of doors, and so looked less out of windows, and nature was their shop-window, not Woolworth or Selfridge.”

“Go up top,” said the lady.

Sir Gavin chuckled.

“And Mr. Ghent is going to dress my shop-window on the right side, the outside, the sunny side. What’s your month, Ghent?”

“February, sir.”

“Which day?”

“The fourteenth.”

“Ye gods, he’s a Valentine.”

“And a very good thing to be,” said Sister Anne.

So they had tea together, and Sister Anne, who made Ghent think of a very bright-eyed and intelligent bird chirruping in a sunny cage, was vivacious and gay with this young grower of trees and maker of gardens. Life was a rich tapestry to her, and she liked her figure of youth in it, as well as the trees and the birds and the flowers. She made Ghent feel somehow happy, as though she were singing a song which he understood, and was the mistress of sweet herbs, marjoram, tansy, southern-wood and lavender. Also, he suspected that he would be discussed when he had gone, but kindly and wisely so. He could smile at this old lady in her simple black frock, and believe that she would wish him good luck with Sir Gavin.

He did contrive to have a few words alone with the great man, for Sir Gavin came to see him into his car.

“There’s one problem, sir.”

“What’s that, Ghent?”

“Labour. Of course, that’s provisional. I mean, if you decide to accept my plans.”



“How many men would you want?”

“About a dozen, sir. I have my own foreman, and I could engage more labour, but one wants it good.”

“I have three gardeners at present. I’m not particularly pleased with the head man. Bumptious, and I think, incompetent. Well, get your plans out, and then we can discuss other problems.”

“I will, sir. I am getting to work on them at once.”

Sir Gavin went back to the parlour and Sister Anne, and either because he thought the matter of insufficient importance, or because he could presume upon Sister Anne expecting him to ask her a question, he did not ask it. He sat down and read the *New Era*, a paper whose resentful and superior suspiciousness infallibly caused him joy. Had not some sage young man hinted in its pages that because the old lion had retired to a den in the country he was preparing a sinister plot, and gathering lesser lions together in a conspiracy for the crunching of democracy’s bones? Sir Gavin did so enjoy reading the letters and articles of the supercilious young men. Sister Anne had taken up her woolwork, and was watching her brother’s face with black, bright eyes. She too sometimes drank of the new wisdom, but with less patience than Sir Gavin. She had not his gusto for laughing at people who were so pontifically prejudiced, and who were so ready to see the world reformed provided that they and they alone were the reformers.

Presently, Sir Gavin laid the paper down with the air of a man who felt better for having rubbed shoulders with a Jeremiah. Contact with such people caused you to experience healthy reactions, and helped you to enjoy your dinner. A little bitters before good meat!

“Well, well, well, this is a ridiculous country. Would you believe it? Poor old Chamberlain has been preparing a secret plan with Hitler for the segregation of Russia.”

“Dear, dear, how does the young man who wrote it know?”

“Yes, that always puzzles me. I suppose a tapeworm would have some vague knowledge of my interior, if he inhabited it, but a journalist has to be so subtle, so infallible. He is expected to know my thoughts even before I think them, or even if they are never thought.”

“Reception clerks at Monte Carlo hotels, almost as superior as that, Gavin. It did not strike me that your tree man was a Wow.”

Sir Gavin twinkled at her.

“No need to bait the trap. I like the lad.”

“Pure prejudice, of course, my dear.”

“Oh, absolutely so. And why not? I don’t like bitter young men with the gift of the gab. One is still free to like where one likes, in spite of the Trade Unions. I suppose a day may come when liking what you like will cause a strike.”

“No, Gavin. This may be a dear, silly old country, but I think it will be saved by its silliness. At least, I hope so.”

Ghent was at work. He had cleared the office table, and spread upon it a double sheet of unruled foolscap, its corners fastened with drawing-pins. By him lay his note-book, and he had outlined upon his paper a scaled plan of the Thursby terraces and lake, and the parcel of ground he had christened The Dell. With the bare outlines before him, he had put both elbows on the table, and with his hands clasping his face, had gone into a dream. This planning of a garden was a poet’s business, pure vision so far as he was concerned, an inspired picture with the colours of plants and flowers and trees for his pigments. For him there was no pigeonholing of conventional plans that could be brought out and adapted to any setting. He had to see his garden, to let it grow vivid and actual before his inward eyes before anything could be put on paper.

He had come by a particular inspiration while standing on the Thursby terrace, and as he sat there in his little, dusty room, looking out of the lattice window, the scheme sorted itself in its constituent colours. Form was essential in such a garden as Thursby, and already Thursby had form, and as Ghent saw it a lovely formalism spread downwards to lose itself in the equally lovely informality, stone and grass and brickwork, and lead vases and statues and clipped trees merging imperceptibly into the cunning disorder of The Dell, and the stately splendour of the Park.

He began to jot down hurried notes in his note-book, the colour details and planting plan as the picture filled itself. He did not hear Mrs. Maintenance’s bell, or Bunter’s bark that shouted “Biscuits, biscuits.” Sarah had to walk across the yard to his window.

“Supper, sir.”

“Oh, supper!”

He came out of his dream, smiled, and followed her to the cottage.

In half an hour he was back in the office. Twilight was falling, and he lit the lamp and his pipe, and sat down to pencil in on the plan his various planting patches, glancing from time to time at the details he had scribbled down in his note-book. It was a complicated game, like evolving a jig-saw puzzle, with a hundred and one different subjects to be visualized and put in place. He began with The Dell and its piece of water, because he had a preference for sketching in his background, before working on his middle distance and his foreground. And there were so many things to remember, the varying heights of trees and shrubs, their habit of growth, their soil preferences, their colour, and time of blooming, if they were flowering shrubs. You might mark a plot "Rhododendrons," while remembering that weeks could elapse between the flowering of the earlier and the later breeds. Spring, summer and autumn had to be catered for. Then there were your foliage trees, maples, liquid-amber, scarlet oak; and the smoke blue of such cypresses as *Wisellii* and *Conica*.

Ghent was soon in the thick of it, as absorbed as a chess-player, or a novelist when his characters have become fluid and actual, and move and speak upon the scribbled page.

A moon was coming up when she poled the punt from under the black and silver filigree of the willows. The night was very still. She could hear nothing but the roar of the weir, a nature sound that seemed to make the night more noiseless. She brought the punt across to the Marplot boat-house, moored it, and climbing the bank, passed up one of the moonlit alleys. The weeping beech and the Camperdown Elm were like two tents filled with darkness, save where little burrs of moonlight filtered through. She made her way to the yard, and seeing Ghent's lighted window, glided nearer to it and stood still.

