

DOOMSDAY



WARWICK
DEEPING

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DOOMSDAY

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DOOMSDAY

BY

WARWICK DEEPING

AUTHOR OF
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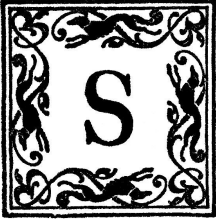
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DOOMSDAY

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PART I
BEAN FLOWER
AND HAY TIME



OMEONE had asked Mary Viner as a child why she so disliked going to school, and had received the pregnant reply: "'Cos one does the same thing every day"; and at the age of three-and-twenty Mary was still resenting repetition. Only more so, because life had become more busily full of it, a circus of dreary tidying and cleanlinesses, of washings up and washings down, of moments that smelt of yellow soap, and tea leaves and paraffin.

Moreover, it could not be helped. And the turning of the domestic wheel demanded the obedient hands of the dutiful daughter. Mary's alarum clock set the welkin ringing at half-past six. It was winter, January and cold. She had cause to know how cold it could be in that cardboard box of a bedroom with its walls of tile and plywood sheeting. The very clock seemed to make a bouncing sound like a pea rattling in a box. The room remained quite dark, and the day's duties offered her no compensations for the loss of her warm bed, so she lingered there, guiltily snug, the clothes pulled up to her chin, her pretty, slim legs tucked up.

Thank heaven she had not to struggle with half a yard of black hair. A bobbed head had its advantages when your hands got colder and colder. The house was very still, but across the landing there travelled a faint sound of harsh, asthmatic breathing. Captain Hesketh Viner was still asleep, but soon she would hear the little twittering voice of her mother, like the voice of a rather futile and busy bird.

O, this house—this "Green Shutters," where everything was heard, from the stirring of the kitchen fire to the brisk functioning of a toothbrush! And her father's cough! She flung out of bed suddenly with a rash of fastidious despair that fought with an inarticulate compassion. What a life for the three of them, cooped up in this jim-crack cottage in a little world of other jim-crack cottages! No wonder that Carslake, solid Georgian Carslake, referred to the Sandihurst Estate as "Cinder Town."

She lit her candle and scuffled into her clothes, intent upon making that morning dash downstairs to light the fires in the kitchen and living-room.

Yes, damn Colonel Sykes for exploiting this patch of clay and sand in Sussex, and for persuading the new poor to put up cottages and bungalows. Cinder Town! She slithered down the steep and narrow stairs and into the kitchen, jarring a slim ankle against the coal-scuttle that was standing where it should not have stood. And that, too, was her fault! Resenting this, she jabbed at the thing with her foot, and by way of retort it tipped a rattling stream of coal upon the floor.

Putting her candle on the kitchen table, and bending down to recover the lumps of coal, she signalized her submission to the tyranny of trifles by a sudden rush of tears. There was anger in her tears, and self-pity, and the rebellion of her youth against life's aimless and inevitable repetitions. But how foolish! And like a child she brushed the blurring wetness away with her fingers, forgetting the coal dust upon them. She put a match to the kitchen fire, wondering whether it was going to prove sulky, and while it was deciding that it would burn she collected the cans for the morning's hot water. And how she yearned for gas! To be able to slip down and turn a tap, and perhaps slip back to bed again.

The hands of the grandfather clock stood at twenty past seven when Mary crossed the little hall between the kitchen and the living-room. There was that second fire to be laid and lit; the kitchen fire she had laid the night before, and if there was one thing she loathed it was cleaning out a grate on a cold winter morning. A beastly job, remaining eternally beastly! Picking out pieces of slag and cinder and dropping them into the housemaid's box! She pulled on her gloves, and kneeling, was about to start on the grate when she heard the spring-bell attached to the front door burr loudly.

It startled her. No one was to be expected at this hour but that very red-nosed boy with the milk, and he always came to the back door.

She went to investigate, drawing back the plain black bolts and turning the key of the cheap lock. She opened the door and saw a man there. A milk-can kept him company on the doorstep. He made no remark. He looked at one of her gloved and empty hands as though he had expected to see a jug in it.

“Oh, the milk.”

She stared and he seemed to stare still harder, for she had black smudges all over her face. And then she realized somehow that this was Furze, of Doomsday Farm, and that he was in a hurry, and that something must have happened to the red-nosed boy.

“I'll get a jug.”

Returning, she was aware of him in the dim light as something big and brown and silent, with a pair of very dark eyes set deeply under the brim of his hat. His face had ruggedness. It was clean-shaven, but she could see that he had not shaved this morning. His lips were very firm. The breadth of the face seemed to match the breadth of the man, the loose-limbed, easy breadth of the worker. When he took the jug from her she noticed the fineness of his hands, delicate even in their roughened strength. He bent down to fill the jug.

“What has happened to the boy?”

“Laid up.”

His voice was deliberate and deep, and his eyes seemed to match his voice. He was looking at her again, a pretty, dark thing in an old cherry-coloured jumper and black skirt. Those smudges of coal dust on her face might have amused him had he been the sort of man who was easily amused, but his glances went deeper. A pretty girl—and a gentlewoman—cleaning a grate on a January morning! Why shouldn't she? He handed her the jug.

“Will that do for the day?”

Her eyes were on his big brown hands. Standing there under the flimsy rustic porch, he seemed to fill the whole of the sky with a significance that puzzled her. He did not belong to Cinder Town; he was part of that other world that had preceded and would outlast a little collection of bungalows and rustic porches.

“I think it will do. I expect you are busy.”

“I am.”

He picked up the milk-can, half lifted his hat, and with another of those deep and curiously silent glances, he swung away down the cinder path. He closed the white gate behind him and turned to the right towards the Jamieson's cottage—Oak Lodge. Mary hated the Jamiesons, and especially the Jamieson children.

She closed the door, carried the milk-jug into the kitchen, and completed the resuscitation of the sitting-room fire.

Mary placed the can of hot water on the mat outside her people's door. She knocked.

“A quarter to eight.”

Her father began to cough, and she could picture his poor bald, birdlike head growing pink on its thin neck. These spasms of coughing seemed to shake the flimsy little house, and with it the whole futile world of her daily endeavor. Her mother's voice, twittering like a robin's, caused her to pause.

"Mary, dear, your father will have his breakfast in bed."

A tray to be laid as well as a table! Well, what of it? If drudgery were your lot, complete submergence did not matter. She carried her own can of hot water into her bedroom, and pulling up the blind, discovered to herself in place of a dead white surface a panel picture of surprising beauty. It was strange and unexpected, and it hurt her, and she wondered why it hurt. She stood and looked at a red winter sun and a smoking mass of blue-grey clouds, and dark hills, and woods spiring up. She could see the great knoll of beeches purpling the sky above "Doomsday," the mysterious and black stateliness of the "Six Firs," and beyond them the aery tops of a larch plantation. It was very beautiful and sad and strange, with colour tossed about, and that red sun edging the clouds with gold. It hurt her. It made her yearn for all sorts of unimaginable things, escape, romance, dreamy happenings, a world other than her own. Her sensitive youthfulness stretched out its quivering hands to beauty, and felt the choke of it in its throat.

She looked into her mirror.

"Heavens!"

No wonder the man with the milk had stared. She was all smudged under the eyes with coal dust. She saw herself as a flustered little drab, a seven o'clock in the morning slattern too hurried to be clean. She went red in the face of her own reflection. Beauty—and that smudged skin! A kind of rage seized her. She splashed the hot water into her basin, and soaped and gloved and towelled herself before rushing downstairs with a red nose and eyes, and a sense of being driven to do a dozen different things at once. More coal had to be put on the fires, the frying pan greased, the kettle filled, the cloths laid on tray and table; cups, spoons, plates, cups and saucers, mustard, bread, butter, marmalade to be collected. And while she hurried about, and was aware of the clatter of her harried handling of all these articles, she remembered that an hour hence she would be washing up the greater number of them and putting them back in their places.

O,—that washing up, that eternal getting out and putting away! Repetition, endless repetition! The woman's part! And she seemed to feel in the core of her consciousness the passionate impulse to escape from it. Yes,

from that tyranny of trifles that seemed to her to be the whole end and tragedy of a woman's life.

She heard a door open. Her mother was coming downstairs, that little brown chaffinch of a mother with her "pink-pink" voice and her little beak of a nose.

"Mary, dear."

"Yes, mother."

"Your father will have a lightly boiled egg—this morning. And some—toast."

"Yes,—some toast."

So there would be toast and a lightly boiled egg as well as the bacon! And while she bustled about, her mother sat on a stool in front of the living-room fire, rubbing her red knuckled and thin little hands. Mrs. Viner was subject to chilblains. She had a stagnant circulation and a habit of inertia which did not fit her birdlike appearance, and yet it was a cheerful, twittering inertia. She perched there just like a young old bird waiting for the breakfast worm, intent upon rubbing her cold hands, while her daughter did all the work, and wondered why she did it. Their tacit acceptance of the situation was the most depressing part of the whole business; her parents took everything for granted; they were so patient and sweet and unseeing. They exercised their claims upon her with such complete confidence that sometimes she wished that she had been born with her sister Clare's temper and her determination to get out of the devoted niceness of it all. While she—with that fatal softness—and a sensitive desire to please—and an uncomfortable habit of self criticism——!

She thrust the prongs of the toasting-fork—another thing to clean by the way—into a slice of bread, and crouched in front of the kitchen fire. She was a slim thing, with long legs and a willowy neck, large dark eyes set wide apart, a wavy and poignant mouth, and one of those noses with a delicate breadth at the nostrils which somehow give an expression of pathos to a woman's face. She could flush quickly and look scared. In repose she was inclined to droop her shoulders and sit with her arms wrapped about her knees, as though life was a cold and dreary business and her brown eyes saw nothing but woe. But, as a matter of fact, she was a strong young wench, supple and healthy, with plenty of red blood, only there was nothing to set it moving as a young thing's blood should move. Her starved, beggar-maid look was due to the fact that two old people were contentedly sucking her vitality.

The toast grew brown and she thought of Clare; flaxen haired, restless, mercurial Clare. Yes, Clare had been selfishly wise. She had insisted on self, and none too gently either. Hence a husband, and a house at Weyfleet in Surrey, and tennis and bridge-parties and dances, and shoppings and matinees in town, and two servants, and early tea brought to you in bed. Clare appeared to have ascended into a suburban heaven. Her letters were full of happenings.

The toast fell off the fork into the ash-tray under the grate.

“O,—damn!” said the girl.

She recovered it, and with a sigh of momentary moral slackness she replaced it on the fork.

“Mary,—dear.”

“Yes, mother——.”

“Is there any honey? Your father——.”

“There is no honey. I’ll order some. I shall have to bike up to Carslake presently.”

At last, breakfast was served both upstairs and downstairs, though Mary could never bring herself to look with any pleasure at Captain Hesketh Viner in bed. He wore a grey flannel nightshirt, and his poor old chin would be all silver stubble. There were times when she felt deplorably sorry for her father, even when his coughing kept her awake. Her mother was very talkative at breakfast; she rattled things and was very busy with her knife and fork. She had a high colour, and pretty grey crinkly hair, and brown eyes that were much smaller than Mary’s, eyes that never seemed to see anything larger than pinheads.

And who was that at the door this morning? Had not she heard a man’s voice.

“Yes,—Mr. Furze with the milk.”

And what happened to the milk boy?

“Laid up.”

“Influenza—I suppose,” said Mrs. Charlotte, tapping away cheerfully, “and what is Mr. Furze like? I thought his voice sounded almost gentlemanly.”

Mary heard her father’s stick rapping on the floor of the room above.

“I expect I have forgotten something.”

And she went up to see what it was.

Arnold Furze of "Doomsday" had paused for a moment where the Melhurst and Rotherbridge roads join each other at an acute angle and become the road to Carslake, for though his day's work began before dawn and went on after dusk he was one of those men who can spare his soul five minutes. A hundred yards farther up the Carslake road his farm lane emerged north of the bank where the Six Firs grew, and on reaching the lane he left his empty milk-can by the hedge, and climbed up beside the trunk of one of the six old trees. Far above his head their outjutting green tops swayed very gently against the cold blue sky. Rabbits had been nibbling the short grass.

Furze stood there, seeming to look at nothing in particular, as much a part of the country as the trees. The rising sun lay behind him. It sent forth a yellow finger and laid it upon that splotch of chequered colour, those abominable little dwellings that dotted the Sandihurst Estate. There were thirteen of them, strung on each side of the cinder track that Colonel Sykes had had made between his red and white bungalow and the road to Melhurst. They looked just like a collection of big red, white, yellow, green and brown fungi, excrescences, each squatting on its quarter acre or so of land, and surrounded by lesser excrescences that were tool-sheds, chicken-houses, and here and there a little tin-roofed garage. Furze knew every one of the thirteen dwellings, though he had not walked up the cinder road more than six times in his life. He supplied the colony with milk and eggs and cordwood and an occasional load of manure. His bills went in once a month.

"What a collection," he thought.

They were of all shapes and all sizes, and they agreed in nothing but in their flimsy newness. Colonel Sykes' red brick and rough cast bungalow headed the formation like a field officer mounted and leading his company up the hill. Oak Lodge, a mock oak and plaster cottage in the Tudor style, contained the Jamiesons, who manufactured jam up at Carslake. Next to it stood "Green Shutters," the home of the Viners, half brick and half tile and pink as a boiled prawn. Following south came the "Oast," a pathetic improvisation contrived out of a circular steel shelter with an old railway-coach attached to it, the whole painted a bright green, and inhabited by one-eyed ex-lieutenant Harold Coode. In his hurry to recoup himself after his speculation in land, Colonel Sykes had sold the plots without troubling himself about building restrictions. Next to the "Oast" the Perrivales had built themselves "Two Stories" in yellow brick. "The Pill Box," a cement block structure, looking like a white box with four red chimney pots placed on it, belonged to Mr. John Brownlow—a retired schoolmaster. The Engledews lived in the "Lodge," by the Melhurst road. On the west side of

the cinder canal the buildings were even more amateurish and ephemeral. Lieut. Peabody had placed two Nissen huts side by side, painted them red, joined the fronts with a white veranda, and christened the creation "Old Bill." The Vachetts,—literary people and very desultory at that, inhabited a red and white bungalow, "Riposo." The Clutterbucks had had to be content with a big corrugated iron hut that resembled a football pavilion or a mission hall. Commander Troton owned "The Bungalow," brown stained weather board and pink pantiles. Lieut.-Colonel Twist had put up a chalet and called it what it was. The Mullins' had shown a sense of humour in calling their cement box "Pandora," for it was full of children and prams, and rag dolls and trouble.

Furze's very deep blue eyes seemed to question the significance of this colony. He considered it as a native might speculate upon some sudden growth of alien haste, and, as he scrambled down into the lane and picked up his milk can, his thoughts remained with Cinder Town. He saw in it one of those improvisations flung up by the confused flux of the post-war period. The new poor! The relics of a superfluous generation dumped down among Sussex clay. Impoverished gentlefolk drawn together in a little world of makeshifts, and keeping up appearances,—of a sort. Rootless people, withering, waiting to die. It was rather pathetic. What on earth did they do with themselves in those little transitory houses on their quarter-acre plots, without a decent tree on the estate, and the very road a sudge of clay and clinker? Keep a few chickens, and grow starved vegetables, and train nasturtiums up flimsy trellises? One or two of them had hired land and were chicken farming. Chicken farming! Lieut. Peabody had planted fruit trees on a south-west slope full in the blue eye of the Sussex wind! And that girl with the smudgy face, and the soft coal-dust eyes who had taken in the milk? Deputizing as a maid of all work? Well, anyway, she worked, did a woman's work, though it might be because she could not help it.

Passing on up the farm lane between high hedges of thorn and ash and maple, with the Ten Acre on his right, and the Ridge Field on his left, Arnold Furze returned to a world that seemed solid and real. He paused—as he often did—just above the pond—to see the greyish brick chimney stack of the farmhouse showing above and through the bare poles of the larch plantation. From this point above the pond where the lane began to dip and the hedges were lower, he could command the greater part of his farm. Immediately below him stretched the pond and the two old ilexes at the end of the larch plantation, and beyond them lay the yard, and the stone farm buildings their grey walls and rust coloured roofs patched with yellow lichen. Rushy Pool and Rushy Wood were hidden by the larches and the

house, but above the swelling brownness of the Sea Field, the beeches of Beech Ho seemed to carry the sky on their branches. Eastwards, along the slope of the valley the greenness of the Furze Field met the deeper green of a wood of Scotch Firs. Southwards at the heel of the Gore, and lying in the deep trough of the valley, the oaks of Gore Wood stood embattled at the end of the Long Meadow. The old cedar beyond the orchard raised three dark plumes above the roof of the house, and further still the spruces at the south-east corner of the Doom Paddock would flash like spires in the sunlight.

To Furze it was very beautiful with all its changing contours, its high woods, and the swelling steepness of its grass and arable. Never did it look the same, but was eternally changeful above the green deeps of its valley where the brook ran down to Rushy Pool. Difficult—yes,—but he never grudged it its difficulties; for a beauty that is loved is borne with in all its moods and mischiefs. For five years now he had been able to call “Doomsday” his. He had fought it, loved it, wrestled with it, and there had been times when it had threatened to tear the guts out of him. But that was life. Better than finicking about in an office, and putting paper over your shirt cuffs.

He went on and down to the path above the yard. A middle-aged man with very blue eyes and a moustache the colour of honey was forking manure out of the cow-house. Furze called to him.

“Will.”

“Ssir——.”

“We’ll cart that wood up from the Gore. I’ll be with you in ten minutes.”

The blue-eyed labourer thrust his fork into a pile of smoking dung, and went with long trailing steps towards the stable, turning to glance over his shoulder at Furze who was disappearing behind the yew hedge screening a part of the garden. But there was no garden there now, only coarse grass and a few old unpruned roses. Arnold Furze had no time for life’s embroideries.

II

1



PART of Doomsday Farmhouse had been built by a Sussex ironmaster in Elizabeth's day, and to this man of iron it owed the stone walls of its lower story, its stone mullions, and its brick chimneys. The second story warmed itself with lichened bricks and tiles. The spread of its red-brown roof with its hips and valleys had an ample tranquillity. The parlour, jutting out queerly towards Mrs. Damaris' sunk garden, had a roof of Horsham stone, but Mrs. Damaris had been dead a hundred and seventy years or more, and her sunk garden had become a sunny place where hens clucked in coops and yellow chicks toddled about over, the grass. Many of the windows still held their lead lights, but in the living-room and the parlour they had been replaced by wooden casements. As to its setting, nothing could have been more charmingly casual and tangled and unstudied. On the east the branches of the old pear and apple trees of an orchard almost brushed its walls and held blossom or fruit at the very windows. Behind it lay the vegetable garden backed by the larch plantation, and full of lilacs and ancient rambling currant and gooseberry bushes, and groves of raspberry canes, and winter greens, and odd clumps of flowers. The tiled roof of the well-house was a smother of wild clematis and hop. South lay Mrs. Damaris' little sunk garden, its stone walls all mossy, and the four yews—left unclipped for many years—rising like dark green obelisks. Beyond the orchard the big cedar looked almost blue when the fruit blossom was out. West of it, the cow-houses, stable, barn, granary, and waggon sheds were grouped about the byres and rick-yard. The sweet, homely smell of the byres would drift in on the west wind. Everything was old, the oak of the fences, the posts of the waggon sheds, the big black doors of the barn, even the byre rails and the palings of the pig-sties. Silvered and green oak, grey stone, the mottled darkness of old brick and tile. The gates leading into the lane and the Doom Paddock were new, for Arnold Furze had made and hung them on new oak posts. The gates he had found there had been tied up with wire and lengths of rope, and patched with odd pieces of deal.

From the window of the parlour you looked over Mrs. Damaris' little sunk garden and the Doom Paddock to an immense thorn hedge that hid the Long Meadow, and the brook beyond it. Rushy Pool glimmered down yonder towards the rising sun. The high ground on the other side of the brook rose like a green, tree-covered cliff in which were cleft blue vistas of woods and shining hills, and white clouds low down on the horizon by the sea. The sea was fifteen miles away, but when Arnold Furze was hoeing turnips up in the Sea Field he could lean upon his hoe and see the grey hills flicker between him and the old memories of France and the war. The birds in these Sussex woods had heard the rumble of the guns in those days, guns at Ypres, guns on the bloody, white-hilled, red-poppied Somme. Furze had been with the guns, the captain of a 4.5 Howitzer battery. It seemed very long ago.