The window was open. She saw his dark head bent over the table. Sometimes he would raise it, and his face showed, as he stared out into the night. He did not see her, and she realized that he was looking at things within himself, a dreamer absorbed in the dream of creating. She stood there for some minutes, utterly silent and motionless, watching him. He was unconscious of her nearness, and she was content that it should be so.

And presently, she turned and slipped away, smiling to herself in the moonlight. He was at work, and happy, and loving him as she did, his happiness was hers.

## XXVIII

**B**ob and George, working together in a plantation of Japanese cherries, heard Ghent's voice down by the river.

"Sybil, Sybil, can you come across?"

George winked at Robert, but Fanshaw's face remained stolid and unmoved. It said, "You mind your own business, my lad. I suppose you never went courtin'? Handsome is as handsome does." George spat on a hand and resumed his labours. Bob could be damp tinder when you tried to drop sparks on him.

Mrs. Strangeways came down to the willows where the punt was lying.

"Finished breakfast?"

"Oh yes."

"I have a plan out. I want you to see it."

"Wait for me. I've no shoes on. I've been paddling in the dew!"

She knew how much depended upon the pleasurable-ness of this plan, and yet she was intuitively sure that Sir Gavin Marwood would accept it. Not that Peter was to be told this, for no one should rob him of the joy and stress of adventure. He came down to the boat-house to meet her, and to moor the punt, and she put up her face to be kissed.

"What, a plan already, Peter?"

"Yes, one has to make one's leap."

She was all innocence.

"You must have been working late."

"I think Grandfather struck one when I was going up the stairs."

He slipped an arm under hers, and Sarah, who was washing-up, saw them cross the yard to the office, linked together as lovers should be.

The plan was pinned on the table, and with their arms round each other they bent over it, their heads in the morning sunlight, while Ghent explained it to her. Here were the Thursby terraces; there, below, The Dell and the lake.

Those black smudges were the old trees that he proposed to keep in order to give background and shadow effects. A vista without trees was like a face without eyebrows. He used a pencil as a pointer, and moved it about the plan. Here were to be flowering cherries, almonds, Pyrus Eleyi and Floribunda, lilacs, thorns, laburnums, philadelphus, ceanothus. Yes, did she see that wiggle-waggle there? She did. That was a particular piece of inspiration, wistaria standards that were to flow upon ropes behind beds of rhododendron and azalea.

“How lovely!”

“Like it?”

She hugged him gently.

“How do you do it?”

“Oh, I just see things. Now, wait a bit. Here’s the water. Water-lilies, of course, and primulas, and Iris Kaempferi, and Marsh Marigolds, and gunnera, and scented bog-bean. And some musk. Then, the rough grass here can be full of bulbs. You look down on the whole thing from the terrace and see the water and all that colour clasped in the half moon shadow of the old trees. Here and there a cypress spiring up, green or grey-blue.”

“It’s perfect. And the terraces?”

“Let’s take the lower one. A stone path, turf, a gorgeous herbaceous border, with the old brick retaining wall hung with vines, roses, clematis, solanum, honeysuckles, jasmine. I’d have clematis flammula here near the steps, just for the scent. Think of looking along that border, two hundred yards of it, when it’s in full flare.”

“Marvellous!”

“I wonder if Sir Gavin will like it?”

“Of course he will.”

“It would look more convincing if the plan were coloured. Colour gets people, you know.”

“I could do that, darling.”

“Could you?”

“Yes. If you could make notes on the colours.”

“I could. There is a devil of a lot in this herbaceous border.”

“Never mind. I’d love to do it.”

“I say, you are marvellous.”

“Am I?”

“It’s going to be a partnership in more senses than one. Then, there are the other two terraces. I have put down roses for the second, and annuals and bedding plants on the first. You don’t know how lovely annuals can be when they are treated in masses.”

“I could colour them too.”

“Yes, I’ll make notes. I haven’t done the walled garden yet, or the shrubberies. You could work here, you know.”

“I’ll start at once, if you will give me a colour scheme.”

“How long will it take?”

“Oh, not long. Besides, dear, I shouldn’t hurry.”

“No?”

“Won’t it seem rather more impressive if you linger a little.”

“You are wise, Heart’s Ease.”

“Well, perhaps, a little. I once ran a hat-shop. I don’t know why, but clients seemed more impressed if you suggested making up a special creation, and were rather mysterious about it, than if you clutched something equally chic off a stand.”

He laughed, and drew her head against his shoulder.

“Oh, wise woman! I think I will write to Sir Gavin, and say that I am at work on the plan, but that I don’t want to hurry it.”

“I should, darling. I should say just that.”

Mr. Roger Crabtree ordered out his Rolls and his wife, and was driven to Thursby. He had ceased to covet Thursby. Indeed, as the car traversed Sir Gavin Marwood’s park, Mr. Crabtree showed himself critical of Thursby and its trees and atmosphere. He said that it was a shabby old place, and that the gardens were as shabby as the house, nor did he suppose that Marwood had the money to restore the place properly. He referred to the great man casually as Marwood, and as they neared the house he pointed out to his wife the poor, starved lawns, and the scrambling shrubberies.

“Wants a bit of colour, what! Begonias, yes, lots of begonias, and dahlias.

Put your hat on straight. It's crooked."

Mrs. Crabtree made a pretence of adjusting her hat. She was nervous, and Roger was such a man for putting you out of step just when you were half-way up the aisle, so to speak. Scattergood brought the yellow Rolls in a triumphant sweep to the Thursby porch, got out and came to the door.

"Ring the bell," said his master. "Ask whether Sir Gavin is at home."

Scattergood rang the bell, and Mr. Crabtree observed the coat-of-arms and the date on the porch.

"Sixteen hundred and ten. Henry the Eighth, wasn't it?"

"No, Father, James the First."

"Well, it doesn't make much difference, anyway. They've been stiffs for three hundred years or more."

A manservant had opened the door, and he came to the car to say that the gentleman was not at home.

"Got the cards, Mother?"

Mrs. Crabtree fumbled with her card-case, and dropped half the contents on the floor.

"Pick 'em up, man, pick 'em up."

Scattergood picked them up.

"Do I leave the lot?"

"No, you don't. Give 'em to your mistress and wait for your orders."

Mrs. Crabtree sorted out the necessary cards, and gave them to Scattergood who hurried to deliver them to the manservant.

"Hi, wait a moment. Tell the fellow to tell his master I was sorry to miss him, and that he'll find us at home any week-end."

Scattergood delivered the cards and the message, and the door of Thursby was closed upon them.

The Rolls was passing through a beech-wood in the park when Sir Gavin Marwood came out of the wood with a couple of dogs at his heels. He stood back against a tree, keeping the dogs at his feet while the yellow Rolls passed by, and he and Mr. Crabtree exchanged glances through the rear side window.

"Why, I've seen that chap before."

“Have you, Father?”

“Yes, ran up against him in a lane. Dirty little old car, staff car, I guess. He was pert with me, and I told him something.”

“But, Roger——”

“Marwood’s butler, I’d say, exercisin’ the dogs. Looked like a butler to me.”

Mrs. Crabtree swallowed, put her hand to her hat, opened her lips, and then closed them precisely. She had recognized Sir Gavin Marwood from his photos, for he had a head that few women would ignore or forget. So her husband had been rude to the great man! Well, well, he was rude to everybody, so why create further complications? She sat back and smoothed her dress.

“Yes, dear, I expect it was the butler.”

Watering continued to be the order of the day at Marplot, but to Ghent the labour and sweat of it had become less urgent, perhaps, because in hoping for possible reprieve he had ceased from attempting the impossible. Dead trees were dead trees, and other trees that were flirting with death were suffered to risk salvation. Water was pumped or carried to the more precious and younger members of the flock, and Ghent, conscious of the rising sun of Thursby, felt the shadows slipping away. He knew that if he obtained that contract he would be given breathing-space and time to replenish and restore that which nature had wounded.

Moreover, he was not alone. He was conscious, while he worked, of the nearness of his good comrade; she who, somehow, was incredibly concerned in all that concerned him. Was he grateful to her for this? He was. Did he take it for granted? He did not. He was not the victim of that sort of vanity.

She had said to him: “I should be finished by twelve,” and at midday he left his work, and with his jacket slung over one shoulder, made for the office. He found her at his table, sleeves rolled up, and wearing a flowered overall. She had a paint brush between her lips, and her right hand was busy with another brush. She smiled at him, and shook her head, and he went to stand behind her and look over her shoulders. Did she know that she had a little blob of carmine paint on her chin? And did it matter? He looked at the coloured plan, and was thrilled by it. This was a work of art. How had she managed to persuade so many gradations of colour into delicate contrast?

She discarded a brush, and took the other from between her lips.



“Just one more patch. How do you like it?”

He bent over her.

“Marvellous! If Sir Gavin does not fall to that——”

“Do you really like it?”

“Almost as much as I like you.”

“Darling.”

He took her chin between thumb and finger and tilted her small face.

“You’ve painted yourself too.”

“Oh, have I? Where?”

“Just here,” and he kissed the spot of carmine on her chin.

“I believe you’re fibbing.”

“Oh, no, I’m not. Handkerchief needed.”

He produced his own, and it happened to be clean.

“A little spittle needed. Spit.”

“No, you do it.”

“I shouldn’t dare.”

“I don’t mind. Be brave and——”

“All right.”

With the handkerchief gloved over his finger he effaced the carmine spot.

“All correct. Don’t you think I might take the plan over to Sir Gavin this afternoon?”

“Yes, I think you might.”

“I will.”

She lay on a spread rug under the willows, with a cushion under her head, and so fell asleep. Peter had gone to Thursby and of Thursby she had no fear. Fear, indeed, seemed to be passing out of her life; even her eyes showed that, for they could look happily at her new world without those oblique and furtive glances that had made Ghent think of a hare crouching in its form. He too had seen her eyes go back into her head, as he put it to himself, and their recovered

serenity had touched him. Was this his doing, this effacing of those startled, backward glances? Had he given her a love that she did not fear? And thinking of this, he knew what love should be, a transparent tenderness, forethought, a desire that transcended the little greeds of the flesh.

Some discord forced itself into the dream that she was dreaming. Noise! She woke suddenly to find the willows and blue sky overhead, and the strident blaring of a motor horn filling the air. She sat up. That was not Peter's horn. Moreover, the swashbuckling summons was not his. The sound was coming from Folly Farm, and looking towards it she could see a particular car by the railings, and a man standing beside it, with an arm through the window and his fingers on the horn-button.

Max! Oh, dear God! Why had this ghost out of her old world reappeared? That the new and the old should meet seemed to her disastrous and unthinkable. What should she do? Her eyes had become the startled and wild eyes of yesterday. Thank heaven Peter was at Thursby! And then a courage born of anger, a fierce protective anger, drove her into the punt. She poled down stream and across to the Folly Farm garden.

He came to meet her, and as she looked into his face she wondered how she could have suffered the thing he called love. But she was strung up for her crisis. She smiled, and was casual.

"Hallo, Max. Come for the punt?"

His eyes narrowed. She knew that particular expression, a kind of sardonic gravity that became sarcastic and cruel.

"What's the idea? Camping on that island?"

"Oh, just a temporary expedient. I am going up to Temple Manor in a day or two."

"Temple Manor?"

"Yes, Lady Vandeleur's, the place on the hill. And I am going to be married. If you want the punt I'll leave it in the boat-house, and I'll send you a cheque for hiring."

A little smirk flitted across his face.

"Marrying the tree man?"

"I am."

"Taking a good deal on trust, isn't he?"

"More than you will ever realize, Max. I suppose you sometimes do a

decent thing? You can do it now.”

“Can I?”

“Yes, leave me in peace.”

“And supposing I don’t choose to be sentimental?”

She laughed. She could have said to him that in such a case he might get a devil of a thrashing.

“Oh, well, I shall keep the punt. How’s Irene?”

He looked at her for a moment as though, complete egoist though he was, he found something strange and mysterious in her. She looked younger than he remembered, yes, quite girlish. Also, his power over her had passed, and in realizing it, he was ready to indulge in a gesture that should flatter his essential vanity.

“No, you can keep the punt, my dear, as a wedding-present. Well, good luck. I was down this way, so I thought I would just look in. For old time’s sake, you know.”

She put her head back and smiled at him.

“I’m glad you have said this to me. No one loses, my dear, by being generous. I’d like to think of you in that way. Good-bye, Max.”

“Bye-bye,” and he put up a facetious hand, as though giving her his benediction.