A year as a learner on a farm in Hampshire, and five years at Doomsday! Five notable, terrible and glorious years, full of sweat and hate and love and weariness, and a back that had refused to break, and a stomach that would digest anything. Lonely? O, yes, in a way, but when a man has beasts and sheep and pigs, and two horses, and a dog, and a cat, and a number of odd hens and ducks to look after, his hands are full of life. And there were the birds, and the crops, and the trees, and the yellow gorse, and the wild flowers, all live things. No, a man had no time to be lonely, with Will Blossom and Will Blossom's boy and himself to work a hundred and twenty acres, though twenty acres of it were woodland. And difficult land at that. Heavy—some of it, and steep.

Five years!

He came up the stone steps to the door, with a great red winter sun setting behind him over the roof of the waggon shed. His boots were all yellow clay, and there were spots of it upon his face. He shaved himself twice a week. Bobbo the sheepdog flummoxed in at his heels, and making for the log fire on the great open hearth under the hood of the chimney, lay down to share it with Furze's black cat. The floor of the living-room was of red tiles, which made it safe for Arnold Furze to keep a wood fire burning and to pile upon it three or four times a day billets of oak and the butts of old posts and the roots of trees. In the winter this fire never went out, for in the morning two or three handfuls of kindling thrown upon the hot heap of wood ash would break into a blaze. He kept his logs and billets in the living-room, a great pile of them stacked in a corner.

Here—too—an iron kettle was usually simmering on the hook. Tea-making was a simple process. The breakfast tea leaves were shaken out of the teapot upon the fire, more tea was added from a canister on the shelf, the

kettle seized with an old leather hedging-glove, and the teapot filled. Milk, a loaf, butter on a white plate, and a pot of jam waited in the cupboard beside the fireplace.

Furze had his tea by the fire. He sat on an oak stool of his own making, like some Sussex peasant of the iron days before man had realized cushions and comfort. He too was of iron, one of those lean big tireless men with his strength burning like a steady flame. You saw it in his eyes; it waxed and waned; it might die down like a flame at the end of the day, but with the dawn of the next day it was as bright as ever. He needed it, but he needed it a little less than he had done, for he had his feet well set in the soil, and could draw his breath and look about him.

Before filling his pipe he poured out a saucer of milk for Tibby the black cat. The dog, a devoted and lovable beast, cuddled up beside him like a shaggy second self, his muzzle resting on Furze's knee, while his master sat and smoked, and allowed himself one of those short interludes that were like the five minutes' halt on a long march. The fire flung the shadows of him and his animals about the bare, old room with its brown distempered walls and beamed ceiling. He had a way of holding the stem of his pipe in his left fist as though he could not touch a thing without gripping it.

The fire was good, like all primitive phenomena to a man who is strong, and Furze's life at Doomsday was very primitive, and not unlike a colonist's, a concentration upon the essential soil and its products, an ignoring of individual comfort. He had come to Doomsday with a claw-hammer, a spanner, and a saw, his flea-bag and camp equipment, and a hundred pounds in cash, all the capital that was left him after the purchase of the farm. War gratuity, savings, the thousand pounds an aunt had left him, Doomsday, derelict and lonely, had swallowed them all. A Ford taxi, chartered from Carslake station, had lurched up the lane, and deposited Furze and all his worldly gear on the stone steps of the old, silent house. He had slept on his camp bed, washed in a bucket, used a box as a table, and another box as a seat, camping out in one room of the rambling and empty house.

From that day the struggle had begun. And what a struggle it had been, that of a lone, strong, devoted man who had that strange passion for the soil, and who combined with his strength intelligence and a love of beauty. There had been hardly a sound gate on the farm; the hedges had been broken and old and straggling into the fields like young coppices. The Furze Hill field had been a waste of gorse; the Wilderness a tangle of brambles, bracken, thorns, broom, ragwort and golden rod, and it was a wilderness still. The coppice wood had not been cut for seven years in either Gore or Rushy Woods; elms had been sending up suckers far out in the Ten Acre; weeds

had rioted, charlock and couch and thistles. Dead trees had lain rotting; a beech, blown down in Beech Ho, had never been touched. The stable roof had leaked. The gutters had been plugged, so that water had dribbled down the walls. The byre fences had sagged this way and that; the roof of one of the pig-sties had fallen in. Nettles had stood five feet high round the back of the house.

What a first six months he had had of it, working and living like a savage, but a savage with a sensitive modern soul! An occasional stroller along the field path that crossed Bean Acres and Maids Croft and ran along the edge of Furze Hill to Beech Ho had seen him as a brown figure in old army shirt and breeches, swinging axe or mall, or lopping at an overgrown hedge, or cutting over the tangled orchard, or ploughing with his one horse and second-hand wheel-plough. Wandering lovers had discovered him scything or hoeing in the dusk; only the birds had seen him in the dawn, with dew upon his boots and a freshness in those deep-set blue eyes. The lovers had marvelled. They had talked about him at Carslake in the shops and the pubs. "Mad Furze"—"Fool Furze"—"Mean Furze." Mean, because he had had to set his teeth and calculate before buying anything. He had never missed a sale, and had brought away old harness to be pieced and patched, old tools, a machine or two, just as little as he could do with. All his shopping had been done up at Carslake on Saturday nights, and the tinned food, the jam and the tea and the sugar, and his week's tobacco, and an occasional piece of butcher's meat, had been carried home in an old canvas kit-bag. For a year all the ready money that had come to him had been provided by the milk of two rather indifferent cows and the sale of a couple of litters of pigs. He had eaten the eggs laid by his dozen hens, and helped himself to live by the few vegetables he had had time to grow. So grim had been the struggle that he had had to sell some of his timber, fifty oaks in Gore Wood, and it had hurt him.

He stared at the fire and stroked Bobbo's head.

My God,—how tired he had been sometimes, ragingly tired. He could remember hating the place for one whole winter month with a furious and evil hatred. It had had its claws in his soul's belly, twisting his guts. Beaten,—no—by God! He had trampled on in his muddy boots, without time to cook or wash, sleeping like a log in the flea-bag on his camp bed. Lonely? Well, he supposed that he had not had time to feel lonely. Holidays? Perhaps seven days off in three years.

Half playfully Furze blew smoke at the dog,—and stretched himself on his box in front of the fire. He had made his roots; they were not as stout as he intended them to be, but they were there. Twenty good shorthorns, thirty

sheep, two horses—fine dapple greys—six black pigs, fifty or so fowls, and a dozen ducks. And manure stacking up, and Rushy Bottom, the Long Meadow, Doom Paddock, and the Gore growing good grass with clover in it, and his winter wheat showing well in the Ridge Field, and a hundred-ton crop of mangels clamped, enough for all his stock. He had had a bumper hay crop. He had a man and a boy now to help. This spring he would be able to buy a new mower, and a new horse cultivator, and in the autumn perhaps a corn-crusher, and a decent tumbril.

He knocked out his pipe on the toe of his boot.

“Come on, Bobbo. Work.”

He lit a lantern, and as he went down the steps and along the path with the shadows swinging from the light, he heard the chug-chug of a chaff cutter. A good sound that. He sniffed the sweet smell of the byres, and looked up at the stars.

A minute later he was in the big cowshed, helping Will with the sliced roots and the hay. The place steamed; it was full of the sweet breath of the beasts and the sound of their breathing and feeding. Rows of gentle heads and liquid eyes showed in the long, dimly lit building, and the warm, milky, bestrawed life of it sent a whimper of pleasure and of pride through Furze’s blood. He was fond of his beasts, and as he passed down the building, his hand caressed the placid creatures—“Well, Mary,—well, Doll—old lady.” The dog kept close to his heels, and the cows, accustomed to Bobbo being there at feeding time, were not troubled by his nearness.

Will Blossom, with a dusting of chaff on his honey-coloured moustache, went through the cow-house, holding his lantern shoulder high.

“That thur wood be ready loaded f’tomorrer, sir.”

“Right, Will. Good night.”

“Good night, ssir.”

Blossom went out with his lantern, but Arnold Furze remained for a while in the cow-house, watching the cows feeding, and feeling the warm contentment of the big brown creatures.

Afterwards, having looked into the stable at the two “greys” and locked up for the night, Furze put out the lantern and wandered up the lane. There were times now when he could stand and draw breath, and let the tenseness of his self relax, and raise his head and look about him at the waiting beauty of this world of his. For years the singing of birds had been no more than a

little chant going on while he laboured, heard dimly but without attention. The soil had held him grappled, and every sense had been absorbed into the struggle, but now he had eyes and ears and nostrils, and a consciousness that could pause and enjoy. Often he would walk the lane at night or wander about the Doom Paddock like a captain whose ship sailed steadily under the stars. To-night it was very still, and yet he knew that the air was moving, for he felt it on his left cheek, and last year's oak leaves on some saplings in the hedge made a dry twittering. He paused to listen to the whisper. Presently, he went on as far as the Six Firs on the mound. They too seemed to send a murmur from the towering darkness, a sound as of breathing; and climbing the mound Furze laid his head against one of the trunks. Yes, he could hear the faint, slumberous breathing of the tree.

Down yonder he saw lights, little yellow points, the lights of Cinder Town, and he stood watching them for a while as though he were the master of a sailing ship out at sea. These six tall trees towering like masts seemed set so high above those puny little residences. He felt sorry for them. Poor little places, no more than bathing huts set up along the edge of the great sea of man's effort.

Well, well, he had no quarrel with Cinder Town. It had been of some use to him, and had opened a little market at his very door at a time when he had felt like murdering every butcher and corn-factor and milkman in the neighbourhood. Poor little places! Feeding them upon the rich milk of his shorthorns was rather like giving milk in a bottle to motherless lambs.

The dog had followed him and had been at his heels all the while, but with so devoted and self-effacing a silence that he had been no more than a shadow. They returned together to the house where the light of the fire wavered through the casements. Bobbo slipped in at his master's heels, and as Furze closed and bolted the door upon the darkness he had a feeling that something had slipped in after him as silently as the dog. An emotion; a subtle and shadowy impression, the wraith of a mood or a manner of feeling.

Hitherto the big room had satisfied his wants, for it was parlour, bedroom, and workshop all in one; he still slept in his camp bed, and used a dining-table that he had made out of deal boards with four fencing posts for legs. A second table over by the orchard window displayed a collection of harness, leather, a pair of boots that were waiting to be soled, a boot-last, tools, a harnessmaker's awl and thread, odd boxes of nails and screws. There was only one chair in the room, an old basket-thing covered with faded green cretonne. At his meals Furze sat on the home-made oak stool.

He hung his hat on a peg and crossed the room, slowly and thoughtfully, and pushed the armchair forward with his foot. He sat down in it by the fire,

took off his muddy boots, and reached for the plaid slippers by the cupboard door. His thoughtful look deepened; he stared at the fire, but once or twice he threw a quick and considering glance over a shoulder at his barrack of a room. He found himself wondering what Will Blossom's wife thought of it when she came up once a week to clean and wash and cook him a joint. It was like a room in a backwoodsman's hut.

Yes, he ought to be able to afford something better before long, but not before he had bought every machine and tool that the beloved and exacting soil demanded. He had got along very well all these years. The furniture, and the pretty-pretties could wait.

Yet, a desire for something else had slipped into the room with him, and he was aware of a vague unrest. Almost it reminded him of those longings during the war when a man sat in the mud under a tin sheet, and thought of Piccadilly Circus, and the Savoy, and girls in pretty frocks, and tables laid for dinner, and a room with a carpet and white sheets and a bath. Yes, he had had to cut out the æsthetics, but even if he were to fill the place with club-chairs, and Turkey carpets and old oak and china,—what then?

He left that question unanswered, perhaps because he was subconsciously aware of the voice that was asking it, a voice that he had met with deaf ears. Why explore your own subconscious, or drag it up to the level of the painfully conscious? Better to turn your back and avoid it.

Presently, after a supper of bread and cheese and ale, he lit a pipe, and opened the door leading into Mrs. Damaris' parlour. Empty, panelled in white, and with its old black Georgian firegrate, it always suggested to Furze the memory of a woman. It had a faint perfume, a faded daintiness, something that was not male. Sitting in the deep window-seat you looked down into Mrs. Damaris' sunk garden, and could imagine a peacock spreading its tail upon the stone wall. It was in this room that Furze kept the one extravagance that he had allowed himself, a baby-grand piano in a rosewood case, bought at a sale in Carslake.

Leaving the door open so that the firelight played into Mrs. Damaris' dim white parlour, he sat down on another stool of his own making, uncovered the keyboard and played Schubert. He played well, with a firm touch and a richness of feeling, and in that empty house the music sounded ghostly.

There was in Mary Viner a gentleness that consented, and a young idealism that rebelled.

In the matter of the week's washing Cinder Town divided itself into the washers and the washed. "Simla"—as befitted the head of the estate—sent its soiled linen to a washerwoman, and the Vachetts and the Perrivales and the Twists conformed to this convention. At the other end of the scale and the colony, poor, fat, fair, and frowsy Mrs. Mullins, helped by a strong girl, decorated on each Monday the back lawn of "Pandora" with innumerable garments, nighties and towels and stockings and blouses and little etceteras, and her husband's blue and white striped pyjamas bellying in the wind. The display annoyed Lieut.-Colonel Twist very considerably. He was a pernickety, iron grey, yellowish man, with scornful nostrils and pale blue eyes. Matters between the "Chalet" and "Pandora" were not quite neighbourly.

As for "Green Shutters," it made a virtue of necessity, and hung its bunting above the patch of grass behind the cottage and close to the Jamieson's fence, where it fluttered against blue March skies, or drooped idly against the green of June. To Mary Viner, Monday was always a day of pain. If to hate doing your own washing and hanging out to dry was snobbery, then she confessed herself a snob, though next door ex-Lieut. Harold Coode kept her in countenance by hanging out his shirts. True, he appeared to have only two of them, the one with a patch, and the one that had no patch. They alternated on the six feet of clothes line behind the "Oast," hanging there with a pair of grey socks and a vest, keeping the flag flying. That was the sort of man Coode was, eager and bright and thin, a noble fellow, but not quite a man, and he was a trouble to Mary. He tended towards worship over the four-foot fence, and she was sorry for him, an uncomfortable emotion, for Coode, like many noble fellows,—had no tact. He appeared when he should not have appeared.

On the other side were the Jamieson children, two tow-haired savages with lapis lazuli eyes, and faces that looked as though they had been dipped in their father's strawberry jam. Irreverent children, they poked their tow heads above the fence, and giggled and were rude, and sometimes a clod of clay left a mark in the middle of one of Mary's sheets or towels.

She was tired and touchy on Mondays, and apt to be quick of colour. The whole business humiliated her.

"You little wretches."

Chortles from the dear little children.

Mary had complained to Mrs. Jamieson who sent her washing out, and who had stared at her with her round, milkmaid's eyes.

“I’m sorry, Miss Viner. They are such young Turks. But it is tempting, isn’t it?”

Mary had flushed.

“O, no doubt. But I don’t see the humour.”

But the culminating Jamieson joy screamed when the clothes line broke, which it did on occasions, and the whole string of bunting collapsed upon the grass. The little red faces exulted. And the line broke upon this particular morning early in March, with a cold and blustering wind blowing. One of Captain Hesketh’s shirts and a couple of handkerchiefs had made direct for the cinder path and drabbled themselves there. Mary, with a soul that burned, was rescuing the wreckage when she heard a voice behind her.

“You—are—busy. Do come and look at my new car.”

On the grass behind her stood pale-haired Winnifred Twist, an only child and precious as Ming china. She had a soft, drawling voice and an air of very intelligent languor. The Twists might live in Cinder Town, but they made it obvious that they were not obliged to live there. Winnifred’s father emphasized his potential mobility and freedom by always talking of “Selling the damned place.”

Mary, with the two ends of the broken line in her hands, and aware of the other girl’s leather coat and fur gauntlets, felt a sudden rage which she was careful to subdue. It was human of Winnifred to show off, but it was not kind of her to show off to Mary, with that washing dragged on the grass and the heads of the Jamieson children visible above the fence.

“Oh, it’s come. I heard you were having one.”

“Do come and look. She’s just outside. I have been up to Carslake and back. And I nearly ran into a cart. Made the horse shy.”

Mary was voiceless.

“The man with the cart cut up quite rough about it. That Furze man who sells us milk. He’s a bit of a boor. I shall advise the mater to change her milkman.”

Mary, sleeves rolled above the elbows, reknotted the rope, and felt herself being overpowered by her friend’s chattering enthusiasm. She supposed that she would have to go and see the precious child’s new toy, and put a good face upon it, and appear brightly and nicely envious. After all, why should she grudge Winnifred Twist a car? It was rather petty and beastly of her. But always the good things seemed to come to the wrong people.

Going out to inspect the car she found half Cinder Town gathered about it. Colonel Twist was there, and the Vachetts who always looked so sorrowful, and Mr. Stephen Perrivale, and Phyllis his red-headed daughter, and Commander Troton booming cheerfully, and the Brownlows, and poor Coode, who fixed his one pathetic eye on Mary and watched her as she stood between the Twist father and the Twist daughter. Why did not someone give Mary a car? Why could not he give her a car? That sorry old bicycle of hers with the rusty handle-bars and the rattling mud-guards always made him feel a little thick in the throat.

“What a beauty!” said Miss Viner.

She smiled. They all smiled, save the Vachetts in whom sorrow had turned sour. The car smirked and glistened, and sleeked itself in its new blue coat. It was only a little car, but in Cinder Town a car was a notable possession.

“New balloon tyres—I see,” said Coode,—and was smothered by the Troton fog-horn.

“Very pretty, very pretty. Call her the Blue Bird—I suppose? Twist, you will be paying fines. That’s the penalty.”

Mary was looking at the Perrivale girl whose pale face was all screwed up under her beautiful flaming hair. Yes, to Phyllis the thing was unspeakable, bitter, mocking. Poor little Phyllis, so quick, and hot hearted, and hot headed, generous and passionate even in her envy.

Up the cinder road came a cart loaded with cordwood, and with a grey horse between the shafts, and a man, whose eyes were still angry, walking beside it. The group had to stand to one side while the cart went on to deliver its wood at “Simla.” Furze gave one glance at the blue car, and spoke to nobody. His eyes lifted as he passed, and dwelt for a moment on the face and figure of Mary Viner.

She had her sleeves rolled up and her hands were red.

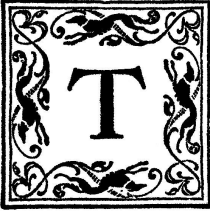
His deep eyes seemed to go up into the wind.

“Cinderella.”

He had christened her.

III

1



HERE were times when Mary Viner reasoned with herself, composing little homilies that laid a gentle and restraining hand upon her restlessness. She confronted the age-old problem of the begetter and the begotten, trying to feel dutiful and not succeeding, and coming to rest upon a feeling of pity. Yet, she knew in her marrow and heart that age and youth should not live together, though youth may not know what it wants and age wants so little, but that little a tyranny of trifles.

She felt her exasperations to be atrocious, but there they were, like muscle pain or toothache or a chafed heel,—realities, disharmonies, and though she strove for their repression she was but weaving them into the texture of herself, threads that would break or get ravelled when some human crisis should come upon her. Such repressions are not good for the soul. For her parents were nice old people, sweetly selfish in feeling themselves unselfish. It is probable that they thought Mary fortunate in having a home, and in not having to cheapen herself in the world's market. And healthy, homely work, cooking and washing and cleaning. Besides you had to live somewhere, and pensions did not carry you far at post-war prices, and the Sandihurst Estate had gentlefolk upon it, and you could get "bridge" most nights a week, and Colonel Sykes and Commander Troton and the Twists were putting down a hard tennis court. Age forgets so easily its own youth and its youth's blind gropings and hungers. It sits resigned by the fireside, and yet can be full of a senile restlessness of its own, of little chattering and exactions, and odd irritating tricks and mannerisms.