When Broster had gone she poled the punt across to the Marplot boat-house and moored it there. She had work to do in the office, for Peter had been taking stock of his healthy trees, and she was typing out the stock-lists from his notes. But she was still troubled by Max Broster’s reappearance, even though he had behaved to her somewhat better than himself. Should she tell Peter? And if she did not tell him, might not one of his men, or Sarah pass on the news, for that trumpeting horn could not have failed to provoke attention. As she crossed the yard, Bunter, who had been snoozing in the sun, got up and trotted to meet her, and the dog’s friendliness seemed a happy omen.

“Hallo, dear. What’s the time?”

Bunter looked up at her with liquid brown eyes, but he could not answer that question. Yet, how kind were the eyes of a dog! She bent down and kissed him, and was kissed on the pretty blunt tip of her nose.

“Thank you, Bunter dear.”

Then Sarah appeared at the back door with something that had to be put in the dustbin, and Mrs. Strangeways rose to her occasion.

“Oh, Sarah, do you know the time?”

“About half-past three, m’am.”

“Oh, Sarah, I’m so excited. Mr. Peter ought to be back from Thursby for tea. We shall know what we want to know.”

Mrs. Maintenance deposited that something in the dustbin.

“A gentleman called.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Broster. I was on the river and saw him. It was about the punt. And that, too, is in the dustbin, Sarah, for good and ever.”

Sarah’s stolidity suggested that she had had a duty to perform, and that she had performed it, though enigmas and mysterious pasts were not all to her liking. Maybe, Sarah had accepted this romance with certain reservations, but when a pretty thing like Mrs. Strangeways took you into her heart, you could not play the crab-apple. Sarah looked at the lady, and the lady looked at Sarah, and then, that which was mutual in them flashed into fruition.

“You do understand, Sarah, don’t you?”

Sarah’s face seemed to crumple.

“I only want him to be happy.”

“And me, too. Oh, Sarah, say you do. Because, if we aren’t both happy \_\_\_\_\_”

“Yes, you too, dearie.”

Mrs. Strangeways kissed her, and Mrs. Maintenance burst into sudden tears.

“He’s such a——”

“I know. If one loves somebody better than one loves one’s self, Sarah, life ought to be good. One can’t do more than that, Sarah, can one?”

“No, dearie. It’s silly of me. And I’ve left my handkerchief somewhere.”

“No, it isn’t silly. I shall do it myself in a moment if you don’t stop. We oughtn’t to have red eyes, ought we, when he is coming back with such wonderful news.”

“Are you sure it will be wonderful, miss?”

“Quite sure.”

“I do hope it will be. It will be the ruin of him if it isn’t.”

“But it will be. I’m quite sure. Go and find your handkerchief, Sarah dear.”

Sarah sniffed, and still holding the dust-pan, waddled solemnly into the cottage, and sat down with the dust-pan in her lap. Dear, dear, dear, dust and ashes! No, not at all. Sarah went on weeping, exultantly and comfortably, for quite five minutes, enjoying it, and the feeling that all was well with the world. She did not bother about handkerchiefs, but presently she did wake up to the fact that she was nursing the dust-pan.

“Tsh, you’re a silly old woman! Now, if it were a baby. Well, perhaps it will be. It’s no good. She’s got me, just as she’s got him, bless her!”

Mrs. Strangeways carried the typewriter to the office table and sat down with Peter’s stock-lists propped against a pile of books. The typewriter was not a very efficient machine, but old and temperamental, and at times it chattered at you like a short-tempered and senile monkey. Moreover, it played malicious tricks, and objected to registering the letter O, which was not in character, O being the most exclamatory of the vowels.

Mrs. Strangeways found herself in such conflict with the machine that though, in all probability, it was not the machine’s fault but lack of concentration, she abandoned the work after five minutes, and sat listening and gazing out of the window. She knew that she had cause to be profoundly thankful for the way the day had humoured her, and for the kindly tears of Sarah. Yes, women could be very good to each other, and she would see to it that she would never be anything but good to Sarah. She would cultivate that dear old thing’s sense of being indispensable. Life could be so much easier when you allowed people their prides and prejudices. Sybil Strangeways, having drunk deep of life’s waters, would know what poor, skimmed milk the reformers dish out to you.

The clock of Farley church was striking four when she heard Ghent’s car in the lane. The old Morris rolled slowly into the yard and stopped. She saw Ghent’s face, a very grave young face, and for the moment she had a heart pang. Surely, Sir Gavin had not turned down that plan? Oh, that wasn’t possible!

She left her chair and going to the door, stood there with a willed smile on her face.

“Peter.”

“Hallo.”

“Oh, tell me quickly.”

“Everything’s wonderful. The job is ours.”

Regardless of who might be about she ran into the yard and threw her arms round him.

“Oh, my darling, I’m so glad.”

He held her close and kissed her.

“It was your paint brush that pleased him.”

“Oh, no.”

“Well, it helped much. He has a colour sense, and he fell for it.”

“Peter, you are the dearest thing.”

She looked up into his face and found a new beauty there, a serenity, a young confidence.

“I ought not to have spoken of him like that. He’s a prince. He couldn’t have been kinder to me. Sybil, we are to have three hundred pounds down, in advance. I’ve got his cheque.”

“Oh, my darling.”

“Call somebody else a darling.”

“So he is. I’ll tell him so. I don’t think he would mind, would he?”

Ghent smiled down at her.

“Hardly. But what a prince!”

## XXIX

Life and Mr. Roger Crabtree were causing the melancholy and sardonic Scattergood to dream homicidal dreams. “After all,” as Scattergood put it, “there are ruddy limits, and the old blighter is that.” But Scattergood, though he boiled and seethed in secret, had a wife and three children, and a cottage, and one of the children was suffering from tuberculous glands. But for his responsibilities he told himself and his friends that he would not have stood another hour of his employer’s bullying and scolding and hoggish habits on the road. Moreover, Scattergood, though surly and silent in his plum-coloured livery, was a different creature with his kids, becoming almost a genial dog, a playful person, full of winks and quips. Difficult he might be, but your difficult man can give the best service when handled with consideration.

One of the first things Ghent did was to tell Bob and George that the Thursby contract had come to them. Neither this shabby summer nor Mr. Crabtree would bring final disaster to Marplot. They were standing waist-deep in a plantation of flowering shrubs, three men to whom life had become once more good and secure.

“You will be wanting that extra labour,” said Bob.

“Yes, right away. I discussed the question with Sir Gavin Marwood. He is not satisfied with his head man, and if we can find good men, he will be ready to take some of them on, when we have finished with them.”

Ghent noticed that Bob and George exchanged glances, but he did not attach any particular significance to the incident.

“Any cottages at Thursby, sir?”