O, those evenings, those long winter evenings when "Green Shutters" seemed buried under a mountain of finality! Nothing happened, nothing could happen, save perhaps the occasional and tentative intrusion of poor Coode who sat nobly on the edge of a chair, and called Captain Hesketh "sir," and listened politely to an old soldier's meanderings. A nice fellow! And his one eye was so dull and adoring! Those evenings, with her mother reading and stopping her reading to chatter directly Mary opened a book! And her father and his acrostics! How she loathed those acrostics and the

ingenious people who strung the jingles together. And the poor old man's perpetual clearing of his throat, an explosive sound rather like a sheep's cough; and the trick her mother had of tapping with one foot on the iron fender! Silence, an immense, eventless silence, and those fidgetings and rustlings and poor little fussinesses!

There had been nights when she had put on a hat and rushed out wildly into the darkness.

“Where are you going, Mary?”

Yes, where—and why? They always wanted to know the reason for everything. As if one could give reasons, at the age of six-and-twenty, when life felt like a dead volcano, and your heart was ready to break for something and nothing.

“Where are you going, Mary?”

She would blurt out some excuse. She had forgotten to shut up their six hens, or Winnifred had a dress to show her, or the Brownlows had asked her in. She would rush out and walk wildly up the wet and empty road to Carslake or down the wet and empty road to Melhurst. Sometimes her heart cried—“It would be better if we were dead.”

Also, on those nights she thought much upon the foresight of her sister Clare. She glimpsed Clare as a palely glowing and fortunate creature away yonder within reach of that London shimmer. Lights, happenings! In the damp, dark deeps of a Sussex night she would turn her face in the direction of the distant city, yearning for it and for all the things that to her young loneliness it seemed to offer. Theatres, dances, shops, a sense of appetites felt and satisfied, trains, buses, tea-shops, the crowds, the stir, the full-throated life of it all. She envied Clare. Clare had escaped, as most women long to escape and dare not confess it.

Sometimes she would wander a little way up the Doomsday lane, not because she was conscious of the man who lived there, but because she had no business in the lane and it gave her a faint thrill of childish adventure. Once or twice she had scrambled up the mound and stood among the Six Firs, looking out into the rolling darkness, with Cinder Town pricked out in yellow points below her. She would lean against one of the trees, and hear its sighing. Her heart seemed to sigh like the tree.

On other rare days she would escape for an hour or two on her old bicycle, going out to meet life that never came, so full of her own unsatisfied youth that she was blind to the life about her. She loved beauty, but in her passion to escape she passed beauty by, youthfully hurrying, hastening somewhere and nowhere. She seemed to know Melhurst and Rotherbridge

by heart, and all the lilies in the moat of Cadnam Castle, and the ruins of Carslake Abbey and the Roman walls of Hoyle. To ride up to Carslake was no adventure, for she did the household shopping there, buying meat and groceries, and her father's cough mixture, and her mother's wool, and an occasional Weldon's Journal with a brown paper pattern of a jumper or a nightdress pinned up inside it. True, you could buy hats at Sturtevant's, but what hats!

It was on one of these excursions to Melhurst early in March that her old hack of a bicycle broke its chain half-way up the long hill that ended in the white gates of Melhurst Park. She accepted the rupture as fate, and went on, wheeling her machine, and into Melhurst Park, for the public road ran through it. The park rolled like a great green sea, with woods of beech and fir sailing upon it, a north wind blowing white clouds across an intense blue sky, and dead leaves scudding like foam. She saw the downs in the distance. In a valley below deer were feeding, and the cedars and sequoias and spruces of Melhurst House looked black as thunder.

A four-mile walk! Well, quite an event. And she would be alone for the best part of two hours, and there are days when loneliness can be precious. She walked at her leisure, and coming to a group of old beech trees standing beside the park road, she leaned her bicycle against one of the white posts and sat down on the high grass verge. The March wind had dried the grass; it was still wintry and brown, and thousands of last year's beech leaves were scurrying about and making little fluttering rushes hither and thither. The air was full of the sound of their rustlings and of the blowing of the wind through the beech boughs.

A blue wagon drawn by two grey horses, and coming from Melhurst way, appeared upon the road. It topped a rise, and was lost to view in a hollow, though Mary heard the rumble of the wheels. A man's figure rose into view, and then the heads of the two horses, and both the man and the horses were familiar. It was the Doomsday wagon.

She could have walked on, but there was no conscious impulse bidding her go or stay, and yet she had a feeling that the man on the wagon had been watching her, and that she was sitting there like a deer covered by a sighted gun. The wagon rolled towards her, and she looked straight ahead towards the downs. It was right upon her now, and still she had that feeling of being observed.

Furze stopped his horses. Her quick upward glance caught him in the act of rising from his seat on the rail. He had a hand to his old grey-green soft felt hat.

“Any trouble, Miss Viner?”

He looked at the bicycle leaning against the white post, and she was aware of a quick flushing of her face.

“The chain is broken——.”

He came down at once, deliberately seizing the opportunity with his strong hands and yet doing it so naturally that that flush of hers need not have happened. He asked no permission, but picked up the machine and lifted it on to the wagon, and standing on a fore-wheel hub, settled it on the load of cake he had picked up at Melhurst station. Then he stood down and looked at her. The turned-down brim of his hat seemed to make the deep stare of his quiet eyes more serious. She had a new and sudden impression of him as a man who had some meaning for her, a man with a tanned and silent face, and a mouth that was both hard and kind.

“Will you ride?”

She stood up.

“I was going to walk.”

“Just as you please. I can fix you up a seat.”

His curiously dark blue eyes remained fixed upon her face all this time, not boldly or gallantly, but with a deliberate and grave interest. She had the instant knowledge of the fact that as a woman she pleased him. She may have gone on to the intuitive glimpsing of him as a man who was not easily pleased. Her thoughts flew back to the morning when he had brought the milk, and she had shown him a smudged face. Again, her colour changed quickly.

“It is very good of you.”

“Not a bit.”

“I think I will ride.”

She had not visualized his helping her up, and she felt more lifted than helped. His hands were very strong, but they touched her gently, giving her a sudden and very vivid impression of contact. She felt it as an act of homage, and her eyes sought to veil themselves. She was just a little confused.

“Where shall I sit?”

“Wait a moment.”

He was up in the wagon, gathering two or three empty sacks and a horse cover. There was a space between the stacked cake and the front of the wagon, and he made a seat for her on the cake, folding the sacks very deliberately and placing the cloth upon them as though the careful doing of it mattered.

“That ought to do.”

“Thank you so much.”

She smiled, with something of a quick, scared self-consciousness in her smile, and sat down. She was aware of a pleasant perfume, the smell of the cake. And he, smiling down at her momentarily with a something in his eyes that went straight down into the depths of her, climbed over the edge and gained the road.

He was going to walk.

“O,—please,” she felt like saying, and was silent, her hands clasped in her lap. But if he meant to walk, well—it meant—— She drew a deep breath. For his walking was like his touching of her, an act that was both sensitive and big and manly, not the act of a little, vain, agile creature, and yet so natural. She had a glimpse of him standing there brown and still beside the blue wagon and the grey horses, part of the landscape, and right with it.

“Thank you,” she said.

So, her blue ship sailed through Melhurst Park, with the white clouds going over, and the landscape half sunlight and half shadow, and she sat and wondered, because he walked beside the head of the near horse as though the wagon held nothing but its load of cake. In a way she was glad of his silence and his back. She could consider him at her leisure, or as much as she could see of him, the broad back, the tanned neck, the old felt hat with the brim turned down, the long, striding legs, and the arms swinging easily. His very clothes seemed to have the soft, weather-worn half tints of the landscape.

He owned Doomsday Farm. He was supposed to be a little unusual. She had seen the house in the distance from the field path by Beech Ho, and had thought it romantic, and a little mysterious, but lonely. Him too, in a sense, she had only seen at a distance, and almost as though he shared Doomsday’s mystery and loneliness.

Half-way up the long hill out of Cherry Bottom he stopped his horses, placed the little wooden roller under a back wheel, and let them rest. He pushed his hat back, looked across the hills and smiled. Next moment he was speaking to her, standing square to the wagon, and looking up steadily into her face.

“Do you mind the smell of the cake?”

No, she did not mind it; she thought it rather fragrant.

“Country smells are,” he said; “at least to me. They hang about like memories. The meal tub and the hay loft, and the reek of a weed fire. All

good. You don't get out much,—I suppose?"

"No, not much."

His quiet blue eyes confused her.

"Women don't. Not with house work. Same with me. I'm stuck there on the soil."

She had a feeling that he approved of woman as a domestic creature, and his man's view of it was as of something natural and inevitable. Vaguely she was aware of resenting this.

"But yours is more interesting. A man's always is."

His blue eyes seemed to receive this statement with peculiar seriousness, and to consider it.

"Do you think so?"

"I would rather be a farm labourer than a servant."

He appeared puzzled.

"Much the same—surely, though one is out in the air more. A man's job is."

"But why should it be a man's job?"

"It happens so. Always has been, hasn't it? Except in the case of the idle young persons who play golf and tennis all day and every day, and they don't count."

She felt herself flushing. It seemed to her rather ridiculous to be sitting there in his wagon and getting into an argument with him. What had they to argue about?

"You think women ought to work?"

His blue eyes suggested that he had never thought of it in any other way than that.

"Well, don't they? Ninety-nine out of a hundred. It's life. Of course, if you get the notion——"

He had silenced her, and he seemed suddenly aware of the fact, and grew silent himself, and then he restarted his horse, and resumed his place by the head of the horse. They sailed slowly athwart the landscape till they came to the place where the Melhurst and the Rotherbridge roads joined, and here he pulled up.

She stood up, and refused his hand.

"I can manage, thank you."

But she had to leave him the handling of her bicycle. She noticed that he glanced at her with something between perplexity and half-amused concern.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

“Not at all. Glad to have been of use.”

He raised his old felt hat, and with a grave and smileless nod she turned away towards Cinder Town.

2

At eight o'clock on a moonlit March night a young woman went out with a jug in quest of milk. For Ransford, the Carslake doctor, expected all day, had not arrived at “Green Shutters” till seven o'clock, and had shown himself a little testy, as an overworked man will. Two old people in bed coughing in chorus and both with temperatures, and why hadn't Mary sent for him before? As though doctor's bills were to be incurred with frivolous recklessness! Ransford had warmed his hands and ordered milk, meat essence, junket. He had promised to send down some medicine by a boy on a bicycle.

Hence Mary's quest for milk, for in the larder she had found just enough to cover a lump of sugar in the bottom of a breakfast-cup. She knew that she had only to knock at the green door of the “Oast” in order to command immediate devotion, but she did not knock at poor Coode's door. She tried the Perrivales, to be met by Phyllis' red head—and a “So sorry, but I don't think we have got a drop. Dad had the last in his coffee.” She hesitated outside the Brownlows, and then went on down the cinder track and out into the road. She would find milk at Doomsday, and she faced the full moon and saw it hanging like a round shield behind the trunk of one of the Six Firs. There was not a cloud in the sky. She looked up at the zenith, though the stars were dim because of the moonlight, and the Milky Way—invisible—trailed symbolically above her head.

Where the lane began to descend she heard the dry rustling of last year's oak leaves shivered over by a little wayward breeze; the gleam of the pond appeared, and upon it the very black shadows of the two ilexes. The moonlight splintered itself upon the larches. She went softly, to pause by the pond, persuaded to loiter there a moment by her own self-consciousness and the night's mystery. She fancied that she could see a light shining beyond the trunks of the larches, and she watched it for a moment as she went on past the pond. She opened the gate, hesitated and was guided by the light. A little below her lay the farm buildings, very black, and with their roofs glimmering a little, and as she followed the path along the edge of the larch plantation she felt like a woman playing the part of a timid child. But how

absurd! To thrill a little over the fetching of a jug of milk from a farmhouse on a moonlight night in March!

She reached the yew hedge and was puzzled. Where was the door? In the wall facing her or over there where the house sent out a dark projection? Straight ahead she saw a window all a-flicker with the light of a fire, and it seemed to her that a weedy path went that way. She tried it, and saw the three stone steps and the leaded hood over the door.

She was on the very point of knocking when a sound surprised her, three deep rich chords played upon a piano. Her hand was restrained. Those prelude sounds were followed by one of Chopin's ballades, played as a strong man might be expected to play it, with a largeness of touch and a good deal of feeling. She was astonished. But why—astonishment? A man might be a farmer and yet love music. Her first thought had been that Furze was the owner of a pianola, but a moment's listening told her that the music was made by human hands.

She stood and heard it out, the white jug held against her body and between her two breasts. Her knock, when it came, was rather tentative and timid. It was answered by the barking of a dog. Then she heard footsteps, and the door was opened.

3

He did not recognize her at once, for she was in the shadow, and the light from the fire was wayward.

“Yes,—what is it?”

He saw the white jug held to her bosom.

“Milk?”

She spoke quickly, as though a little out of breath.

“I'm so sorry to trouble you at this hour. My people are ill. The doctor ordered milk.”

“Miss Viner——”

He stood back a little, and was silent for a moment, as though he was in doubt about something, or was embarrassed by her coming, and she noticed his hesitation. She did not expect hesitation in him; deliberation,—perhaps.

“I'm sorry. Nothing very serious—I hope?”

“Bronchitis.”

“Both?”

“Yes.”

“Rather hard luck on you. The jug——”

She gave him the jug, wondering whether he was going to leave her standing on the doorstep, and if so,—why? She could see Bobbo’s fluffy head pressed against one of Furze’s legs; even the dog seemed to deliberate.

“Won’t you come in a moment? By the fire,—while I go to the dairy. I’m afraid I’m rather a backwoodsman.”

Now that he had asked her in she hung back.

“O, no,—I musn’t bother you; I’ll wait here.”

“Please come in. I won’t keep you a moment.”

There was that in his voice which said “You shall come in,” and she obeyed it, and to mask the surrender she spoke to the dog, caressing the fluffy head, and drawing it against her knee.

“What a dear! Your farm dog——?”

“Yes.”

She would not show him her face, but while she bent over Bobbo she was all eyes and ears, and trembling with a quick and darting curiosity. She saw him move to the right, and put his hand behind him, and close a door that appeared to open into another room. Now, why did he do that? She supposed that the piano was in that other room.

And suddenly she felt herself stiffen. She was assailed by a consciousness of herself as an intruder, trespassing upon something that he wished to hide. But what could he wish to hide? A piano and a room which seemed to have had no light in it? She stiffened more awkwardly as her thoughts extended.

“Won’t you sit down?”

He had pushed the one chair forward and she seated herself as though she were made of china, while he—with a queer look at her, went out by another door, carrying her jug. She heard the scraping of a match. And sitting very still, she turned a head on a rigid neck, and scanned this room of his and its poverty and disorder, its improvised tables, its pile of logs in a corner, its camp bed. Surely, he did not live in this room? No, that could not be. The work-bench with its litter of tools and leather and odd pieces of harness convinced her that he used this room to work in. And in her innocence she supposed that the dog slept upon the camp bed.

She heard Furze returning, and directly he reappeared she stood up.

“Thank you so much.”

She held out her hands for the jug, smiling uneasily, her eyes downcast and hidden by their smoking lashes. She was in a kind of panic mood, and

when she got herself to the door she realized that he was behind her.

“Good night, Mr. Furze.”

“I’m coming out,” he said; “take care of the steps. Wait while I light a lantern.”

She spilt some of the milk on the doorstep while she was quaking there, wanting to run, but holding herself back from such foolishness. He was lighting his lantern, bending over it as it stood on the table.

“I’ll light you down the lane.”

“O, please,” she said; “don’t bother; there is a moon.”

“I have to come out, anyway,” was his reply.

He came and held the lantern shoulder high so that she could see the steps, and when she was down them he moved quickly in front of her to light her along the path.

“Just follow.”

She followed, and when they reached the gate he held it open for her.

“Please,” she said, “I can manage now.”

He closed the gate deliberately.

“Oh,—I shall be up most of the night. It so happens,—if you call it wasting my time——”

She walked on—and he was beside her.

“Up most of the night?”

“Yes,—lambs.”

But she was still asking herself why he had closed the door of that other room just as though he had something or someone to hide. And yet—if he was to be up half the night——? And—anyway—did it matter? She saw the Six Firs towering overhead, and feeling that her silence had been rather churlish she turned her face to him as they reached the road.

“You must not come any farther. Good night.”

“Good night. I hope your people will soon be better. We shall both be looking after helpless creatures—you and I.”

His voice held her there for a moment, very still, and looking up at him.

“I think I heard you playing——”

“O, my poor old piano,—yes. Schubert. Good for these winter evenings. And then I heard your knock.”

She was holding the white jug to her breast, and to him her eyes appeared dark and immense.

“You must go to your lambs, Mr. Furze. Good night.”
He stood and watched her go down the road.

IV

1



RNOLD FURZE struck back along the lane, and turned into the Gore Field by the gate opposite the pond. He had blown out his lantern, for in truth it had not been needed after its lighting of Mary Viner down the steps and along the path, with the moon's silver lamp rising in the sky. Furze loitered here, one arm along the bar of the gate, the old thorn trees in the hedge making a shaggy blackness, and the Gore sloping away from his feet like a mirror that has been breathed upon.

His sheep were pastured here, for he preferred to run them on grass to folding them on a root crop, and at the end of the field and under the shelter of the Gore Wood were the pens and shelters of hurdles and faggots where the lambing ewes and their lambs were kept snug for the first few days. But for the moment Furze was not thinking of his ewes. He was thinking of Mary Viner and her big brown eyes with their smoking lashes, and her quick changes of colour, and her air of breathlessness. A creature so easily scared and silenced—so he thought. And sensitive, and not too happy. Yet, she puzzled him, and he supposed that he did not know much about women. He had been too busy doing things. But her moods and their expressions seemed to blow this way and that like brown leaves on a March day; she appeared to be moved by vague currents that would not have been perceived by his stronger nature. She was yea and nay all in one breath, giving him the impression of a palpitating, warm-blooded bird. Her refusing to enter his house—for instance, and then her coming in, and the queer blight that had swept suddenly over her face after he had closed the door of Mrs. Damaris' parlour. Certainly, he had hesitated about asking her in, for never till that moment had he realized the almost sordid poverty of his house. It had come upon him in a flash when he had seen her there with the white jug pressed to her bosom, and her brown eyes all glimmering. It had come as a shock. He had put out a hand and closed that other door because he had felt that house's nakedness and was suddenly ashamed of it.

What had she thought of his room with its rough tables and its litter and its deplorable old chair? It must have seemed to her a squalid hole. And

what if the seeming squalor of it had attached itself to her impression of him? He was conscious of a gust of mortification.

She would not understand—perhaps—how he had had to labour, incessantly and furiously in the service of the soil, and that he had had neither the time nor the patience nor the money to be fastidious? He had just succeeded in keeping clean. But that room, and Mary sitting on the edge of the chair as though she was not sure of it, and her air of rigid decorum, and her half-frightened eyes, and her hurry to be gone!

“Damn!” he said, and flung away from the gate and down the field. “I can’t afford sentiment—at present.”

For the rest of the night, under the waning moon and the shepherding stars, he was kept busy. Crouching in one of the shelters, with his lamp hung from a forked stake, he had to succour one of the ewes. It was life and death in the sheep pen, with the moon paling and the stars going over, and a little whispering wind coming with the dawn, and Furze, like the eternal shepherd, losing life and saving it. In the greyness of the dawn the poor ewe lay dead, and Furze, tired and grave-eyed, went up the slope of the Gore with a new-born lamb wrapped up in his coat.

Passing through the gate he met Will Blossom coming to his day’s work, and the two men looked at the little, long-legged creature.

“I’m sorry to have lost that ewe, Will.”

“They will die, sir.”

The blue-eyed man spoke as though dying was a natural cussedness.

“You’ll give he the bottle.”

Furze smiled, and stroked the lamb’s head.

“Bring me up an armful of hay, Will. The little fellow can lodge in my room.”

So Bobbo sat and watched a little bleating thing lying on a sack on his master’s bed, while Furze routed out an old hamper, and filled it with hay, and put the orphan to bed beside the fire. Bobbo was a very wise dog; he knew all about sheep and their stupidities, and the mischievous vagaries of young cattle. The lamb was as safe with him as it would have been with its own mother.

Furze looked from the lamb to the dog.

“Gentle, Bobbo. We’ve got to be gentle, old chap, to all such things.”

The dog’s amber eyes stared up at him devotedly. The night was over, but the day’s work waited, and Furze went into the kitchen to wash.

There were other ministrations at “Green Shutters” where two old people lay propped up in bed, with all the sitting-room cushions brought into use because the number of the Viner pillows was limited. They coughed separately and they coughed in chorus, poor old Hesketh very red in the face, and Mrs. Charlotte all fluffed up like a sick bird. They were very much worried about each other.

“I’m afraid I shall keep you awake, dear.”

“I shall do that myself, my love. You are the one to be pitied.”

“I could not sleep—anyway—Hesketh. I should be sitting up with you. It must have been that wretched ‘bridge’ party. The Vachetts had terrible colds.”

And Mary was cumbered with much serving. She had a fire to light in the old people’s bedroom, and Dr. Ransford had given her instructions to keep it up, and they were to have their medicine during the night, and some warm milk if they fancied it. She was in no mood for bed or the prospect it offered her of emerging from the warmth of it every two hours to put coals on the fire or to pour out medicine. An armchair in front of the sitting-room fire seemed to her a more practical and comfortable proposition, for she had a book to read, if she chose to read it. Moreover, bed might have proved too persuasive, and her duties have sunk submerged beneath a healthy young woman’s need of sleep.

Mary belonged to a generation that values comfort, and though she had had no chance of experiencing the complete flavour of it, her sensitive nostrils could quiver over the imagined perfume. Her parents’ ideas upon comfort were utterly different from her own, and to express her ideal of it she arranged the two armchairs in front of the fire, and curling up in one of them, disposed of her legs and feet in the other. She had brought her pillow down from her bedroom, and collected her novel, and two or three copies of the weekly illustrated magazines lent her by Winnifred Twist. A box of chocolates would have completed the illusion.

For it was an illusion. She had just snuggled down and opened the *Bystander* when she heard the rapping of her father’s stick on the floor of the room above. She was wanted. She had to get out of her two chairs and go upstairs where a night-light was burning, throwing the shadows of two heads upon the wall. The room had a flat, warm, stuffy smell.

“Mary, dear, your father feels so sick.”

“Get me—a basin,” said the father, with the anxious and earthy face of a man urgently in need of it.

She was just in time. She steadied the basin for him, and when the paroxysm was over and he crouched there panting, she supported his poor old head against her bosom. How deplorably thin the back of his neck looked. She too was feeling overwhelmed by a sense of nausea, and the stuffy heat of the room. But how beastly of her! Though somehow—she could not help it.

Her mother was twittering.

“You had better empty the basin.”

Of course she would have to empty the basin when her father felt secure without it.

“Can you manage now, Daddy?”

Captain Viner’s head was back on the pillow.

“Yes, my dear, thank you. But I think I will have it on a chair.”

She carried the basin away, emptied it, washed it, and returning, placed it on a chair beside the bed. Was there anything else she could do for them? No, not for the moment. They were grateful to her, nicely appreciative.

“Sorry to give you all this trouble, child.”

“O,—that’s all right, daddy.”

She patted his old hand with its blue veins and shiny and mottled skin, and closed the door gently, and descended the stairs with a dreary sense of having done her duty. Pity? O, yes,—she felt that all three of them were to be pitied, but then—the other two had lived their lives, and she saw no possible chance of living hers. The dutiful and loving daughter! Why could not she be that, and not the grudging, restless, squeamish creature that she was, yearning for things to happen—so long as they happened to her? Were there any dutiful daughters, ministering angels who found complete and whole-hearted satisfaction in surrendering to others? She wondered. She could not help wondering, because her own flesh rebelled so fiercely. She hated poverty and housework, and coal fires, and the smell of dish-cloths, and the greasy water in which you had washed up, and the reek of boiled cabbage, and the eternal dusting, and the washing of soiled clothes. Always, her sensitive gorge was rising, and her fastidious and eager spirit shrinking from the things she had to touch.

“What an egotist I am,” she thought, and pulled the two armchairs apart, and sat down in one of them, shoulders rounded, her arms wrapped round her knees. Her little illusion of a transient basking before the fire had gone. She felt like a cat with a wet fur.

Irritably she picked up one of the illustrated papers and turned over its pages.

How tantalizing! She found herself regarding pictures of the fortunate world parading and playing tennis where the sun shone and the sea was blue. Ah,—that blue sea! She could imagine it, and the orange trees in fruit and flower, and the mimosa and the olives and the palms. A world of flowers and of sunlight, and of colour, and of spacious, golden hours. Things must happen down there. Sister Clare had passed a gorgeous three weeks at Monte Carlo. She had written letters, and sent them vivid picture postcards in which sea and sky were two splashes of blue.

She threw the magazine aside, and sank back into the chair. Her mouth looked thin, and she bit restlessly at her lower lip. She was Cinderella, the new Cinderella, peevish and pale, with brown eyes that asked questions.

Presently, she fell asleep. She had not meant to fall asleep; it just happened. And she slept the rest of the night there, to be awakened by a sound which she took to be the clamour of her alarm clock. In bed? Not a bit of it. A greyness was stealing in, and the fire was out, and she heard the grandfather clock striking the half hour.

She jumped up. It was the back door bell that she had heard, and she found the red-nosed boy there, a young Blossom, with the milk can.

“You’re late,” she said crossly.

“Know I be. Muster Furze was up all night lambin’.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” she asked.

The boy stared at this ignorant and unreasonable creature.

“’E were late with the milkin’, o’ course.”

She felt snubbed. So—he—had been up all night. And she wondered whether he felt as cross as she did.

3

A little flickering yellowness in the tree-tops, and the daffodils blown flat in Furze’s orchard, such seemed the beginnings of the spring that year. Skipping lambs and bleating ewes, and the fallow blossom flashing a pale gold, and the celandines out in the moist places. A night’s gale had stripped tiles off the roof, and unroofed two of the lambing pens. On the soil it is the expected that happens, and a man of the soil must expect trouble.

But, looked at largely, life was very good, even when you had the stress of the year before you, and the weeds were ready to grow. Soon, the wryneck would be calling, and the cuckoo ringing the valley with its double

note. Moreover, Arnold had brought a carpet, two basket-chairs, a sofa, a small painted wood table, a fender, and a length of cretonne to be cobbled into curtains before the fire at night, with the lamb, the cat and the dog making a queer group upon the two sacks that served as a hearth rug. Furze's lips were very compressed over the making of those curtains, and he was inclined to breathe heavily. Bobbo would sit on his stumpy tail and watch.

“What the devil's this?”

His barley sugar eyes had observed many phenomena, but this stuff spread over Furze's knees,—what was it?

“Camouflage, old dog,” said his master.

There were times when he talked aloud to Bobbo, finding him a sympathetic animal, and not like Tibby the cat who was the blackest of egoists.

“Ever missed an opportunity, old chap? Let an obvious rabbit get away—when it ought to have had no chance with you?”

Bobbo had. He blinked his eyes at the lamb who was becoming a bit of a nuisance, and all together too sure of himself, trotting and butting about the place as though the earth belonged to him. Bobbo was a disciplinarian so far as sheep were concerned; it was time the lamb went to school; he was getting through his period of long-legged and silly charm, and would soon be a stupid beast. Bobbo had no opinion of the brain of a sheep.

Furze poked away carefully with his needle. The carpet was down in Mrs. Damaris' parlour, and the furniture arranged, and on the white walls he had tacked up three or four coloured pictures collected from some old magazines. Obviously, furnishing was some business, and he had tried the chairs, the sofa and the table in every sort of position, with the table somewhere in the centre of each scheme, and then had given it up, and left them all backed against the walls.

“A woman would do it in two minutes,” he supposed.

Stitching steadily, he reflected as he often reflected on that lost opportunity. Why had he not gone to ask after the health of Captain and Mrs. Viner? How simple life might be, and how difficult one's silly moods and sensitiveness made it! He had let three days pass before he had taken young Blossom's place with the milk-can, and had had the door opened to him by a very unromantic wench from Carslake. Her manners had been as slatternly as her appearance.

“Miss Viner not well?”

“She's abed.”

“Serious?”

“Not as I know of. Do I pay you now, or do you send us a bill?”

“I send in a bill. Will you give my compliments to Miss Viner, and say that I am sorry?”

The girl had gasped in his face, clutched the milk-jug and closed the door upon him and his compliments. Compliments indeed! It might be a democratic age, but did the man who delivered the milk send up his condolences to a lady?

Furze stitched away at his curtains. A south-west wind was breathing about the house, and upon one window there was the patter of the rain, and upon the other the tapping of an apple bough in the orchard. He had left that bough uncut, liking the brushing of its fingers against the lattice, for when a man lives alone sounds have a friendly significance. Warm rain and a south-west wind, lushing up the young grass in his meadows, and breathing gently upon the pear and the plum blossom! The sound of the wind in the chimney seemed to make a stirring in the heart of the old house, and he sat and listened as though those empty upper rooms were coming to life and filling with a presence. He could imagine feet going softly to and fro, a creaking of the old boards, hands busy with white linen. Yes, a woman's presence, breathing within the house as the south-west wind breathed outside it.

He put his woman's work aside, rose, and stood up with a questioning and inward stare, moved by some impulse that seemed to have come to him out of the wind. Whence—whither? Was man but a creature of the soil, and of the sky? Did all his yearnings and strivings grow out of the earth, and put out their inevitable leaves for the wind to play with? And leaves died. The trees cast them off, and the wind played with them.

He became aware of Bobbo sitting up and solemnly watching his face.

“Moods, old chap, moods.”

But he took a candlestick from the shelf, and lit the candle with a brand from the fire, and opened the door of Mrs. Damaris' parlour. His head drooped a little. He had kept a dimly apprehended ideal shut up with his music in that little room, a room in which the perfume and the memory of some woman seemed to linger with a delicate, soft sadness. It was a woman's room, the one feminine room in that great empty old house. It needed a woman. Yes, good God, how it needed one! That furniture! Quite hopeless! Why on earth had he bought it? Because of a silly, shy male pride, and after a moment of mortification?

“That's not my job,” he thought; “it should be hers.”

He closed the door deliberately and firmly, but his hand remained on the handle. He had gone down into sudden deep thought, and the candle, tilted askew, dripped grease upon the floor. He did not notice it. "Hers." And who was she? Was she the woman? Were hers the hands that were to complete the rough-hewn product of his labour, to give the soft and delicate touches to the home, to bring a sense of tenderness and beauty into it? Flowers, and soft fabrics, and pretty human things, human because of their association, and the soft breathing of her about the house, and the spell of her presence?

Something very deep stirred in him. Five years of loneliness, and all that he had lacked! He began to yearn for it now with a fierceness that was part of his man's nature. He was not a man to love easily or soon. Oak, deep rich soil, tough fibre, a devotion that could be tragic. He stirred like a man in his sleep, and all the while the dog watched him. He became aware of the guttering candle and the grease on the floor.

"Dear heart,—it is time. The spring is here."

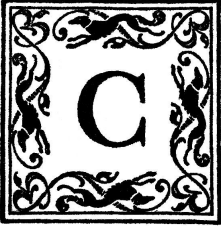
He smiled. His deep blue eyes had light in them. He went and opened the door leading to the old staircase, and climbing it, passed slowly from room to room. He stood in the centre of each of them, looking gravely and intently round. Yes,—this should be the woman's room, the one looking south over the roof of Mrs. Damaris' parlour and her garden. He must do something with that garden.

He came down again to the fire, to find the dog standing absolutely still beside his chair, waiting and watching for him.

"Dreams, old chap."

The dog's cool nose nudged his hand.

Dreams? But why should it be a dream?



COLONEL SYKES had finished his tea, and was standing at the window of the “Simla” dining-room, lighting a cigarette, and looking uncommonly complacent over it. He was tallish and slim, with a birdlike head and a high colour and very English blue eyes. He wore an eye-glass. His hair, growing thin, was of a dubious and yellowish brown, and most carefully spread like thin butter on a brown loaf. He looked youngish for eight and fifty, because of his slimness and his colour, but when that colour was examined more closely it lost much of its youthfulness, being a stipling of minute and twisted blood vessels. His appearance must have caused Colonel Sykes to pay much attention to detail. He shaved twice a day, so that he should never be caught with an incipient crop of grey stubble upon his chin. He was mostly seen in golfing clothes, grey, very baggy as to the knickers, with a blue and yellow “pull-over” under the coat, the stockings a soft fawn. He was alert, loquacious, and emphatic, and at emphatic moments he would drop his eye-glass out of his eye. His friendly loquacity was such that at times he would talk to his own reflection in a mirror.

Colonel Sykes was a bachelor. Behind him his cook-housekeeper was clearing away the tea things from the oak table. An immensely tall woman, and incredibly ugly, with a broad flat colourless face, a black moustache, and grey hairs on her chin, she had been with Colonel Sykes for seven years. Her name was Death, Mrs. Jane Death. “Cheerful name” as the colonel put it —“and safe.” Having lived the life, he appreciated safety. No chance of any romantic foibles being attached to Jane Death. “Might as well consider a little riskiness with Cleopatra’s needle.”

Colonel Sykes completed the lighting of his cigarette and threw the match into a brass ash-tray on his writing-table. The woman was still clearing the table, and he glanced a little testily over his left shoulder. What a time she was about it!

The door closed upon the straight immensity of this black figure and china jiggering on a metal tea-tray. The colonel faced about and dropped his eye-glass. The thought had been recurring of late that Mrs. Death was

becoming a little too authoritative. “Knows too much about me, damn it!” Which she did. Also, there was another reason for Toby Syke’s reaction against the funereal finality of the woman’s name. Death? Not a bit of it. He was feeling young, sentimentally and benignly young, a well-tailored Orpheus capable of leading life back out of the shades, a bachelor Orpheus whose young old fingers were fidgeting to twang the strings of a romantic and domestic lyre! The inspiration piqued his mature youthfulness.

Over the mantelpiece hung a mirror of the Regency period, and Colonel Sykes wandered firewards to look at himself in the mirror, carefully and with a certain complacent primness. He passed a hand over the back of his head, and gathering his eye-glass, adjusted it into his left eye.

“Capital, capital! Splendid, splendid!”

Notable words during the war, for the junior members of his mess had caught their colonel on one occasion in this very same pose, and addressing his own reflection. Irreverently they had christened him the “Parrot.” Those words served him in every sort of crisis, or when he was feeling young, or had accepted a cigar, or wished to be sporting at golf, or to praise some noble sentiment.

“Splendid! Capital!”

He returned to the window, and from it he could look down the cinder Via Sacra he had created, and command the various homesteads, and by shifting his position a little he was able to obtain a view of a portion of the Viner’s back garden. The Jamiesons had planted a golden privet hedge against a portion of the boundary fence and over the top of this hedge Colonel Sykes beheld a deck chair and a young woman sitting in it. It was an April day and warm, but the young woman was all wrapped up, April herself convalescing after March.

The Colonel’s eyes grew sentimental.

“Poor child,—poor little Mary.”

Twenty-six was she! And he felt less than forty, and was quite sure that he could pass for forty-five. Splendid, splendid! Capital, capital! A pretty, affectionate, dark-eyed creature was Mary Viner, a young woman who stayed at home and did her job, God bless her, without much jam on the bread. The poor old Viners were very dull people, anecdotal sit-by-the-fire folk and the woman Death would have made a much more suitable nurse for them than a pretty girl who ought to have been eating chocolates out of a box.

Colonel Sykes stroked his chin and considered the girl in the deck chair. Poor little Mary! Life was rather hard for her, nothing but the filling of hot

water bottles for a couple of amiable old bores! and there she was sunning herself after a nasty bout of flu. She needed a month at the seaside or in Switzerland, away from Harold Coode's patched shirt and his devotion, and the voices and the strawberry jam faces of the Jamieson children. Blatant people those Jamiesons. Sorry he had sold the land to them. And Coode was the sort of fellow who took off his hat when he met a funeral. Quite right—of course—and proper, but Coode would do it with too much nobility, or as though it was the one and only funeral he had ever met.

Colonel Sykes collected copies of *Punch*, and the *Graphic*, and the *Bystander*. Not that he needed an excuse to wander into the "Green Shutters" garden, and stand with an air of tender distinction beside Mary's chair. How was she to-day? Better? Capital, capital; splendid,—splendid! For he was beginning to feel himself a veritable Lochinvar destined to snatch her up and carry her on to a world of sentimental happening. He was sure that she would make a sweet wife. He would buy a new car, teach her to play golf, and rid himself of the Death woman.

Pausing with his bundle of magazines he looked with sentimental blue eyes in the direction of his gentle lady. Someone was coming up the cinder road, a man in a grey green suit, and wearing new brown boots that glistened. That fellow Furze,—“Captain Furze!” To Colonel Sykes there was no incongruity in the reverting of a temporary captain to the status of a milkman, but when he saw Furze stop at the “Green Shutters” gate he felt challenged. What did the chap want there? Had he called for his money? The Viners were never anything but hard up. And the fellow could not be allowed to dun the household when Mary was lying there convalescing.

Obviously—no! Colonel Toby had begun to think of her as his Mary. He settled his eye-glass, tucked the magazines under one arm, and went out for kindly intervention should intervention be necessary. He rather hoped that it would.

Reaching the “Green Shutters” gate he saw no one on the doorstep. Had the fellow pushed his way in? Colonel Sykes deliberated, and then cut neatly round the house to the patch of grass at the back of it, to find Furze standing beside Mary Viner's chair. H'm, damned cheek! Surely——?

He was very much the great gentleman. He arrived convincingly on the other side of Mary's chair, eye-glass glimmering, magazines at the present, his heels together.

“Well, how are we to-day? Better? Capital, capital! Brought you a few things to look at.”

Very properly, when he had paid his homage to the lady, he attended to the man.

“Afternoon, Furze.”

Furze smiled and nodded.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

The next few moments were a little awkward, for Furze remained on the other side of the chair with an air of having as much right to be there as had Colonel Sykes, yes,—and more right. He was twenty-five years younger; he had come in the spring of the year to this April woman; he made the colonel look like a withered old chancleer. Moreover, he had ease, and the repose of a strong thing rooted on that grass patch, a little shy and reserved, but capable of smiling.

Colonel Toby did not feel like smiling. He dropped his eye-glass, picked up one of the magazines, and discovering a particular picture, displayed it before Mary’s eyes.

“See that. Sir Carnaby Jackson. Knew him in India. Used to play polo together.”

“How interesting.”

She looked at the photo of Sir Carnaby, and Colonel Sykes looked at her. What was the matter? Frightened? Yes, she looked frightened, distressed. Surely, that fellow had not come to present a bill for milk and eggs? He glanced under his yellow-grey eyebrows at Furze who was staring intently and with a puzzled gentleness at Mary’s feet. Tucked up in the rug they had fidgeted themselves free, and one shoe was half off. The colonel was shocked. He saw Furze bend down as if he was doing the most natural thing in the world; he slipped the shoe back on to Mary Viner’s foot, and readjusted the rug.

“Damn the fellow!” thought Colonel Sykes.

He replaced his eye-glass, and discovered blushes, a glowing, quivering face, and eyes that were veiled. No wonder! Infernal cheek of the chap! He felt excessively hot and annoyed. Capital, capital, splendid, splendid! No, not exactly. And Furze had his hands in his pockets, and was looking down at the rug-covered feet, and was smiling as in a dream.

Colonel Sykes cleared his throat. Something needed saying,—and the remark that arrived had to be directed to old Hesketh who appeared with a trowel and a trug basket containing—well—of all things—the scrapings of the chicken-house.

“Ha,—Viner, active again—I see.”

Captain Hesketh was one of God's most simple creatures.

"A little something for my sweet peas, Sykes."

"Capital,—capital!"

But the surprise was yet to come. The big fellow appeared to wake out of his dream. He was smiling at old Hesketh and taking the trug from him, and though they had only approached each other over milk bills, they went off together like a couple of dogs who understood each other from the first mingling of their doggy sense of smell. Furze was saying something to the old man. They walked on past the six blackcurrant bushes and the two scraggy pyramid apple trees to where old Hesketh cherished his sweet peas.