“Yes. Two or three, which would be available at once. By the way, Bob, I’m thinking of trying to buy in a second-hand light lorry. I believe Roper has one for sale at Loddon.”

“It’s what we’ve always wanted, sir.”

“I know. We’ve been short of equipment.”

“You’ll need a driver.”

“Yes, if I buy. Know of a chap?”

“I might do.”

“Well, nose around, Bob. Only good men, you understand.”

“If I’ve got the job of overseeing ’em——?”

“You have.”

“Well, I shan’t want slinkers, shall I?”

Peter and Sybil drove up to Temple Manor. If they were feeling rich in hope and in prospects, Temple Manor gave them both richness of texture and of understanding. The loveliness that was England, so spacious, serene and free, spoke to them both and made them silent. Here England had known its greatness, a greatness that was passing. Temple Manor belonged to an age that had achieved things, not to this generation of talkers. Over it Nelson’s signal at Trafalgar might have flown in contrast to all the city catch-cries, the snarl of “What do I get?” not “What do I give?” But if Ghent, like many countrymen, had doubts as to the spirit of the age, life was too good for the moment to admit of such self-questionings. Temple Manor was Temple Manor, and he and the woman he loved were looking up like two children into the great green hearts of the beech trees.

Ghent stopped the old car in the avenue, and Sybil Strangeways’s face had gone all soft and dreamy, and Ghent, looking at her with the eyes of a lover, did not ask her what her thoughts were. Possibly, he divined them, and when she did ask him a question, he was ready with an answer.

“I wonder why people cannot be content with this?”

“Some are.”

“Yes, tree men like you.”

“Generations upon generations of men have been, till we all took to living like rats in a warehouse.”

She smiled like one smiling in her sleep.

“That sounds quite bitter for you, dear man.”

“No, not bitter. One’s sorry, in a way, for the city crowd. Talk to the old people, Heart’s Ease, and they will tell you that they had much less than the young generations, and were happier.”

“Isn’t that funny.”



“No, it seems to be one of the fundamentals. The more you get, the more you want, and the less you are pleased with it. The old story of spoilt children and too many toys. But, damn it, I’m talking like a prig. And we have to get to Thursby, after Temple Manor.”

He drove on slowly under the beeches, and in a little while they were sitting in the Vandeleur drawing-room, waiting for Lady Melissa who had had a headache, and was lying down. “Oh, don’t bother her ladyship, Sanderson,” but Sanderson knew that her ladyship might like to be bothered. So they waited, Peter sitting decorously in a Louis Quinze chair; Mrs. Strangeways fluttering about the room like a pale yellow butterfly, and settling on the pictures and the china, and the brocades. She simply had to look at things and touch them, not enviously, but because beauty made her happy.

Then Sanderson returned, smiling in his whiskers. Would Mrs. Strangeways come upstairs? Her ladyship would like to see her in her bedroom. Sybil followed the butler, and Ghent, wandering out on to the terrace, watched Lady Melissa’s new water-fan waving its silver plume over the grass. The sprayed water waved half in the sunlight, half in the shadow of the old trees, and the play of light upon it was very lovely. Yes, man was an ingenious beggar, and sometimes his ingenuity was helpful, sometimes devilish. Also, a good balance at the bank was useful, if used creatively. There were so many useful gadgets that Ghent coveted for work down yonder, an Auto-Culto, a motor-mower, and what not! But hearing voices coming from a window up above, and knowing to whom the voices belonged, he felt rather like an eavesdropper, and sauntered off to watch the water-fan at close quarters.

The rhythmic, waving spread of water fascinated him, until the plume ceased suddenly, and the machine came to rest. A gardener had turned off a tap and come to move the fan to fresh ground. Ghent knew the man, old Killick, who had worked at Temple Manor since a boy.

“Useful thing that, Killick.”

“That it be, sir. Didn’t have such things in my young days.”

Ghent smiled at the old man.

“And yet you approve of them.”

“I do, sir. Saves sweat and time, sir.”

“That’s true.”

Ghent was strolling on to look at one of the borders when he heard Sybil’s

voice calling him.

“Peter.”

She was floating down the steps of the terrace, and her little face had an emotional radiance.

“She can’t come down. She’s in a lot of pain, poor darling. She told me to give you this,” and she kissed him.

“Thank you, great lady.”

“Yes, that’s just what she is. If only the world had lots of such people. I am to come here on Thursday, Peter.”

“Farewell to the island!”

“Not really. It will always be our island. And I can come down every day and work.”

“I seem to be marrying all that’s useful and good.”

“Just that?”

“Oh, just a little more than that. Well, we had better be getting on to Thursby.”

Sir Gavin, having just read a bitter attack upon himself in a Reformist journal, was in the very best of humours. Ghent and Sybil, arriving in time for tea, were taken to the upper terrace, to see the view and the distant Surrey hills. Ghent asked leave to go down and look for a minute at the pool and The Dell, for there was a detail in the plan which he wished to reconsider. Mrs. Strangeways, left alone with the great man, became a little flushed and emotional.

“I do want to thank you for all your kindness.”

Sir Gavin was quite ready to be thanked by so very charming a creature. There was nothing of the maiden aunt about him when a pretty woman became enthusiastic.

“Dear lady, I am conferring no favour. Our Mr. Peter is going to be employed in garlanding my absurd vanity. According to my critics, my vanity is colossal, and only equalled by my sinister complacency.”

She laughed with him, crinkling up her pretty little nose.

“Aren’t people funny! I don’t think you are at all vain. Not nearly as vain

as you might be.”

“Subtle gradations!”

“I don’t think the people who do the really big things are vain. It’s the people who do the little things who have to make such a fuss of themselves. But, as I was saying, you don’t know what all your kindness means to us.”

“Well, that is a happy omen for the garden. I’m letting Adam and Eve in, instead of turning them out. I have always thought Jehovah behaved rather like a curmudgeon on that particular occasion.”

“I promise you I won’t steal apples.”

“Were I the deity I should forgive you.”

“Would you? I do think you would make a perfect god. Not a Hebrew one, but Olympus and all that.”

“I seem to be getting all the garlands!”

“I rather think that is as it should be. Isn’t it a pity that we don’t give people garlands?”

“Knighthoods, my dear, and mayoral robes, and one’s photo in the picture papers.”

“Haven’t you enjoyed it?”

Sir Gavin chuckled.

“Of course I have.”