Colonel Syke's eye-glass fell out of his eye, and he bent devotedly and just a little deprecatingly over the April woman.

"My dear little lady,—I do hope—ahem—that that fellow has not been _____"

She went the colour of June.

"I don't quite understand."

Her brown eyes were all blurred. Colonel Sykes smoothed the air with a suave hand.

"You really must excuse me, little lady. I am concerned. The fellow has been worrying you——"

She was almost voiceless.

"Worrying?"

"Yes, with some wretched milk bill—or other."

Her face seemed to sink into an extraordinary and blank silence. She was groping for something,—her handkerchief. She found it and pressed it over her mouth.

Colonel Sykes never discovered the truth of the matter, for when his April Lady had smothered what he took to be a spasm of coughing, she erected a barrier between herself and that too intimate and sentimental eye-glass. She spread one of the papers he had brought her, and made desultory remarks upon the illustrations, while he had to stand at the back of her chair in order to see what she was talking about.

"Ha," he said to himself, "sensitive,—proud, of course. Does not wish to talk about it. Such sweet, silent pride is adorable."

When all the pictures had been looked at twice *Punch* was put away, and then the brown eyes of Mary Viner rediscovered her lover. Colonel Toby's eye-glass glimmered towards the same quarter, the strip of ground beyond the currant bushes and the apple trees. Dash it, if the fellow had not got his coat off, and possessed himself of a spade, and was hard at it opening a trench for the planting of Captain Viner's sweet peas. And there was old Hesketh with his trugful—of—a'hem—tipping it into the bottom of the trench that Furze was digging!

“Capital, capital! So—Mr. Furze comes in and does odd jobs for you?”

She did not appear to catch the remark.

“A useful fellow. Might employ him myself—now and again. By the way—what does he charge by the hour?”

Her brown eyes remained utterly innocent.

“I don't know. Why not ask him?”

He had had his “devoir” given him by his dear lady, and since his sense of direction was limited and his only movements were one of advance or retreat, he marched across to where Furze was digging and old Hesketh was scattering the colour that was to be. Mary could do nothing else but watch. She saw Arnold Furze pause in his digging, and stand with his two hands on his spade. Colonel Sykes was speaking, and Furze was looking into the colonel's face. The man with the spade had dignity, and realizing his dignity she was both afraid and glad.

Colonel Sykes returned to her. He did not see the faces of the two Jamieson children projecting above the fence, each with a penny screwed into an eye, but Mary saw them, and all her sympathy was with the colonel. The Jamieson children always produced in her an angry and self-conscious seriousness. She lost her sense of humour—and she had not too much of it—when those two strawberry-jam faces appeared above the fence. Little beasts! Her elderly Orpheus discovered her a readier listener to his sentimental music.

“The man's too busy. I asked him. Wonder if I put my foot in it, Mary?”

She dared to remind him that Furze was a farmer, and that when a man had a hundred and twenty acres and cattle to look after——. Besides, in spite of a surface smile, she had her grievance against the great man. She could not decide how much or how little guile lay behind that eye-glass. Having lived with her father's simplicity for twenty years and marvelled at it, she was on the watch for a like simplicity in other old soldiers. For to her Colonel Sykes was old, though he did not appear to know it.

Very properly he asked after her mother, while she tried not to see those detestable children, each with one blue eye and one copper one. They were beginning to giggle.

“Mother is rather weak—still.”

Colonel Sykes had “Capital, capital”—on the tip of his tongue, but managed to withdraw the words before they had escaped.

“She must be careful. These spring days—treacherous—you know. Sure—now—that you don’t feel chilly, dear lady?”

She assured him that she felt quite warm, and was suddenly and horribly afraid that he was about to do something foolish. She felt it in the air, a quivering of his sandy eye-lashes over eyes that were suffused and tender. O, bother the men; he was going to be as troublesome as poor Coode! And then the Jamieson children extracted her from this delicate situation.

Giggles, and the sound of a mouth making a smacking sound on the back of fat red hand! Colonel Sykes, looking round sharply, saw the two faces and the pennies. He glared. The two heads disappeared, and there were sounds of joy behind the fence.

He lingered a moment, very stiff and proper, keeping that brave circle of crystal glued into his red face.

“Damn those infernal children! That’s what comes of selling land to such people.”

Mary lay relaxed, eyes half closed, watching Furze and her father.

3

Under her rug lay a bunch of primroses. He had brought them wrapped up and hidden in a clean handkerchief. “We have lots of these. I thought you might like a few.” He had stood holding them with an air of grave shyness until she had put out her hand and taken them, and thanked him, not looking at his face but at the flowers. She had heard his voice going on. “They came out of Gore Wood. Masses of them there since I had some oaks felled and the underwood cut over. Same with other flowers. Bluebells later, like a bit of blue sky fallen down on the ground. And then—foxgloves. I hope you are better?”

A bunch of primroses, that was Colonel Sykes’ imaginary bill, concealed from the conquering eye-glass, lying snugly somewhere near her bosom. She lay and watched the two over yonder, the strong man with the spade, and poor old Hesketh with his egg-shaped head looking too heavy for his thin neck, and his long legs flopping about as though neither quite knew

what the other was doing. She heard Furze speaking to her father, and his voice had a gentleness.

She felt warmed, and yet curiously alert and afraid. He disturbed her. He appeared to her as deliberate as the seasons, a vernal equinox of a man, part of the inevitable purpose of the soil. And he was no fool. Cinder Town was full of fools, nice and otherwise, and there were times when she grasped the implication of their foolish ineffectualness. That was why Cinder Town was. His choosing of Colonel Toby had impressed her. So wisely done, and yet so naturally! To go off with her father and get a spade and to start digging! She had known at once that his spade would outlast and out-talk Colonel Sykes' tongue. Doomsday! No, assuredly he was not to be hustled out of his opportunity, having made it and seized it, or—perhaps planted it.

She knew that presently he would come back to her and stand beside her chair. She was both afraid and excited. His eyes looked at you as though you were a piece of land that he wanted and meant to have, not arrogantly, but with profound conviction. She neither accepted her liking of him nor repelled it. He was just there, to be looked at and wondered about, something new and strange, an open doorway in her dull life.

The work was over. He had put on his coat. He came towards her with her father, still carrying the spade. He stood beside her with a kind of glowing silence, looking at her figure, for an impulse that was feminine had made her slip the rug back so that the bunch of primroses showed. She did not mean all that he thought she meant.

“I am so glad you are better.”

He glanced at old Hesketh.

“It was good of you, sir, to let me.—Yes, I must be getting back now. Work is never done on a farm.”

He raised his hat, and the glow of him seemed to envelop her.

“You have saved my back,” said her father. “Mary, Mr. Furze ought to have had tea with us.”

She found her voice.

“Oh,—another day—perhaps.”

VI

1



OR ARNOLD FURZE life, that spring, renewed all its strangeness and its mystery. It began with the singing of birds in the greyness of the dawn, a chant such as it seemed to him he had never heard before, the whole earth waking suddenly into exultation. Pippings in the orchard and in the hedgerows. But there were other volumes of song, a massed chorus that came from Gore Wood, and another and fainter thrilling that trembled across the meadows from Rushy. A blackbird in the Doomsday orchard led off the chant each morning, and a thrush ended it, piping “Awake—awake” to the blossom that slumbered. Furze never drew a curtain, for daylight found him stirring, and in the long light evenings he was about till dusk sent him to bed. The rising sun looked in at the orchard window, and lit up the rosy lips of the apple blossom, and turned the young green of the pear leaves to gold. Masses of white cloud floated brilliantly above the dim blue woods. And on rainy mornings even the rain sang a song to him. Murmuring upon the great, spreading roof of the cow-house, it joined its soft moist music to the purr of the milk into the milking pail.

About half-past five was his usual hour for rising, but this spring he rose at five, adding those extra minutes to the day’s labour of mystery. Those still and secret hours of the dawn, with the yellow sunlight stealing through, and dew everywhere, and the stillness and the solitude, how he loved them. Each dawn came with a sense of adventure. He would put a match to some kindling and hang the kettle over it, and go out and up the lane as far as Six Firs, Bobbo at his heels—and as grey as the dew-covered grass. He would climb the mound, and stand for a moment looking towards the little red and white and green and brown houses. Cinderella Town! They were asleep down there. They had nothing to get them out of bed, no clamorous crows, and no cows with swelling udders, and all the essential urgency of the soil. But she—she would be up earlier than most of them, mysteriously busy about mysteriously simple things, lighting fires and sweeping rooms. The distant contemplation of her labours fascinated him, for they were coming to have a personal meaning for him, a glamour, a tenderness. The man in him

reached out to the imagined woman in her. He saw her at “Doomsday,” moving about the house, more happily busy perhaps than she could be down yonder.

Wandering back with his face to the dawn he would see his old house as a symbol, raising its chimneys above the young green of the larches. The flames of the wood fire would be licking the black kettle. That early cup of tea and slice of bread and butter had the flavour of a sacrament. Then followed his half-hour of service. Chicken coops had been banished from Mrs. Damaris’ garden; he had scythed the grass, and collected some stone flagstones, and made a path, and now he was at work digging a border under the grey wall and two beds—one on either side of the path. He had begged, bought, or scrounged plants, sweet-williams, Canterbury bells, white pinks, snapdragons. He was sowing annuals, larkspur, correopsis, candytuft, marigold, flax, Virginia stock, mignonette, nasturtiums. My Lady’s garden should be dressed and perfumed after all these years. Flowers for Cinderella.

For she had taken his primroses.

His large simplicity moved to the new measure. Never had he felt so strong or so tireless, and yet he seemed to have more time to think and to feel. The days had lost all sense of effort. Driving the milk-cans to Melhurst station, or harrowing his wheat, or rolling the meadows, or milking, or hoeing his bean field, he felt life moving easily, like a young man well mounted setting out upon an adventure. His love for the old place increased. He would wander out in the dusk, with the birds singing their vespers, and the woods growing a greyish blue, and a faint mist spreading over the Long Meadow. Perhaps he would wander in among the oaks of Gore Wood, where the young oak foliage was the colour of gold above the pale faces of the last primroses. Wild hyacinths were beginning to make a blueness there.

Why should he not ask her to come and see them?

Yes, he wanted her to see it all, to be able to spread it before her in its beauty as he saw it, the fading gorse and the yellow broom of the Wilderness, and the young bracken like shepherds’ crooks, and the golden spikes of the beeches bursting with an incredible greenness, and his orchard in bloom, and those emerald larches, and Rushy Pool with a few kingcups still left, and his meadows, and his sleek violet-eyed cattle. Surely she would love it all as he did, and feel the beauty and the goodness and the cleanness of this English land. Devoutly dreaming, he believed that she would.

“Mary Viner, Mary Viner.”

The thrush who perched on the old cedar sang her name. He saw the face in the milk, her lips in the budding apple blossom, her eyes in the brown

water.

But chiefly now he loved to loiter in Mrs. Damaris' garden under the window of the white parlour, for it was here that his man's thoughts took shape. He would stand with his back against the stone wall, and watch the light die out of the sky, and the stars prick the increasing blackness. Here was grass for her feet, and flowers for her hands. Next spring it should be a mass of hyacinths and tulips. Music in colour,—a Schubert's song.

Then, perhaps, he would go in and feel a little chilled by the empty and barren house. No fit place for her yet, but if her heart was as his he felt that he could pull the welkin down to hang it on the walls for her. Hangings of blue and of gold.

Meanwhile he would light the lamp, and sit down at the rough table with his account book and a pencil and some odd pieces of paper, and make calculations and scribble little sums. His figures were like himself, large and simple and steadfast. He would run his hand over his wavy brown head. Supposing he did without the corn-crusher and the new wagon and harness in the autumn? The reaper he must have. The farm was showing a profit; he had money at the bank; he felt sure that his strong hands could drag more money out of the soil. Yes, supposing he furnished a bedroom, the parlour, the sitting-room and the kitchen, not flimsily, no, but with gear fit for her? By God,—of course it could be done. The soil had been swallowing everything; it was fat and lusty; let the house have its turn.

Arnold was a man of method—even as a lover, and part of his success as a farmer was due to his methodical intelligence. He kept accurate accounts, a diary, and a day-book in which he entered up the work for the week in front of him, and the keeping of these books was an act of heroism, as any man who has to strive with the soil will tell you. To feel dog tired and sleepy, and yet to make yourself sit down and scribble! That is where will-force comes in, and Furze had been taught that half the farming of England is laborious and haphazard, without that last flip of intelligence which knows where the muck goes, or how the money comes, and has it down on paper.

He did his scribbling last thing at night, after half an hour at his piano, sitting in his socks, breeches and shirt, his feet tucked back under his chair, both arms spread on the table. He hated this scribbling but he made himself do it, and many had been the times when he had blessed himself for doing it. It was a check on himself, and a check on Will Blossom, for however good a man's body is—his brain may be a sheep's, and such was Will's.

But now Furze would pause and dream a little. He might win a partner. And perhaps she would sit at a table and write for him while he dictated the day's doings. A wife was interested—surely?

“You are tired, Arnold. Sit and smoke and talk, and I'll write.”

Yes, he would love her for that, and perhaps she would love doing it.

The routine of his life began to be altered in a dozen significant ways. His camp-bed had ascended into one of the bedrooms; the kitchen became a kitchen, and the living-room something of what it should be. Logs ceased to be piled in a corner; the work-bench was transferred to an out-house. The home-made table had its legs planed and stained, and its top covered with a blue and white cloth. Sarah Blossom gave the house two days a week instead of one, and she—being a woman—had eyes in her head and a tongue.

“Muster Furze be sweet on someone.”

Yes, because a man does not become suddenly fussy about his house, and rise to table cloths and electro-plated spoons and forks without an adequate reason. And that garden, and those flowers! Mrs. Blossom was a little, thin, rat-trap of a woman with a bluish tip to her long nose, and straight, mouse-coloured hair dragged back very tight off her forehead. She was a careful woman, close, with shiny and clutching red hands. Furze had always noticed her hands. He disliked the idea of them touching his food.

Mrs. Blossom talked. In such little, mean lives as hers talking becomes a vice, a vocal drunkenness or incontinence. She got her excitement out of talking. Yes, Furze was wearing two shirts a week instead of one; changed his working shirt after milking-time. And three soft collars a week instead of one and a half. And he had a new pair of brown shoes, and he shaved himself every day. And he had planed those table legs and stained them! Hee, hee, hee!

Mrs. Blossom had an irreverent mind. Those table legs seemed to her a great jest. She would go off into thin laughter that was rather like a sheep's bleating, and press her red hands to her breastless bosom, and screw her head on one side.

“Don't know who 'tis,—but there's a gel—somewhere.”

She was always cross-questioning Will.

“Ain't you seen a gel—any time?”

Will hadn't. Domestic life had tended to make him more and more like a blue-eyed bull, surly and sluggish, and breaking out occasionally into exasperated bellowings. He was a good fellow, but in the bull-ring of marriage his wife's tongue maddened him.

“Guess it be one of the gels at Cinder Town.”

She was so eager to get her nasty little blue-tipped nose into the mystery of Arnold Furze’s transfiguration that she would go wandering down the lane of an evening, ostensibly to gather rabbit food. The Blossom cottage stood on the road to Rotherbridge. When met and spoken to butter would not melt in her mouth, but remained there to turn rancid.

“Evening, Mrs. Blossom.”

“Good evening to you, sir.”

She had caught him in the lane, wearing a clean collar, and with something bulging in his pocket, and going towards the main road. She had an apron full of green herbage. She idled after him far enough to see that he went down to the Sandihurst Estate. There were happenings in the air. Will had had orders to have the blue waggon and the greys ready early to-morrow morning. There was to be a sale at Melhurst. Mrs. Blossom had seen the auctioneer’s placard posted on the back of Mr. Burnham’s cowshed.

2

Mary Viner was mowing the lawn. She herself called it a grass plot, but to her mother and her father it was the lawn, twenty feet square between the road and the fence and the house. An ash path divided it on Harold Coode’s side from the herbaceous border; towards the Jamiesons it was flanked by a privet hedge that did not exclude the red and intrusive faces of the Jamieson children. The lawn held a circular bed in its centre where Captain Viner tried to grow violas, and the slugs saw to it that his success was relative.

The Viner mowing-machine was like most things in Cinder Town, a make-shift, cheaply American, and second-hand at that. It gnawed the grass instead of cutting it. It had clenched its teeth upon many rusty nails and small stones, and its soul had grown churlish and embittered. It clanked and rattled and squeaked.

Mary went to and fro with the cross-piece of the handle pressing close to her young bosom. She remained strictly attentive to the business in hand, for poor Coode was hovering like a celestial scout-master eager for a day’s good deed. She knew that if she relented ever so little he would come and hang devotedly over the fence. “I say,—do you think—you—ought—to do that? After ’flu? Why not let me do it for you?” Also, she had seen Colonel Toby strolling in his garden, smoking a cigar, and that little circle of crystal had flashed frequently in her direction. “Fine young woman. Cutting grass! No false pride. Capital, capital!”

Furze came to the gate a moment after the knives of the machine had jammed, and she was trying to extract a rusty wire-nail from the mower's teeth. Hot, flushed, and a little peeved, she looked up and saw him. He was half inside the gate.

"Trouble?"

His glance had a deep and lingering steadfastness. It disturbed and fluttered her, so that her colour came more quickly. Her brown eyes were elusive. Yes, she was in trouble. This beastly old machine—!

He smiled and bent over the mower.

"Builders scatter their nails—like the bread in the Bible. On grass—though."

His strong brown fingers freed the blades. He tossed the bent nail into the flower bed, and without a "Shall I?" or an "If you please," began to finish the job for her. And she stood and watched him, feeling vividly conscious of him and of herself, and of all the windows and the gardens, and of poor Coode melting away nobly, and of Colonel Sykes' eye-glass fixed upon them like the eye-piece of a telescope.

"It wants sharpening," he said suddenly.

She agreed that most probably it did.

"And oiling."

"Does it?"

"Afraid so."

"I use the oiler belonging to my bicycle, and I've lost it."

"Bad luck for the machine!"

He paused, smiling, and she had an impression of white teeth and very deep blue eyes in a very brown face.

"I use a scythe."

"Isn't that—rather difficult?"

"Not when you have the hang of it and know how to have the blade. Makes a nicer noise too. Purrs."

A few stridings to and fro and the mowing was finished. He picked up the machine.

"Where do you keep it?"

"Oh,—in the tool-shed."

She led the way to the tool-shed, a brown box no bigger than a small chicken-house. It also contained her bicycle, and a barrow with a wobbly wheel, and a few odd tools. She felt apologetic about the tool-shed, as she

felt apologetic about nearly everything connected with her existence in Cinder Town. How trivial it all seemed, and she resented its triviality, for she conceived herself cheapened by it.

“I hope you are better?”

He had put the mower away and had shut the door, and she was wondering whether she should ask him into the house. She was ashamed of the house. Also there was the question of supper, and even the sunset and the soft green splendour of this spring evening were effaced by her vision of a small leg of mutton carved to the bone and a few cold potatoes waiting in the larder. Her father was one of those dear and hopeless souls who can never learn to understand a woman’s sensitiveness, her hatred of being caught with no cake for tea. “Mary,—Mr. Furze will stay to supper.” And how could she produce that scraggy end of mutton? Supper—too! Real people dined.

She said that she was quite well now.

“And your mother?”

“O,—much better, thank you.”

He was taking something out of the side pocket of his coat, six brown eggs in a paper bag. He handed them to her.

“Thought your mother might like these.”

The nay of her mood gave place to the yea. She was touched. Six brown eggs in a paper bag! She had to ask him into the house after that, and to show the eggs to Mrs. Viner who was a child in these matters. “See what Mr. Furze has brought you.” Old Hesketh, who was a sahib, however simple he might be, tried to make Furze take his armchair. “Sit down, my dear fellow”; but Furze would not hear of it. He sat on a hard chair in front of the fire, between the two old people, with Mary on a foot-stool and quite close to him, so close that his dream seemed to be coming down to earth.

They talked, or rather Hesketh and his guest talked, while Mrs. Charlotte knitted and threw at Furze quick birdlike glances. She was considering the man who brought them flowers and eggs, and who wanted to marry her daughter. A farmer, but a farmer who could claim to have that notable word “gentleman” added to him. Yes, Mr. Arnold Furze—gentleman farmer. Mrs. Viner asked of fate to be allowed her gentleman. Captain Furze was not “service,” of course, not a pukka captain, but in these topsy-turvy days did it matter? The little old lady’s bright-eyed, birdlike mind reflected a more clearly cut image of life than did her daughter’s, for she had lived her life, and Mary had not. Even a twittering old lady must be allowed her philosophy, and a wise, thrush-like glance at the responsible man. To Mrs.

Viner it was most important that a husband should be kind; strong too, and capable of using a protective shoulder; also just a little exacting at times. So she knitted and watched and listened, her head on one side like an attentive bird's. She did not want to lose Mary, but if Mary had to be lost, well—"Doomsday" was very near; moreover, Mrs. Charlotte liked Arnold Furze. He was kind; he could sit still and talk quietly and naturally to two old people; she watched his eyes when he looked at her daughter. Yes,—that was the way a man should look at a woman, with human wonder at so human and wonderful a thing.

Like most women—an innocent snob—she could be impressed by frankness—and by the easy carriage of the man who possesses what has been called inward dignity. Furze talked a little about the farm and his work. He was so unashamed of it that Mrs. Viner felt that there was nothing to be ashamed of. He could laugh—too—at some of his struggles and his makeshifts. Not one of your fussy, irritable little men, who must walk on his toes and crow.

"You ought to see the bluebells in Gore Wood."

His eyes seemed to catch the firelight as he spoke of the wild flowers and looked down at Mary.

"You too, sir, if you are fond of flowers."

Cinderella, one hand along the cheek turned to the fire, seemed to muse.

"I should love to."

"Any time you like. Go where you please, you know. The Wilderness too is a picture, all yellow broom and young bracken. It lies above Rushy Pool and Wood."

He was silent for half a minute after offering her free trespass upon his farm, and then suddenly he rose, bent to Mrs. Charlotte, and laid a big and restraining hand on old Hesketh's shoulder. "Please don't get up, sir." Captain Viner produced the inevitable invitation to supper, and there was a moment of feminine suspense quickly relieved by Furze's refusal.

Mary went with him to the door, and since the dusk had fallen and she was grateful to him for going, she went a little farther. He paused at the gate and held it open as though he hoped that she would go with him as far as the main road. He looked at the sky, and at a moon coming up over Beech Ho.

"You know that when I say a thing I mean it, Mary."

It was the first time that he had called her Mary, and he uttered the name as though it was both beautiful and sacred.

"I believe you do. You mean—about the farm?"

“Yes, go when you please, and take what you please. Fruit,—flowers,—anything.”

He moved out into the road, and she felt herself drawn out into the dusk. The spell of his tenderness was upon her, the gentle lure of his strength. And there may have been some curiosity behind her vague emotion, and a little thrill of conscious power.

He was silent for a moment. Her drifting out with him into the dusk was so blessed a happening.

“I’m going to Melhurst to-morrow. There is a big sale on there. I am taking the wagon.”

“That sounds as though you were going to spend a great deal of money.”

“Just as little as I can for as much as I can get.”

“Animals?”

She fancied that he laughed slightly and soundlessly, if laughter can be soundless.

“No,—furniture and things.”

“O,—furniture.”

Very significant—that, and she knew it. The day in her felt that it was time to turn back.

“You love old things.”

“Old things for an old house. I shall be away most of the day. Wish me luck, will you?”

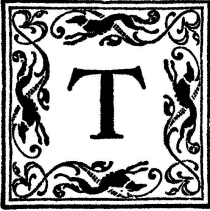
“Of course,” she said, pausing by the Engledew’s gate, and looking at the moon; “I wish you all sorts of bargains.”

They parted there—she going back to that dull little house, and he to the great spaces of his fields and woodlands. He felt that he could throw his hat as high as the tops of the Six Firs, but she had been caught by a sudden panic of seriousness. She was looking beyond him, and through the quivering air of her emotion at the ultimate choice and its finalities.

Doomsday! A farm!

VII

1



HAT she should happen to see the wagon pass down the Melhurst road next morning was a mere matter of coincidence. Furze was standing up in the wagon like a charioteer, and she saw the blue wagon and the grey horses and his brown figure melt into the young green of May. A mere coincidence, yes, but it would seem that the subconscious part of her had been at work during the night, and that an idea was materializing. The bluebells in Gore Wood! And to begin with, the idea and its inspiration were as delicate and as virginal as the very scent of the wild hyacinths.

Arnold had given her the right of free trespass upon his farm, and her choosing to exercise this right while he was away at Melhurst concealed a mood rather than a motive. She hurried through the morning's work, brought out her old bicycle as though she were bound for Carslake, but when the sentinel firs had passed her into the Doomsday lane she dismounted and loitered. She was neither very sure of herself nor of her purpose. The passion to escape, to have a good time, to attain self-expression were like the surge of the sap. And so she loitered, asking herself questions, treading with unsure feet on the edge of her lover's world. What, as a woman, did she mean by self-expression? Escape, whither and how, and to what end? Not to be rooted in routine and interminable repetition? She saw the Doomsday woods rising about her, green with a golden and changeful greenness, and cleft with blue distances. The larches made her pause, throwing their reflections in the still water of the pond where the water-crowfoot was showing white. A wood-pigeon crooned. There was a great silence everywhere, save for the sounds made by living things, the underchant of a spring day. Beautiful? Yes, she had to allow it its beauty, and her blood stirred a little, and her brown eyes became elvish. She turned down towards the farm buildings where a sunny sloth seemed to prevail, and no live thing moved save the hens and sparrows and two or three young porkers scampering over the straw of a byre. Will and his boy were up the fields. She was bound ostensibly for Gore Wood, but the way to it was unknown to her.

Leaning her bicycle against the gate she looked at the house,—his house. She had entered it but once, on that night when she had come for milk, and a place looks so different in the daylight. The house, as a thing of beauty, laid its appeal upon her. Its grey walls and mellowed brick, its lattices and great spreading roof and massive chimneys touched the romance in her, and displayed the old velvet of its texture to her sleek, comfort loving soul. And the smother of green about it, and the secrecy, and its little silent lattices with the glimmer of their glass lozenges, and the falling meadows, and the old cedar, and the great thorn hedges turning white! She felt that she would like to touch it, know it more intimately. And why not? He had given her leave to go everywhere, and the garden and the orchard were part of the everywhere. Not into the house itself—of course.

The Eve in her was tempted, and no Eve is without the knowledge of some secret apple, even though it be hidden in the foliage of a charming and wilful vagueness. She fell to the beckoning path beside the yew hedge. There were steps that went up and steps that went down. She eschewed the ascent, and descending, found herself in Mrs. Damaris' garden. She did not know that she was observed.

So this was his garden! She wandered across the scythed grass, and along the stone path, looking about her a little furtively. She was conscious of the windows of the house, and yet when she turned about to meet their scrutiny she realized that they were sightless eyes. No curtains, no blinds! Also, it seemed to her that the garden had a newness in its oldness. The work was recent, the very plants fetched in hurriedly to a love feast. She stood against the stone wall, and looked across the Doom paddock to the great thorn hedge. Two large black pigs were feeding in the paddock, their black bellies brushed by the buttercups.

Observed—yes, and by Mrs. Sarah Blossom who had come in to scrub out the bedrooms, and who—by standing well back in one of the upper rooms, could see my lady without being seen. So, it was Miss Mary Viner! Will had been told that morning that Captain, Mrs. and Miss Viner had wander-rights over the farm, and Will had told Mrs. Will. Captain and Mrs. Viner—indeed! What did Captain and Mrs. Viner signify? It was the girl he wanted down among the bluebells, yes, or on a summer evening in a quiet corner when the bracken was growing high. Miss Mary Viner!

And here she was. Mrs. Sarah took a good look at her from the back of that upper window, and considered the situation and its possibilities as they concerned herself. The future Mrs. Furze deserved the soft side of her tongue. Mrs. Sarah wiped her hands on her apron, and descended the stairs.

Mary heard the sound of a lattice being opened, and she faced about to see a woman shaking a duster from the window of Mrs. Damaris' parlour. The woman smiled at her.

“Good morning, Miss.”

Mary felt caught, though she had every right to be in Arnold Furze's garden. She was quick in remembering her excuse.

“O,—good morning.”

She approached the window, putting a pleasant face upon the occasion.

“Can you tell me the way to Gore Wood?”

“Of course I can, Miss Viner. The flowers—they be lovely—in the spring of the year.”

She conveyed to Mary the impression of a friendly but very respectful creature ripe for a gossip, but very respectful gossiping of course. Miss Viner was Miss Viner. O, yes, Mrs. Sarah knew how the honey was spread, or should be spread.

“Fine old house, Miss, be'nt it? Yes,—I come up Tuesdays and Fridays. Mr. Furze—he be mighty fond of it.—All beams it be. And there be a bedroom all walled with wood. I can't call to mind the right word for it, exactly.”

“Panelling,” said Mary.

“Yes, that be the word, Miss Viner. All oak—it be—and black as black.”

She flicked the duster, folded it up, and looked obsequiously sly.

“I've got to be going down to the cottage to get my man's dinner ready, Miss. Mr. Furze, he be away at Melhurst. I be leaving the key in the door. Maybe—you'd like to look over the house.”

Furze's broad gesture had not opened the house to her, nor should one accept the authority of a Sarah Blossom, so Mary thanked her and denied herself the time to make use of an unlocked door. She said again that she was going down to Gore Wood, and had been looking for someone to show her the way. Mrs. Sarah came out of the house, wearing an old cap of her husband's, and looking if anything more sly.

“I'll show you, Miss.”

They returned to the lane where Mary had left her bicycle against the gate. Mrs. Blossom assured her that the bicycle would be quite safe there. The way to Gore Wood lay through the field gate opposite the pond, and down across the Gore Field where the shorthorns were pastured. Mrs. Sarah left Mary at the gate and went on up the lane. She was sure that Miss Viner would make use of the key when she was left alone with the temptation.

It would appear that Mrs. Sarah knew her Mary better than Mary knew herself. The temptress had raised the edge of the curtain, and there was more behind Mary's fall than a natural and irresponsible curiosity. She was a twentieth century Eve. When romance offered itself, she fingered the magic garment, turned up the lining, and tried to estimate its wearing qualities. Such caution may be held to be either wise or foolish, balancing on a knife edge, or trying to teach nature to turn a wheel in a cage. People who wade cautiously into life like a timid girl paddling on a rather bleak foreshore are apt to be too conscious of the existence of crabs and pebbles. Nature prefers the plunger. Or you may more quickly learn to swim by being pushed into the deeps.

She left her bicycle against the gate and returned down the path. The eyes of the house looked at her, and she translated into their stare the varied thoughts and feelings of the moment. They reproached her; they were hostile; they hid things that she had a right to know; they challenged; they were both shy and sad. Surely a woman is justified in exploring that corner of life into which a man is devotedly seeking to inveigle her? Women's eyes see what a man's might miss, or they see them differently. The house is the woman's workshop. Why should she not inspect it before agreeing to work there?

The key was in the door. She went in and closed the door behind her, finding herself in the living-room, alone with Tibby the black cat somnolent and couchant on a windowsill. The cat did not turn a whisker. Mary was all eyes. Yes, the room looked different, more lived in or less lived in, she did not quite know which, but she thought it had a bare and draughty feeling. Three doors opening into it! She tried the one that Furze had closed when she had come for the milk, and she remembered her own flash of uncomfortable suspicion. Some other girl or woman! She stood in the middle of the little white room with its old Georgian grate and its deep window-seat. The sun poured in. She sat down in the window-seat and looked about her at the furniture Furze had collected, a prim sofa, two rather uncomfortable-looking chairs, a green and blue carpet that was already beginning to fade. And that painted wooden table! Poor man! She was conscious of a feeling of dismay.

Was the whole house like this? Driven from Mrs. Damaris' parlour by a curiosity that was self-conscious and a little ashamed, she found the stairs and went up to explore the rambling bedrooms. Their emptiness astonished her. Not a chair, not a bedstead, nothing but one or two old packing cases! Opening yet another door she discovered herself on the threshold of Furze's

room, and though she shrank back almost instantly, she had lingered long enough to realize its makeshifts. A camp bed, a dressing-table contrived out of two sugar boxes, a cheap, painted chest of drawers, clothes hanging on pegs.

Mary closed the door. She felt that she had been spying upon his secret poverty. She was swept by a little gust of shame and of pity. Poor man,—what a house! But her pity could not save her from a feeling of gradual and intense depression. The great, rambling, empty barrack of a place chilled her, even though the sun was shining. It would be a tyrannical, heart-breaking house to care for. And her feelings of depression deepened when she explored the kitchen and its belongings. It had a brick floor, an old stone sink with no water laid on, and a vast and rusty range whose bars seemed to snarl at her like unfriendly teeth. What a horror of a place, with one single dark looking cupboard, and a larder that smelt of mice! Even the “Green Shutters” kitchen was a paradise compared to this hole with its peeling walls and damp and chilly floor.

“I couldn’t,” her heart cried, “oh,—I couldn’t.”

She felt overwhelmed by the thought of the sordid struggle in which a woman would find herself involved. Water to be carried in, water to be heated, that ill-tempered savage old range to be fought or humoured, lamps to be cleaned and trimmed, floors washed down, while the peeling plaster fell into your frying pan. Not a decent cupboard; a plate rack that looked as though it had absorbed the grease of centuries; a sink that made her think of a drain.

She went back to Mrs. Damaris’ parlour and stood by the window where the sun poured in. She looked at the garden and the greenness of the hills. Yes, they were dressed and pleasant now, but she pictured them in the deeps of winter, with windows streaming—and the horizon blotted out.

Buried alive!

It seemed to her to be incomparably worse than Cinder Town, and she felt a choking and a pity. Poor man! But was he to be pitied? Were not men different? That black hole of a kitchen, with the coal shed away across a weedy yard, and the well outside the back door, and the long gloomy dairy where she had seen his long white milking-coat, hanging like a poor, pale thing that had committed suicide! He could live here and appear contented. And perhaps he would expect a woman to enter upon an interminable struggle with the cruel crudeness of the house, and think nothing of it? He held that a woman should work, and find her feminine salvation among the scrubbing brushes and the pots and pans.

She fled out of the house, feeling guilty and pitiful; and to justify her coming and those twenty minutes of exploration and of disillusionment Mary Viner went down to Gore Wood. She could see the wild hyacinths as thin sheets of blue under the young foliage of the oaks, and she sat down on the stump of a felled tree and tried to co-ordinate her prejudices and her emotions. So, he could expect a woman to bring herself there, a modern girl? Of course, dozens of women must have lived their lives at Doomsday, and scrubbed those floors, and drawn water on icy mornings from the well, and blundered about in that great cavern of a kitchen by candlelight, but they had been other women, country women, common and strong, born and bred to it. But she, with her fastidious hands, and her sensitiveness, and her passion for movement? She who loathed poverty and its limitations? It was not fair.

She cried out that it was not fair because there was a part of her that wanted to open its arms and leap. She wanted Arnold Furze the man, but not Arnold Furze the farmer.

He was so strong. He could rough it. But she began to be afraid of his very strength.

“He would not understand,” she thought. “The man on the land, the woman in the house. Yes, yes,—I know. A human partnership. And yet _____”

She picked a few bluebells, not because she wanted them, but to show that she had been there, for she might meet Mrs. Sarah in the lane. She disliked that woman, her cap, her nose, her sly and sidelong ways. O,—what a morning! And she thought of him and the wagon and the sale at Melhurst, and her heart hurt her. Why did he happen to be what he was, and why was she her fastidious self?

By the Six Firs she pushed her bicycle against the hedge, and climbing the mound, sat down at the foot of one of the trees. She saw Cinder Town very new and flimsy, and behind her lay the old house like a thing rooted in the soil. Yes, that was permanence, the life of the husbandman, getting up at dawn and going to bed at dusk, looking at the same fields and trees, doing the same things year in and year out. No holidays, no movement, no sunlight on southern seas, one’s excitements a new litter of pigs or a record mangel crop.

No, she felt that she simply could not stand it.

At Great Park Farm, Melhurst, country carts, cars, Fords, and a light lorry or two were parked in the paddock, while their owners went in search of bargains; and Furze, who had kept his greys under the shade of a big chestnut tree and in the charge of a friendly carter, wandered about catalogue in hand. Great Park spread itself in the arms of a pleasant and untidy old garden full of monkshood and lilac and guelder rose, and since the weather was fair much of the gear to be sold had been laid out in the garden.

Furze, pencil in hand, marked the lots upon the catalogue for which he wished to bid. Harnett the auctioneer had gathered in extraneous material, and it was a composite sale, and Great Park sheltered for the day much furniture that was strange to it. In the farmhouse parlour, with its wallpaper of red roses and blue garlands, Furze found a massive old oak table with chamfered rails and square legs, black-brown with age, put together by some village carpenter a hundred and fifty years ago. On the table was laid out a pink lustre tea-service, six cups and saucers, teapot, sugar bowl and milk-jug, and Furze, the lover, saw Mary's hands fluttering over the old china. He marked down the table, Lot 33, also the pink lustre tea-service, Lot 67. Wandering about the house with a crowd of farmers' wives and Melhurst women, and bargain hunters and snatchers up of the antique and the curious, he found many pieces fit for "Doomsday." His pencil left marks against an oak bureau, a mahogany chest of drawers, three old Windsor chairs, a bedstead, an oak chest, a long mirror in a faded gilt frame, a length of green cord stair carpet, a kitchen table, a deal cupboard, a set of knives, a willow pattern dinner service, a Chesterfield sofa that would need recovering. He jotted down against each item the amount that he could afford to bid for it. Particularly did he covet the old oak table and the pink lustre tea-service.

A dealer, old Symonds of Carslake, spoke to him in the kitchen. He knew Furze as an implacable bargain-hunter, a buyer of useful rubbish.

"Anything doing to-day, Mr. Furze?"

Old Symonds was a decent old boy, and Arnold confided to him his passion for the pink lustre.

"I suppose you fellows will be after it?"

Symonds screwed up his eyes.

"Not enough of it to be worth a scrimmage. Dare say I could get it for you."

"How much?"

"Can't say."

"Go to three pounds. My day's extravagance, Mr. Symonds."

Harnett held the sale in the garden, standing on a kitchen table under the shade of a lime tree, with a smaller table to serve as a rostrum. He was a bald-headed, cynical man, with a set smile, and a tired, flat voice. His gagging was conventional and perfunctory. "Thirteen shillings I am bid. Thirteen shillings! Unlucky number, ladies and gents. Make it fourteen. Thank you, Mr. Brown. Fourteen shillings I am bid, good kitchen table. Fifteen shillings, Mr. Furze. Fifteen shillings——"

It was a hot day, and the bidding was languid, and the crowd one such as Mr. Harnett was apt to describe as a "Lot of gaping stock-fish." Arnold was lucky. Mr. Symonds bought in the tea-service for one pound, fifteen shillings. Furze lost the oak bureau, but he won the table, the mahogany chest of drawers, the Windsor chairs, the bedstead, the oak chest, the long mirror, the stair carpet, the kitchen table and half a dozen other bargains.

With the help of a gentleman from Melhurst who was there to earn some casual silver as a porter Furze loaded his possessions on to the wagon, covered them with a rick cloth, and started for "Doomsday." His lunch had been a slice of bread and a piece of cheese, and some cold tea out of a bottle, but it was one of those days for him when a man does not feel physical hunger. He was happy. He walked beside his two greys with a mind full of possessive symbolism. The rose lustre tea-service, carefully packed in a box, was the cynosure of the day's happenings. Already he was making plans for the disposal of the furniture.

It happened that from the bank above the road Mary Viner saw the blue wagon pass as she had seen it set off in the morning. But much had happened. The wagon was full, but her heart felt empty.

Furze saw her and pulled up for a moment, and his face was happy. Her conscience smote her.

"I have done rather well."

She smiled down at the lover in him, because she loved the lover.