After dinner Mr. Roger Crabtree liked a cigar, and in summer he would smoke it in the rustic super-summerhouse, or strolling up and down the croquet lawn like a little Napoleon. Almost, he had adopted the Napoleonic pose, one hand tucked into the opening of his waistcoat, the other folded behind his back, but the cigar detracted from the dignity of the picture, for Mr. Crabtree smoked it rather like one of those ominous tough guys in an American film. He chewed and bit at it, and sometimes the ash fell on his black waistcoat, for, since coming to reside at Temple Towers, the Crabtrees changed for dinner. Mr. Crabtree’s dinner-jacket might have been described as the bridegroom’s frock-coat, a garment assumed while he waited for the Bride to arrive on the arm of a Social Father, but Mr. Crabtree was still waiting. No one of any importance had left cards upon Temple Towers.

Sometimes, no doubt, the Man of Ideas was bored, and that was why he

was so curmudgeonish and contumacious, and reduced to impressing his self-importance upon the neighbourhood by quarrelling with it. Also, every petty tyrant must have his particular victim, and poor, sulky Scattergood had been cast for the part. He was the sort of man who, by his suggestion of dumb-sauciness, provoked his master to trample upon him. Mr. Crabtree was fond of saying, "What this country needs is discipline," which virtue, of course, was to be cultivated in people like Scattergood. Circumstances had been unkind to Scattergood during the last week. He had had a puncture at a time when his master had chosen to regard such a casualty as a personal grievance, and while reversing the Rolls in Loddon he had backed into a lamp-post, and buckled a back wing. Mr. Crabtree had called him a damned fool, and was continuing to treat him as such. That very morning he had rated Scattergood for not maintaining the polish on the car at its right and proper brilliance.

Mr. Crabtree was strolling up and down the croquet lawn, smoking his cigar, when someone passed along the drive leading to the stables, garage and cottages. Mr. Crabtree recognized the intruder, and hailed him.

"Hi, you there, don't you know the back way?"

It was George Garland in his Sunday suit, and being a slim, well-made lad, he carried his clothes better than did Mr. Crabtree.

"Beg your pardon?"

He did not touch his cap or salute the master of Temple Towers, and his face was cheeky.

"I said, don't you know the back way. What are you doing here?"

"Seeing a friend," said George.

"Well, the servants' entrance is round there."

"Thank you," said George, and with a bright smile proceeded upon his way.

Mr. Crabtree shouted after him.

"Hi, didn't you hear what I said? You obey orders when a gentleman gives 'em, my lad. Come back, and go as I told you."

But George continued, long-legged and deliberate, upon his business, leaving Mr. Crabtree biting at his cigar, and feeling that someone would have to suffer for the fellow's intransigence. Nor was the victim far to seek. The sun was setting, but Mr. Crabtree remembered that he had given Scattergood stringent orders as to the car's toilet, and it occurred to him that it would be

interesting to stroll round and inspect the Rolls and make sure that his instructions had been carried out. He did so. He noticed two or three figures grouped together in the dusk of the drive near its entrance to the lane, but they moved off and were lost to view when the master appeared. Mr. Crabtree walked on and coming to the garage yard, saw that the sliding doors were open, and the lights on. A bonnet flap was raised, and Scattergood was half lying over the fore mudguard in an attitude of sour reflection, his stomach hollowed against the metal, a cigarette stuck in his mouth.

Mr. Crabtree had found his occasion. He walked into the garage, smoking his cigar. He had the right to smoke there, if he pleased.

“Take that damned fag out of your mouth.”

Scattergood did not move.

“Haven’t I given strict orders about no smoking?”

Scattergood did not turn his head. He went on smoking.

“Did you hear what I said? Take that damned thing out of your mouth. No use being sulky with me, my man, just because you’ve been caught out.”

He had waddled up till he was within two yards of the man reposing on the mudguard, but Scattergood did not move or speak. He just went on smoking.

Mr. Crabtree bellowed:

“Stand up, you insolent swine. Take that thing out of your mouth. Do you hear what I say?”

The figure slouching over the mudguard uncoiled itself and came to life. Scattergood turned sharply, and with a white and blazing face, swung his right fist. It caught Mr. Roger Crabtree smack between the eyes, and Mr. Crabtree went down and lay there, sagging against the wall.

Scattergood did not look at him or utter a word. He walked out of the garage with the cigarette still in his mouth, leaving the lights on and the doors open. No one but his wife saw him again that evening, and she, being a woman of character, did not throw her apron over her head or become hysterical.

“I’m glad you hit him, Bill. There’ll be trouble, of course, more trouble than he guesses.”

“That there will, Mother. Put my pyjamas and things in a bag. I’ll doss at Farley to-night, and I’ll send up a van to-morrow and clear the cottage. I know where to go, and where to find you and the kids a corner.”

“It’s going to cost you something, my man.”

“Damn it, it’s worth all my ruddy savings. The old blighter will have a couple of black ones to-morrow. Gosh, what a smack I got in. Well, good night, Mother. Thanks for taking it like a good ’un.”

So Scattergood kissed his wife, and carrying a shabby old bag left by the path that led into the lane, and made his way to Farley. But his wife had not completed the day’s duties. Having put the children to bed, she went to the garage, and finding no corpse there, turned off the lights and shut the doors. A minute later she was knocking at the door of Tamplin, the head-gardener’s cottage. It was Mrs. Tamplin who let her in.

“Bill’s gone. He knocked the old man off his legs, and that’s that.”

Mrs. Tamplin’s face expressed joy.

“I knew it would happen to him one day. Come in, Gert. My man and the rest of them will want to know.”

## XXX

Sudden rain, and a roistering west wind blowing the willows all one way, and ruffling the surface of the river, but the tent on Folly Island was empty and flapping its wet sides as though shaken from time to time with rollicking laughter. Mrs. Strangeways's possessions had been rescued and housed at Marplot, but the island's Sybil was sitting up in bed, swathed in a corn-coloured gown, and healthily enjoying early morning tea. She could see the wind playing in the Temple Manor trees, and a great herbaceous border, its colours drenched and dimmed, bending to the wind and rain under the impending branches of the cedars.

Said the little maid to her: "Her ladyship asks, madam, at what time would you like the car?"

"Oh, about half-past nine, Lily, please. And what time is breakfast?"

"Half-past eight, madam. I'll get your bath ready."

Ghent had been up at six, and at work in the office on the estimates that the reconditioning of Thursby demanded. Sir Gavin had told him to go ahead, and Ghent, having measured up his ground, had to sit down and calculate how many square yards of loam and loads of manure would be needed, how many trees and flowering shrubs, and how many thousands of plants. He would have to scour the county for manure, buy in loam, arrange for cartage, and pay visits to other nurseries from which he might have to draw stock for the dressing of so princely a plan. Marplot itself could supply a number of trees, but not of the larger sort, for specimen trees were expensive, and unless they had been conscientiously prepared for transplanting, would die.