"I'm so glad."

"You must come and have tea, you and your people, when I am straight."

"We should love to."

He waved his hat and went on, leaving her to wonder why the lover should not suffice, and why he should be lost in the husband. For that is what happened; she had read it and been told it. Marriage was a wholly different affair. "My dear, flirt with the bank-clerk if you like,—but marry the banker." Clare's philosophy. Marriage should be comfortable; it needed cushions. Lovers might be content with a hay-cock or a bank of heather, and an ephemeral moonlight madness; marriage was a house to be lived in.

She returned to her “Green Shutters” and her old people, and the making of a gooseberry tart. Gooseberries were early that year.

Will Blossom worked until seven o'clock that evening on his master's beer and great good humour, helping to unload the wagon and carry the furniture into the house. The bedstead, the chest of drawers, and a little old mahogany washstand had to be persuaded up the narrow stairs. The rest of the purchases were left in the living-room.

Mrs. Blossom heard about it when her man came home.

“I tell 'ee 'e 'as bought a bedstead.”

Mrs. Sarah laughed.

“Looks like business, hee, hee, hee, though most gal's first bed be a grass bank or a dry ditch bottom.”

Her man growled at her.

“Muster Furze be'unt that sort.”

“Oh, ben't he! She was round there to-day.”

“Who be she?”

“That there Mary Viner. She looks ready for it, she do. Come to pick bluebells! Hee, hee, hee.”

Her man, irresponsibly stubborn, clumped through into the scullery to wash. He, too, had been caught at the hay-making season, and for his sins was the mate of the lady who annexed and wore his old caps. To Will Blossom marriage was symbolized by a tongue, and a jeering voice that never had anything good to say of anyone when the particular person was not there to hear it.

Meanwhile Furze was busy, happily busy, a pipe in his mouth, and all the windows open wide. And so were the windows of his soul. Having cleared the living-room by carrying the kitchen table and the cupboard and other necessities into the kitchen, and added to them his own home-made gear, he arranged the new life about the old oak table. The oak chest looked well under the east window. The three Windsor chairs he tried in various positions. The lounge sofa, the long mirror, a little old pie-crust table and two rugs went into Mrs. Damaris' parlour. Certainly, the sofa needed some attention, some flowery piece of cretonne draped over it temporarily, and a man who could mend harness ought to be able to tackle such a job.

Last of all he unpacked the pink lustre and laid it out on the oak table, while Bobbo, puzzled by so many movements and mutations, sat with his

head on one side and watched this new game. The evening light slanted through the west window, and the metallic and rosy glow of the old china seemed to float upon the dark sheen of the oak. Furze stood back with his hands in his pockets, and felt that the room was good.

VIII

1



T “DOOMSDAY” Arnold Furze had been preparing for a tea-party. Mrs. Sarah, chartered for an extra morning, had scrubbed the tiled floor of the living-room, and the brick floor of the kitchen, and poked her nose into all sorts of matters that did not concern her. Furze had locked up the pink lustre tea-service in a cupboard, and that locked cupboard had tantalized the lady through the whole of the morning. Now—what—had he got in there? The sugar and the tea no doubt, and his tobacco tin? Mrs. Sarah could not abide a suspicious temperament.

But the labour of love was the man’s. With oil and beeswax and two old socks he polished the oak table and the chest, and having bought a length of flowery cretonne at Carslake he ingeniously fashioned a sort of apron for the lounge sofa. It was stitched at the back and tucked in round the cushioning, much to the interest of the dog who attempted to lie on it, but was removed gently yet with a firmness that he understood. Furze brought in flowers. An old red bread-pan he filled with foxgloves and stood it in a corner, and on the oak table were crimson stocks in a blue bowl. A cream-pan on the oak chest held a mass of red and white may, and the scent of it was a sweet and heavy fragrance in the room. Mrs. Damaris’ parlour had a sheaf of yellow flags from Rushy Pool. As for the sunk garden, the Canterbury bells and the sweet-williams and the stocks were in early blossom; the grass had been scythed and the beds weeded.

The ritual of tea gave Furze some thoughtful moments. He decided to have the lustre service set out on the pie-crust table, and the bread and butter and the cakes on the painted table. And he would make the tea himself, or with Mary to help him. Young Blossom was sent up to Carslake for cakes, and getting seven for sixpence purloined and ate the seventh and most sugary one on the way back. Then there was the thin bread and butter. Furze cut it himself after his dinner, with great care and concentrated solemnity, finding the loaf rather too new and the knife too blunt for the carving of slices of ideal thinness. The beastly things would buttonhole! Still,—there it was, twelve slices well buttered, and laid like weather-boarding on one of the willow pattern dishes. He put it away in the dairy to keep moist.

If Mary Viner could have seen him! The big, deliberate, devoted thing with his large but sensitive hands arranging the flowers, and cutting that bread and butter! It is possible that his labours with loaf and knife and butter, breath held, eyes very serious, might have conquered her. It would have won him most women, the women who have touched the little, trivial, pathetic things of life. But Mary wished to have her bread and butter cut for her, and brought in by a spruce young woman with a bobbed head and a white-laced apron. She did not see it quite in that way. Her desire for happenings had outgrown her heart.

At half-past three Furze came in from hoeing weeds, and washed and put on his best suit. Afterwards, he strolled about the house, observant, excited, half in a dream, listening, giving some chair or piece of furniture a touch. He fetched the bread and butter from the dairy, saw that the kettle was on the boil, and kept looking at his watch. It was a hot day, abnormally hot for May. Should he wait in the house, or go up at the lane to meet them? He hesitated for a moment, on the path by the yew hedge, fancying that he could smell his bean field in bloom though it lay two hundred yards away beyond the Doom Paddock. Still, the wind—such as it was—came from the south-east.

He decided to wait in the house. That confounded cat might try to get its head into the milk-jug.

2

Mary Viner sometimes wondered how her mother and father had managed to be born, for always they were late for any party or occasion. Like many people with nothing to do they did not appear to have sufficient leisure even for the accomplishment of nothing, nor had they any sense of time. Their unpunctuality was one of the afflictions of her youth. Mrs. Charlotte could not write a letter without a final flourish of "In haste." Old Hesketh had a habit of taking a bath just when his daughter was ready to serve up dinner, or he would have to be summoned from some pottering job in the garden by the tinkling of a handbell. Furze had asked them for half-past four and at four-twenty Mary could hear them twittering away upstairs like a couple of sparrows busy building a nest.

She called up the stairs.

"It is nearly half-past four."

The door of the room opened.

"We shall not be five minutes dear. Your father found two buttons off his summer waistcoat."

The door was reclosed and Mary knew that nothing would hurry them. Yet—presently—they would come downstairs in a flutter, and looking very hot, having odd gloves or no gloves, or a broken shoe-lace. Or the hat-brush had been mislaid. Such agitation!

She would sigh, but not resignedly. And to-day it was she who felt fussed and agitated, and was yea and nay in the same breath. The weather was abominably hot; she had had a good deal of cooking to do, and she had dressed in a hurry, putting on a new biscuit-coloured frock and a brown hat; and at the last moment a stocking had “laddered.” Yes, she felt cross and agitated, and her heart seemed to be in a hurry, while her head was attempting to construct some compromise. What were they talking about upstairs? Absurd, futile, garrulous old people!

Then, her heart smote her. Poor old things, they were so very old, while she felt all the drive and impatience of her youth pushing against their little dawdling ineptitudes.

Yet the conversation upstairs concerned her, and was less selfish than her thoughts. Old Hesketh had accomplished a very indifferent knotting of his tie, and Mrs. Charlotte was retying it for him. In some ways he was still a great lanky, irresponsible, and rather lovable boy.

“Well, if it does happen, Nellie will come. She always said she would. And it would be a home for her. Do stand still,—Hesketh.”

“Sorry, my dear. These things have to be faced. One can’t stand in the way——”

“That’s better. Of course—a farmer’s life—not quite what one might wish.”

“A good life. A very decent fellow; character; and kind——”

“And quite near. Besides, he does own the farm. Mary had been so restless lately. I was almost afraid that she might do something foolish,—like marrying Colonel Sykes.”

Old Hesketh bristled.

“Sykes! You don’t mean to tell me——”

“I think so.”

“Preposterous! Why, the man is only ten years younger than I am. My dear, it is five-and-twenty minutes to five.”

“Dear, dear, we shall be late. Where is my sunshade? I’m sure I put it out. Look in the cupboard.”

Mary had to find the sunshade for her mother, and then the three of them set out as though they had had just five fluttering minutes in which to dress

and were chasing the wheels of a social whirl. Mrs. Charlotte tripped along very fast with her sunshade bobbing up and down, and Hesketh had the air of a man late for his own wedding. Like timid old birds they were flustered so easily. Youth drifted in the rear, impatient and absorbed, thinking its own thoughts, aloof and troubled. Brown eyes staring vaguely at green hedgerows, saw nothing but an inward tangle of thorns. Her silence passed unnoticed like the flight of some brown bird from tree to tree. She was full of questions that would not let themselves be answered, of warning impulses and impatient wisdoms. What a pity it was that life could not have been arranged differently, that is to say—as she would have chosen to arrange it. If she could have put Arnold into a fat chair in a fat London office where men seemed to make money just by sitting still? As Clare's husband made it. And here was all this sentimental pother, with her heart wanting something, and her head refusing to let her want it, and the hedges white with May blossom, and her stocking "laddered," and a man over yonder threatening her like a deep sea.

"Hesketh, isn't it green?"

She found her mother poised in the middle of the lane, surprised by a childish delight, while her father stood and smiled as some old men can smile.

"A green valley, a wonderful green valley."

"And those larches. And the two American oaks, and that white weed on the pond. Every shade of green."

The daughter felt irritated. Somehow it seemed to her absurd that her mother should have eyes for the greenness, and a childish delight in its beauty.

"It must be nearly five o'clock."

She shepherded them on, though they showed an inclination to dawdle at the gate because Mrs. Charlotte had seen a swallow, and because two young pigs were thrusting friendly noses under the bottom of the gate.

"Tig-tig," said her mother.

Absurd old lady! With Furze visible at the corner of the yew hedge, a man who had been kept waiting for half an hour.

"Mother, there is Mr. Furze."

She looked at Furze a little anxiously, and then denied him her eyes for quite three minutes, while he—with an air of unclouded pleasure, shook her mother's hand and then her father's, and said how hot it was and how glad he was to see them. But the house was cool; it was not built yesterday; and would they like to look at the garden? No; he was sure that Mary's mother

wanted her tea. He took her sunshade from her and closed it, and gave her his arm up the steps.

“You must not expect too much of a mere bachelor, Mrs. Viner.”

Mary’s mother fell into a sudden delight with the first room, and her delight was quite genuine. “What a lovely room, so restful. The old tiles and the oak. And what is it that is smelling so sweet?” He told her—“May blossom.” He looked very happy and a little shy, and his eyes kept touching Mary with quick, deep, tentative glances. What did she think of it? She stood there by the door, her brown eyes fixed upon nothing in particular, while her mother went on twittering.

“Your flowers, Mr. Furze! Who arranged them?”

“I did.”

“And what a lovely old table. Look at it, Hesketh.”

Captain Viner passed a lean brown hand over the oak surface.

“English oak; nothing so good.”

Bobbo had sidled in to have his head patted by all save the queer young woman who looked as though she had lost herself somewhere outside the house. Furze was opening the door of Mrs. Damaris’ parlour. “We will have tea in here. Yes, it was an ironmaster’s house, and I suppose Rushy was a hammer-pond.” His deep eyes were a little anxious, and Bobbo knew the look, and connected it with straying cattle or a sick sheep,—but where was the sick sheep on this particular occasion? Furze stood aside and they passed in, and he looked at Mary as she passed him, as though asking for something.

Mrs. Viner sat down on the sofa.

“Sweet,” she said, “perfectly sweet. And the garden! Why, you ought to have a peacock on that wall.”

“Perhaps we shall,” he laughed.

Mary’s mother was pulling off her gloves, and looking at the pink lustre. Her bright eyes glimmered.

“Well—you have got pink lustre! I’ve always wanted pink lustre. Mary, dear, isn’t it sweet?”

“Yes, very,” said the daughter.

Old Hesketh was held by the window, and the view, that complete and wonderful greenness, with distant hills floating a bluish grey between the spring woods. He was lost to the party for the moment. Furze was explaining that he had the tea to make, and that the kettle was boiling in the kitchen, and his eyes hoped for a consenting playfulness in Mary’s. Would

she not want to help him, and to see the kitchen? She had seen it, but he did not know that. She sat down in one of the basket chairs, with a troubled forehead and self-conscious eyes, and then got up quickly and joined her father at the window. Furze went out alone to make the tea.

Bobbo sidled out after him. He watched his master fill the pink lustre teapot, and they returned together to Mrs. Damaris' parlour. Mary had joined her mother on the sofa.

“Who will pour out for me?”

He looked from one to the other.

“Of course—Mary will,” said her mother.

“Will you?”

His eyes besought her. She rose from the sofa, but without looking at him, and took one of the chairs by the tea-table.

“We none of us take sugar. Do you?”

“I'm afraid I do.”

He was waiting to pass the cups, and thinking how well that biscuit-coloured frock and the little brown hat suited her. Her hands were moving over those pink cups, and they gave him a sense of tremulous agitation. But she was here, in his house, touching his possessions, the things that he had striven and waited for. She had picked up the milk-jug; its handle had been riveted, and with the weight of the milk in it the riveting gave way. There was a crash as the jug struck the edge of the table and broke; milk ran across the table and fell in a little stream upon the floor.

Her eyes trembled up at him.

“Oh,—I'm so sorry.”

He laughed. He wanted to tell her that she could break everything in the house. Her scared brown eyes and plaintive mouth made his love hold its breath.

“O,—that's all right. Not your fault. I ought to have tried that handle. Besides—there is plenty more milk.”

He gathered the broken pieces, and suddenly inspired—called the dog.

“Here, Bobbo, tongue—old chap, nice new milk.”

The dog came and lapped at the white pool and Furze laughed, and so drew a little awkward laughter from the others.

“Forestalling the cat!”

“But what a pity! That sweet jug!”

“Things with weak handles deserve to be broken, Mrs. Viner. I’ll get some more milk.”

“And a cloth. We must wipe the table and the carpet.”

The providing of more milk in a plain white jug was an easy matter, but the finding of a respectable glass-cloth was more of a problem. These domestic etceteras were not to be picked up so easily at “Doomsday.” Mrs. Sarah washed and dealt with such cloths as existed. And where the devil were the clean ones? He was away quite a long time, rummaging, and wondering whether he could use a clean handkerchief. Then he remembered the box of cloths in the dairy, for he was far more meticulous about the cleanliness of the dairy than of the kitchen, and he called himself a fool, and went and fetched a cloth. Mary took it from him. She looked very near to tears. She mopped up the spilt milk on the table, and would have gone down on her knees to complete Bobbo’s operations upon the carpet, but Furze would not have it. He thought her remorse adorable.

“No, no,—I’ll do that, while you pour out. I hope the tea isn’t stewed.”

“It can’t be too strong for me, my dear fellow,” said Captain Hesketh kindly.

“Oh, a little hot water,” said his wife.

“Hot water!” Another problem. What the dickens was he to use for hot water? Had he another jug? But why not put a bold face upon it and bring in the kettle? He did so, throwing the milk-soaked cloth into the stone sink.

So—at last—tea was served and they ate his laboriously shaved bread and butter, and three of the cakes, and conversed brightly so that the death among the china should be forgotten. But Mary looked as though tragedy had overtaken her, with a dewy sadness of the brown eyes, and a poignant droop of the mouth. And Furze loved her for looking like that.

3

Afterwards they went out into Mrs. Damaris’ garden, and where one of the old yews threw a band of shadow Furze placed two of his Windsor chairs. He would have carried out a third for Mary, but she—in a moment of wilful self-effacement—told him not to bother. She would sit on the grass.

“But in your new frock, my dear!” said her mother.

Mary looked peeved.

“Well—a cushion then, if Mr. Furze has an old one.”

She had broken his milk-jug, and now she was asking for cushions, and a cushion was a thing that he did not possess. But happily he remembered

that the padded seat of one of the basket-chairs was removable, and he went in and fetched it for her and placed it on the grass. Captain Hesketh was lighting a pipe. Mrs. Charlotte, sitting under her sunshade, and feeling the moody silences of her daughter, made chirpings like a cheerful sparrow.

They talked about the farm, Mrs. Charlotte asking questions, and Furze answering them. Did he get up very early in the morning? Yes, at about five o'clock, for when you had twenty or thirty cows to milk, and the milk to be put on the train or delivered at various houses, you had to be early. And she assured him that his milk was excellent. And was it true that the cows had to be washed before milking? He assured her that it was true, if you did your job properly. Your milk-cans and dairy had to be cared for like an operating theatre and its fittings.

“That is where a woman can help. There are times when a farmer’s hour should contain seventy minutes.”

He was leaning against the stone wall, filling his pipe, and trying to assure himself that Mary’s silence was not the silence of boredom. He wished that it was the daughter who was asking these questions, instead of sitting there with her hands clasped over her knees, and her eyes looking at the horizon. Or was it that the breaking of that precious milk-jug had upset her? She seemed lost in a mood of aloofness; she had uttered no impulsive word of interest or of pleasure; and yet she was very much awake, distressfully self-conscious.

He turned to the father.

“You don’t shoot, sir, do you?”

No, Captain Hesketh did not shoot. He had never been able to afford “huntin’ and shootin’,” not even in India. Besides, he had to confess that he was not very fond of killing things, live things.

“That’s the difference between the old boy and the young one, my dear fellow. At fourteen you will crawl round a field to get a pot at a sitting rabbit, and go all hot with joy when you bowl over your first running one. But—of course—a farmer has to shoot.”

“I do as little as possible. One has to keep the rabbits down, and it is kinder than snaring. Wood-pigeon too. But I don’t like it, not a fine bird like a wood-pigeon.”

“No pheasants—of course?”

“Oh,—other people’s—occasionally. Self-defence.”

Captain Hesketh had something to say on indigo planting, and the rice fields, and the difference between Eastern and Western smells, and Furze listened, and then spoke of English scents, hops, and mustard, and hay, and a

bean field in bloom. Yes, he knew of nothing more exquisite than the smell of the black and white flowers of the common bean. He confessed that it had the same effect on him as the cuckoo's note in the green of the year; it sent a thrill through him, and filled him with a sense of strange yearning.

"I have a field in flower. Why not stroll down there?"

Captain Hesketh and his wife exchanged glances. Some telepathic message seemed to pass. Old Viner looked at his watch; his wife explained that she was a poor walker in hot weather, and that the day was very hot. Besides, they ought to be getting home. But there was no reason why Mary should not go down to the bean field while two old people toddled back to Cinder Town. It was Mrs. Charlotte who suggested it. Young people were young people, and Mrs. Viner was vaguely annoyed with her daughter. Mary had made no effort, no effort at all, and could a man have been kinder?

Furze, deep eyed, watched the girl.

"What do you say?"

She knew what the inner voice of him was crying. "O, my beloved, my beloved!" And something stirred in her, an inarticulate, physical agitation. Her heart hurried. Her brown eyes were like shimmering windows hiding all that was within from those who stood without. She pulled at a piece of grass, and with a kind of sweet sullenness, looked up slantwise and as high as the man's collar.

"I might."

Captain Viner stood up. He was a little flushed, the old child full of young and vicarious emotion.

Bean Acres lay between Rushy Bottom and Maids Croft, surrounded by old thorn hedges that were like lines of foam, and when the two were half way across the Doom Paddock the scent of the bean flower met them. Furze, walking beside and slightly behind her, kept watch upon her face, that sulkily sweet profile overshadowed by her dark hair. She had gone forth with him without a word, as though under some compulsion, looking at everything and nothing with a silent and self-conscious vagueness.

They came to the gate, and Bean Acres lay spread before them, six acres of grey green foliage glistening in the sunlight, six acres of fragrant black and white flowers. A wayward wind, coming and going, stirred the bean tops, and seemed to blow the heavy and exquisite perfume into their faces. Furze breathed it in deeply. It was the very scent of her and her presence.

“Heaven might smell like this.”