Moreover, there was the day's adventure to be enjoyed. He had purchased his ton-and-a-half light lorry, with a guarantee from Roper's that it was in good condition, and he was driving over to Loddon to collect it. He had never driven a lorry, and he wanted to try his hand at it. Sybil was coming with him. She had no driving licence as yet, so one of Roper's men would have to bring the old Morris home. He had asked Mr. Roper if he could recommend a man who was available as a lorry-driver, but it would appear that Loddon could supply no such person.

At half-past seven Ghent went in to an early breakfast. He had finished it

and was lighting a pipe, when Mrs. Maintenance put her head into the room.

“Bob’s at the back door, sir.”

“Doesn’t he know what to get on with?”

“He wants to see you, particular, about something.”

Ghent went to the back door, and found Fanshaw standing there with something of his Sunday morning look about him. A slow and jocund smile lit up his austere face, and a smile on Robert Fanshaw’s face was so rare that it provoked comment.

“Well, Bob, looking pleased about something.”

“I’ve got some men, sir.”

“Have you? That’s quick work.”

“D’you mind where they come from?”

“Not a bit, if they are good men. But you sound as though you had engaged an army.”

“Four chaps, sir, and a lorry-driver, if you want him.”

“Where the devil did you get them?”

Bob’s smile broadened.

“Temple Towers.”

“What!”

“Old man Crabtree’s crowd. All of ’em, sir, including Mr. Tamplin the head.”

“Good God, man, what have you been doing?”

“Nothing, sir. The whole lot ’ave walked out on him. I don’t say that me and George didn’t have a word or two to say.”

“And the lorry driver?”

“Scattergood, old man Crabtree’s chauffeur. That’s the biggest joke of the lot, Mr. Peter. He and old Crabbie had words, and Scattergood gave ’im a smack in the face, packed his things and hooked it. He’s moved his family and furniture down into Farley. He’s not a bad chap, sir, if you treat him right.”

For a second or two Ghent looked infinitely serious, and then he threw his head back and laughed.



“But, Bob, there will be a devil of a row.”

“He can’t do nothing, sir. They’ve discharged themselves, and blown a month’s wages. Of course old man Crabtree can have the law on Scattergood, if he’s fool enough, but I wouldn’t go into the witness-box if I were he. Wouldn’t do him much good, I reckon.”

“But, Bob——”

“Well, sir, the whole crowd are ready to go and give evidence for Scattergood, as to old Crabtree not having a notion of how to treat a man. He’s got a black eye, and so far as I can see that’s about all he’ll get out of it.”

Fanshaw’s news had put Ghent’s pipe out, and he borrowed the kitchen matches and re-lit it.

“I can’t do anything, Bob, without consulting Sir Gavin Marwood.”

“But it’s you, sir, who’ll be hiring the men.”

“Yes, Bob, but I am not sure how the law runs. Old Crabtree might work up some sort of case. You know how he loves that sort of thing, and he’ll be as mad——”

“They say he’s in bed, sir, at present.”

“Yes, but I can’t let Sir Gavin in for some fool-row. By Jove, Bob, we shall have the laugh of the old devil.”

“I should say you will, Mr. Peter. Him trying to break us, and we getting the biggest job in the county, and all his men walkin’ out on him, and comin’ to you. Why, it’ll be gossip in the pubs for years.”

Again Ghent laughed, and again his pipe went out.

“All right, Bob. I’m fetching the lorry from Loddon. I’ll drive over afterwards and see Sir Gavin. If he has no objection, I’ll take the men on. You had better get on your bike and tell them so.”

“And what about Scattergood, sir?”

“Can he drive a lorry?”

“Guess he could drive anything after ol’ Crabtree’s ruddy circus van.”

“A Rolls and a lorry, Bob, aren’t quite in the same class. Besides, they might gaol him for a month, for assault.”

Fanshaw spat.

“I’ll bet you five bob, sir, the old man won’t prosecute. There’s too much

against him, and he'll know it. And if he does, I reckon half Farley'll be there to hoot him."

"Rough justice, Bob."

"You're right, sir. I never thought we'd have the laugh of the old devil like this. Why, it's better than a cinema show. And I tell you he won't find it easy to get a new lot at The Towers. Rotten fish, Mr. Peter. We chaps aren't out just for money. If you don't feel happy in a place, the money begins to stink in your pocket. I wouldn't have my guts twisted by an old beggar like that, no, not for five quid a week, and for tuppence I'd tell him so."

Ghent did not sing the Crabtree-Scattergood Saga to her until they were half-way to Loddon. She had taken off her hat, for he liked to see her hair blown about by the wind, and her hair was the colour of her frock. Nor was he a pagan lover, just because her wind-blown hair somehow stirred in him a desire to take her head in his arms, and possess those curls with his lips. She was still a creature of mystery and awe to him, and such tenderness does not fade.

He told her the story, and her lips parted and her eyes laughed.

"Oh, Peter, how lovely! It's almost like one of those little moral stories for the good child."

"Oughtn't you to be shocked?"

"And why? I am sure there have been moments when I should like to have smacked his nasty old face. And all his men coming to you! It's perfect."

"I have to consult Sir Gavin first."

"But he will see the joke. Look out, darling, you're rather near the ditch."

Ghent swung the old car back to the crown of the road.

"Sorry. I'd better attend to business, but the distraction was rather potent."

"Was it, darling?"

"Yes."

She put her head down on his shoulder.

"Kiss my hair."

"Not allowed."

"Just once."

“Tempress. And now, I’ll attend strictly to business.”

So, they came to the Barham beechwoods where the hollow gloom would burst into flame with the coming of autumn. The rain had ceased, and a great shaft of sunlight slanted upon Loddon town, lighting up its old red roofs and walls. The windvane on the church spire glittered. Ghent did not take his eyes off the road as he brought the car down the steep and winding hill, but there was a smile on his face, and his eyes were happy.

They found the lorry ready for them, and Mr. Roper prepared to provide a man to take charge of the old Morris.

“He can shove his bike in the lorry, sir, and ride back. How’s the car running?”

“Almost as well as ever.”

“What about one of the new models, Mr. Ghent?”

“Oh, perhaps next year. Any tricks to be learnt about the new toy?”

“You’ll have no trouble, sir. Reversing may be a bit funny at first.”

Ghent laughed.

“I hope I shan’t have to till I have had some practice in the yard.”

“Heard of a likely man?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have. Mr. Crabtree’s chauffeur.”

“What, Scattergood?”

“Yes, he discharged himself after smacking his master’s face.”

Mr. Roper echoed the exquisite satisfaction of that blow by smacking his own thigh.

“Gosh, did he though! That’s the best thing I’ve heard for a long time. The old man’s been asking for it. Well, I’m damned!”

Ghent suggested that Sybil should drive back in the car, but she would have none of it. She swung herself up into the front seat of the lorry. It had a cushion of sorts, a brown, shiny thing that looked as though it had been well polished by proletarian trousers. Ghent climbed up behind the steering-wheel.

“Mustn’t talk. Serious business. My first effort.”

“I’ll look at the scenery, and nothing else.”

“Better keep your hat on. Your hair distracts me, somehow. Like corn

blowing.”

“I won’t say a word.”

Ghent brought the lorry out into Loddon High Street, and over the bridge to Barham Hill. He missed his gears on the hill, and had to brake and stop, and start again. Mrs. Strangeways was looking up into the green splendour of the beeches, and when Ghent restarted rather amateurishly, her head gave a little jerk and bumped against the back of the cabin.

“Sorry.”

“I thought you stopped on purpose.”

“Oh, did you!”

“To let me look at the trees.”

“Don’t tell fibs, even nice ones. I messed that gear-change badly.”

“Did you, darling?”

“Yes, and you bumped your dear head.”

“You can do it as often as you like.”

“Thanks. Just look through that little window and see if the Morris is behind us.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, I must have stalled him. And if I do it again, I’ll shed tears of shame.”

“But you won’t,” and he didn’t.

When Ghent drove to Thursby that afternoon, taking Sybil with him, he had a number of estimates to show to Sir Gavin respecting the trees and materials that would be needed, and Sir Gavin, having glanced at them, marvelled that a garden could be so greedy.

Ghent had a moment of panic.

“Of course, I could cut things down, sir.”

“No, my lad, what I do, I do. There is no need for you to worry.”

“Thank you, sir. For the trees I supply from my own nursery I propose to charge you trade prices.”

“Why should you?”

“Oh, just a gesture, sir. One likes to make some sort of return. You don’t know what your kindness has meant to us.”

“I think you ought to charge me full prices, Ghent.”

“Really, sir. I’d rather——”

“Well, we will talk about that later. What about the question of labour?”

They were strolling together along one of the wild paths in a tempestuous shrubbery, and Ghent paused to put aside the branch of an arbutus that had straggled across the path.

“That’s a subject I have to consult you on, sir. I’ll hold this branch back while you pass.”

So Ghent told Sir Gavin of the epic happenings at Temple Towers, and it quickly became plain to him that Sir Gavin was enjoying the story.

“Wait a bit, my lad, does Pooh Bah travel in a yellow chariot?”

“That’s the gentleman, sir.”

“Ah, we have met. And he called on me.”

“That might be awkward, sir.”

“Not in the least. I have no intention of returning the call. Our first and only meeting will suffice. We met in your lane, and he appeared to expect me to put my car in the ditch.”

Ghent laughed.

“Did he know who you were, sir?”

“Probably he thought I was a bagman. But I take it, Ghent, that these men have discharged themselves. If you care to take them on I have no objection. I have given my head man a month’s notice. Too bumptious and bossy. What about cottages?”

“They would be very welcome, sir.”

“I shall have two vacant.”

“I dare say two of the men can find accommodation in Farley. But I ought to warn you, sir, that old Crabtree is a cantankerous old brute.”

“Let him be. Moreover, my lad, the situation seems to me to be rather intriguing. Quite a curtain for you, is it not?”

“Well, in a sense it is, sir. He wanted my place, and thanks to you he won’t get it.”

“And you get his men. *Explicit*. The laugh is with you, Ghent. Enjoy it.”

Sybil had been left with Sister Anne, but since that rather fierce old lady had always argued that brains and beauty do not cohabit in the same mansion, she had been interested to discover in Mrs. Strangeways elements of the exception to her rule. Not that Mrs. Strangeways was brainy. God forbid! If anything Sister Anne disliked your coldly clever woman more than she did your spontaneous fool, for a woman who has lost the child in herself is no more than a museum piece. And in Sybil Strangeways child and woman seemed to dwell together, and to have produced between them a charming *naiveté* spiced with humour.

Said Sister Anne, when the two young things had gone:

“Your nice lad has done very well for himself, though I understand that the child has had a past.”

“How can a child have a past?”

“That is one of our mysteries, my dear, Eleusynian or otherwise! Most men do not penetrate into that mysterious place.”

“Don’t be naughty, Anne!”

“Nonsense. One of the Drearies told me in a book the other day that all women are sensualists.”

“How universal of him!”

“Yes, my dear, the very clever people are such fools. I think I would prefer my human problems solved by the village carpenter than by——”

“Me, for instance!”

“No, Gavin. You’ve never grown up, and then grown down again. You are still terribly young. And I like it.”

“Thank you.”

“It is the decrepit attitude to life that bores me, cynicism that thinks itself final, and is just senile.”

Ghent was driving Mrs. Strangeways back to Temple Manor, and half-way up the great avenue he felt her hand upon his arm.

“Stop, just for a moment, Peter. I want to look.”

Ghent brought the car to a standstill, and between two of the smooth grey trunks the little valley world revealed itself. Holding hands they sat and gazed upon the river and Folly Island, and the white line of the weir above the old red bridge. And there lay Marplot with its companies of trees, like vines arow or archers in Lincoln Green.

“Isn’t it lovely,” said she.

His eyes turned from the landscape to her face.

“Yes, very lovely.”

“It makes me feel so secure. Do you know, darling, I can see all those meadows full of trees, our trees.”

Ghent’s eyes turned again to the valley, and an inward voice asked a question. Was this the way success came to a man, and grew and prospered until all the little envious people would nibble with anger and cry “Luck”? But did the little, envious people matter? He had that which would conjure away all bitterness. This shabby summer had brought him other things, and as he turned again to look at his good comrade, he heard that inward voice utter wise words.

“Through me may you never suffer pain.”

And suddenly she turned her head and looked at him, and her eyelids trembled and her eyes were shy.

“What were you thinking, Peter?”

“Oh, nothing in particular. Just feeling something perhaps, more than thinking.”

“About us?”

“Yes—about us.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Shabby Summer* by Warwick Deeping]