Her hands were resting on the rail of the gate, and on either side of the gate the shaggy old thorn hedges added their scent to the fragrance of the field. It was overwhelming. Her brown eyes had a blurred sheen. The flicker of the sunlight and the grey green leaves seemed to intensify her mental and emotional inter-confusion. She stood there rigid, like a wild thing conscious of its peril, yet unable to take to flight. He was so very near, and they were so utterly alone. She had felt his voice like a strong hand gently touching her.

“I mustn’t,—I mustn’t,” she kept saying to herself; “it would be so hopeless, so wrong. I ought not to have come out here.”

He was leaning beside her over the gate.

“Clean land, Mary. It nearly killed me—getting it clean. I’m glad it didn’t.”

She began to shake. The smell of that field seemed to be intoxicating her. And all this greenness, and the whisper of growing things, the insidious sweet stealth, the call of the sap to her blood!

“Yes, you must have worked. I can understand that—because I work—and because I am lazy—really——”

She was talking as though to keep fate off.

“I should like to lie down in that field and do nothing—for ever and ever. So you see——”

She stole a panic look at him, and found him regarding her with such quiet and slightly smiling adoration that she lost herself and seemed to clutch at any floating words that came.

“I’m—I’m so sorry about that jug.”

So—that was what had been worrying her.

“I bought it for you to break.”

In the sweetness of her terror she was silent.

“You can take the service piece by piece and break it—if you wish. You could take me—the man—and break me—my darling——”

She uttered a cry. It had happened. She was trying to hide her face, and his arms were round her. He was saying things to her, sacred and infinitely tender things, and though his arms held her they were very gentle. “O, my beloved.” Her confusion was like a beating of wings. His man’s tenderness seemed to overwhelm her like the smell of that flowery field; she put her hands on his shoulders, and laid her cheek against the roughness of his coat.

“O,—my dear——”

She closed her eyes. His arms seemed to grow more strong. She felt his warm breath, and then—kisses on her eyes and mouth. She was returning his kisses. Her mouth was plaintive and passionate.

“Oh, it’s wrong, it’s madness,” cried a voice in her.

But her surrender was like a falling into a sweet and deep sleep. She felt herself lifted up and carried in his arms to a bank under the shade of the old thorns.

IX

1



IN THE dusk he went with her along the lane as far as the Six Firs. And here she withdrew herself, separating her young body from him as though some mystical web threatened to join them together.

“Don’t come any farther, Arnold.”

He stood looking down, at her dark comeliness made more swarthy and southern by the dusk. The smooth, white sleekness of her was flushed like an autumn leaf. Her eyes were both coy and wise.

“As you wish, my darling.”

“Not to-night.”

She fled from him suddenly with one quick backward glance, a sidelong gleam of the brown eyes, leaving him standing there in the green twilight, serene as one of the tall trees, his head in the world of wonder. It had happened. And his thoughts had the scent of the bean flower, and the perfume of a girl’s hair. Wonderful! Yes, how wonderful it all was. Mary Viner, his Mary Viner, quick of breath and quick of colour, his Beloved of the poignant mouth. Thank God for it. His love was a love that stood with head uncovered.

He wandered back down to the lane to the house, and there he heard poor Bobbo whining, Bobbo who had been shut up away from the blessedness of that May evening. He let the dog out, and bent down and held the beast’s head between his hands.

“Bobbo, she loves me. Wonderful, isn’t it? Why should she? But she does.”

In the dusk he went all over the house with the dog at his heels. He was full of a sacred and tender exultation. “Doomsday” had a new meaning; it was her house; she would sleep in that bed; her feet would go to and fro across the old, undulating floors. She would look out of this window and that at the woods and fields. He could see himself coming in from his labour and calling her, “Mary,—Mary.” And there would be the sound of her

footsteps like the beating of wings, and she would come to him quickly with those coyly glancing eyes and a hurrying of her blood and breath.

No more loneliness, no more long evenings alone by the winter fire. She would be with him.

2

Mary returned to “Green Shutters” with a white lie on her red and burning lips.

“I’m late. We went all over the farm.”

How far the lie carried she did not know, but she felt that she had come breathlessly out of a struggle, that she had been overpowered. O, the smell of that bean field, and the May blossom, and the green shadows under the hedge, and the tall grasses with the sunlight flickering through them! And to be held like that, sweetly and tenderly, crushed and conquered! The strength of him, the gentle, compelling strength of him!

She sat on the edge of her bed and shivered. For behind the glowing gold of the evening she saw that old house like a cavern ready to swallow her and her insurgent restlessness, and though she had lost her heart, she had not given her head. He was so strong, so devoutly serious, and she knew that she was afraid of his strength. His love, man’s love, was calling her to come and be his sweet slave, and so—perhaps—she could have been, but not on a lonely farm and in that house. It was extraordinary how she feared that house, as a child fears some darkly mysterious corner. No, she must keep her head and not let herself be overpowered.

Furze wanted to see her people that very night, and she had put him off. “No, not to-night, Arnold.”

And when he had spoken of marriage she had looked playfully confused and self-conscious. “What a hurry you are in! I like to dawdle over my cake!” But he was not the sort of man to be put off for long, and the more she put him off the more devotedly would he urge marriage upon her. She lay prone and clasped her pillow. He had breathed the fatal fire into her, and she was burning, for she was a dark girl and warm blooded. She wanted him, just as he wanted her, yet differently. And yet—was their wanting of each other different? Would he sacrifice his farm if she asked him to do it? He was asking her to sacrifice herself, but then—of course, it did not appear to him like that, for he did not understand or even suspect her point of view. And could she tell him? It would be honest to say—“Arnold, I can’t live such a life; I’m not made for it. It would mean unhappiness for us both.” She felt that it would not convince him, that his dominant tenderness would try

to get her into his arms and overwhelm her with sweet reassurances. "What is my girl afraid of? It will be all right. It—must be all right. What is it that frightens you?" And if she were honest she would have to tell him that she loathed housework, and poverty, and loneliness—and that she wanted—Well—what exactly did she want? Movement, variety, comfort, a good time, her little triumphs and adventures? She would have to say—"I am not up to my job, the woman's job, if you mean by that—a life of cooking and mending and dish-washing. I can't help it. I am made that way. Lots of women are."

And she supposed that he would despise her, because he loved work, and was rooted in the soil, and did not seem to need the modern excitements, but with a quite amazing contentedness followed the plough. Where was his war restlessness? How had he been able to bear burial alive in this Sussex valley? He was utterly different from herself, and she saw disaster in an attempt to mate with such a difference.

What should she do?

She wanted him—the lover, and the arms of the lover.

Tell him she could not leave her people—at least—not yet? Yes, that was an idea. Meanwhile she would be fondled and kissed—and the woman's yearn in her assuaged. Yes, to a point. But how far?

She sat up and shook her hair out of her eyes. Embraces, clingings, kisses! She could risk them, and dissemble, and hope for some compromise? If she could persuade him to give up "Doomsday" and take some nice farm, nearer London, and on the edge of the world's happenings? She felt sure that such places existed.

So she left the problem waiting, and slept in snatches, and woke with a feeling of being embraced; and snuggled into the sensuous warmth of the feeling. At breakfast, realizing that there was wisdom in regularizing the affair, she let it be known that Arnold Furze had asked her to marry him. Consented? Well, not exactly. She wanted to know more of him, and also she did not see her way yet to leaving "Green Shutters" to the mercy of casual servants.

"Oh, but we have thought of that," said her mother archly—and much excited; "it was always agreed that your Cousin Nellie would come to us. It will be a home for her."

This was rather unexpected. Mary had not properly reconnoitred all her defences.

"I don't wish it talked about yet."

“But, my dear, the things that are not talked about are just the very things that are talked about.”

She countered that.

“Arnold is coming this evening to see you both. But I wish it to be understood that I want more time.”

She passed a most difficult day, and in the evening, at the end of the day’s work, Arnold Furze came down from “Doomsday.” She met him at the door, and in the little passage he bent and kissed her hand like an old-world lover. She left him alone with her father and went out into the garden, and at the end of five minutes they joined her there. The discussion had been a very brief one. They appeared to have come to a very rapid understanding, possibly because of Furze’s archaic attitude towards her parents. Had parents to be consulted in these modern days, and when a girl was six-and-twenty?

“I am afraid that I can give your daughter only a working home, sir. But it is a good life.”

“My dear fellow, Mary knows what work is.”

She did, but not as her father understood it, nor as Furze understood it, and when they were left alone together in the garden she had to warn the lover in him. For she knew that Harold Coode was sticking a row of peas on the other side of the fence, and that Mr. Jamieson was smoking an after-dinner pipe in the little red and white hammock-tent on the back lawn. That was the worst of these cramped, cheek by jowl lives; you had to be so careful.

“Have you ever seen the sunset from the Six Firs?”

No, she had not. But as she had certain things to say to him she accepted the sunset, and the public parade past the windows of Cinder Town. No, she would not need a hat. At the gate she was aware of his pausing, and looking at poor Coode’s iron hut, that most lamentable of improvisations, but there was no scorn on his face, for he had no scorn in his nature.

“Rather pathetic—that.”

She allowed herself a moment’s moodiness.

“Aren’t we all rather pathetic?”

“I did not mean—you. But a one-eyed life like that—Mary.”

“Yes, it is not ‘Doomsday’—oak.”

He glanced at her questioningly.

“I cannot help loving that place. English clay and oak—if you like. You will learn to love it too. A little world of one’s own—English, where you

can say what you please—just as loudly——”

Her face silenced him. She had seen the Twists’ blue car turning into the cinder road, with Winnifred at the wheel, and late home from a tennis party. And she was walking with Winnie’s “milkman.” O, what a monstrous snob she was! And cowardly. She felt a sudden scorn of herself, and was able to give her friend a radiant look, and a smile that introduced Captain Arnold Furze of “Doomsday.” She was kinder to him after that, because she felt in wistful need of his kindness.

“You won’t hurry me—will you, Arnold?”

She was sitting at the foot of one of the trees, and he was standing and leaning against the trunk.

“I mean—it is such a serious business, getting married.”

He understood a part of her better than she knew.

“The five minutes before Zero hour, dear one. Serious for a woman; her ‘going over the top.’ But we shall go over together.”

“I have my people to think of.”

“I know.”

Above them the red-throated firs pressed the sunlight in their green arms, and he—standing there with an air of supreme contentment and a tenderness that was tranquil as the sunset, spoke deep and simple words. She was touched by them, so touched that she felt like clasping his knees and pouring out all her doubts and distresses. How big and strong he was; but somehow she could not surrender to his strength.

“I’m at your service, my beloved. When one is very happy—one does not want to hurry. Besides, there is more to do yet before you come to me. I have had so much to do on the land that I have had neither the time nor the money to do justice to the house. It shall be the house now,—because it will be my beloved’s house.”

She felt a choking in her throat.

“You are a good man, Arnold.”

So, finding it sweet to be loved as this man loved her, she temporized. It was not fair to him, and she knew it, but at the back of her mind was the hope that something might happen, such as her being able to move him by imperceptible degrees towards a life that would be less lonely. As yet she had no philosophy of life, and neither knew what was worth getting, nor how to get it. She was ignorant of those dear and durable loyalties, or a

calmness of mind that is independent of the crowd. To hundreds of sensitive women that old Sussex homestead would have put forth many appeals. They would have understood its sureness, its permanence, its happy and green isolation, secure from the yelling voices of little common children, and the cheap and gaping crowd. It had beauty, and permanence, but much of modernity asks for neither. Almost it would seem that the new spirit asks for permanence, and regards marriage or any such human relationship as a citizen of God's Own Country regards his motor-car, good for a year. That, in a way, was Mary's feeling, and it was a very natural feeling, though she was unconscious of the rather pathetic vulgarity of her so-called ideals. She was both attracted and repelled by sex. She was experiencing all the curiosity of youth in the presence of a new and old sensation. To be kissed and held close, and to be looked at as though the lower part of her was human, and all above her breasts divine! It made her feel smooth as silk, and warm in her body.

Well,—well! She sighed, and kissed back, and temporized, and supposed that men might be persuaded out of the deeps of their devotion to uproot themselves and take root elsewhere. Surely, land was land, and a farm a farm. She even went so far as to write to Clare, in strict confidence of course, to ask her whether people did not farm near Weyfleet. Yes, twenty or thirty miles from town, where you had shops, and a tennis club and dances, and cheap Wednesday tickets to town, and where those expeditions—so dear to women—were possible. Clare wrote back to say that—of course—people farmed in Surrey. Weyfleet was “country,” not a suburb. Mary must most certainly not bury herself in Sussex. The servant problem would be too awful; it was sufficiently awful at Weyfleet. Leslie, Clare's husband, knew one of the local estate agents very well,—and should they make tactful inquiries?

The letter put Mary in a panic. She wrote in a hurry to say she had nothing definite in her mind, for she did not wish to feel the close grip of finality.

And servants!

For suddenly she had come to realize that they would not be able to afford a servant, at least—not yet. That woman—Mrs. Sarah or something—with the blue nose and the cap, would come in three times a week and help. He expected her—his wife—to work in the house as he worked on the farm. Certainly he had put it to her gently, and as though he was just a little sensitive about it, but he did not appear to think that there was anything inhuman in her working like a servant. “You and I together, Mary.” A labour of love,—what? Cooking her beloved's puddings, and making his bed, and

sweeping his carpets,—when there were carpets. O, very natural—of course, but she was not asking how to give him the part of domestic drudge. She had had enough of that. She was not so strong as he was, and she was different.

Ye gods, how different! The difference between them, glozed over and concealed beneath a shimmering mist of amorousness, began to frighten her more and more. Even when his kisses were on her mouth she would shudder a little at the finality of these embraces. Yes, she began to know now what they meant, and that the ultimate end of them would be children. Children in that great house, and without a servant!

Was he mad? Or didn't he realize? Or was it just the blind way things happened? She began to feel like a fly in a web, with the strands trembling under the rush of fate—the spider.

He talked to her about the farm and the farm's economy, and she realized with a new fear that he could bore her. Perhaps—too—she was a little jealous of his beloved farm. But it did not interest her to be shown his "milk book," with the records of the milk each cow gave, nor could she thrill over the yearlings and porkers, or the weight of a crop or the prospects of the hay fields. He talked of cutting and selling more timbers in order to furnish the house completely, and he took her down to Gore Wood, and she sat on a stump while he measured some of the oaks and worked out a rough estimate of the cubic capacity of the trunks. She said—"Yes, yes;—is that so"—when he explained the system of measurement to her, and how you had to allow a twelfth for the bark. He seemed to take it for granted that she would be interested in all that interested him. But why should she be? She was interested only when he was interested in her, and came and sat on the tree stump beside her and kissed her. His kisses made her feel that as a woman she mattered.

Moreover, she was coming to understand all that life on a farm implied, and how desperately hard Furze worked. Dawn till dusk,—with no holidays, and very rarely a half-day off. With cows to be milked and beasts to be fed a man cannot indulge—like the industrialists—in temperamental peevishnesses. Grind, grind, grind, as a part of the growth and the greenness! And he seemed to love it so well that he was eager for her to share it.

The issue grew yet more final when he took her over the house, and with an air of tender seriousness asked her to suggest any improvements and alterations.

"Your department, you know, and a woman has ideas. Anything to save labour."

She stood beside him in the centre of the dark kitchen. His arm was round her. She felt both stubborn and compassionate, and her warning thoughts and emotions rendered her voiceless. But something had to be said.

“It is a very nice kitchen.”

“Anything that you think ought to be altered?”

“That range must be very extravagant.”

“I suppose it is. We might scrap it, and put in a small one.”

“And the sink. It ought to be glazed, and stand higher, and have draining boards.”

She wondered whether he would be offended, but she found him intelligently interested. He made her stand at the sink and go through the shadow process of washing up.

“Yes,—that’s obvious. With a higher sink you don’t have to stoop. And that plate rack looks obsolete.”

With the handle of a broom he measured the height of an ideal sink as it would suit her, and nicked a mark on the handle with his knife.

“Most important—all this—Mary. I know what it means to have to work with bad tools. Anything else?”

There was one most obvious defect, and the worst of them all.

“No water laid on, Arnold; not even a pump. Every drop has to be carried in.”

He looked very serious over this.

“By jove,—yes,—what an ass! I have managed somehow, but I always meant to have it altered. It will have to be altered. I’ll have a pump fitted in the well, and the water piped to a tank in the roof, and piped down here. Of course, what I mean to do some time is to have a water-ram fitted in the brook, and so get an automatic supply, but it would mean at least two hundred yards of piping.”

His enthusiasm troubled her. Here she was inspiring him to all sorts of schemes that were to improve the internal economy of the house for the benefit of the woman, and she had no intention of becoming the woman in charge. No, not even if he had hot and cold water laid on in every room, and an electric plant put in, and electric radiators, and every swindling gadget advertised in the household papers. With all the so-called labour-saving devices the woman would still remain a slave. And she had a temperament. Domestic work should be left to stolid women without temperaments.

He had got hold of a notebook and a pencil, and was making notes.

“I’ll go up to Crofts at Carslake and get them to give me an estimate for these things. Now, what about coal? Supposing we had that corner bricked in and covered, and a shoot made in the wall, so that we could tip the stuff in, and it would be ready to hand.”

She agreed that it would save labour, and watched his busy pencil and his intent face, and tried to find the courage to throw herself upon his mercy.

“I can’t live here, Arnold; I can’t. It is too lonely and too big and too overwhelming. Can’t we live somewhere else?”

But her realization of his fixity stifled her. He loved the place; it was his bread and butter and hers; and if no regular servant could be afforded here, well, there would be no servant elsewhere. And all this happy scheming was part of his love. She continued to be a coward, and to temporize.

“Yes,—those trees will have to go this winter,” he said quite cheerfully. “Hot water in the house is better than oak in a wood. Yes, we will have a good range and a hot-water boiler put in while we are about it.”

He put his arm round her and kissed her, and swept her up the stairs to look at the bedrooms.

“I thought you would like this one, my darling.”

He opened the door of the room overlooking the south garden, and in it he had installed the bed, and the mahogany chest of drawers, and the little wash-hand stand and the long mirror.

“More needed. It gets all the sun. And what about curtains? If we bought the stuff, do you think you could make them?”

She laid a hand along a pensive cheek.

“Yes,—I think so.”

“Well, we shall have to go shopping. What about a day in London,—when I am through with the hay? I dare say we could pick up a few good second-hand pieces.”

She tried to withdraw him from too much tragic spending.

“But—you need not furnish the whole house, Arnold. The parlour and the living-room, and one bedroom. It would not be necessary.”

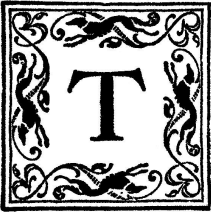
He seemed to think this very sweet and sensible.

“Dear God,” he said; “thank heaven for a woman who knows her own mind.”

He kissed her, and she felt like weeping.

X

1



HEY were cutting the grass in the Long Meadow. The whirl and clatter of the reaper had begun very early, and from the iron seat Furze guided the greys. The swathes had fallen with the dew upon them, and a potent sun was turning them from green to grey, and already the fragrant smell of the dried grasses was floating on the air.

The cutting had begun yesterday.

“T’ dew be off t’ grass, ssir.”

Will had been scything the dead corners under the hedges. The back of his neck was the colour of a hedging-glove, and all wrinkles. There were no women in the field, and no casuals from Carslake lazily shaking twists of grass on sleepy pitchforks. Furze had learnt better than that. Colonel Porter at Carslake Great Farm had a new swathe-turner, and had allowed Furze to hire it, and now that the dew was off the grass and the sun strong, the swathe-turner was put to work. The field grew more fragrant. Furze, with his shirt open at the throat, rode to and fro, the sunlight cutting a sharp shadow from the brim of his hat. His eyes had a dreaminess.

Yes, life was good! The crop was a heavy one, and he was getting it under ideal conditions. And up at the farm Messrs. Crofts—ironmongers and sanitary engineers—were fitting a new and efficient little range in the kitchen, and installing a force-pump in the well, and a tank in one of the attics. A super-sink with teak draining-boards lay outside the back door. Mary, the housewife, was to be lovingly humoured.

Furze ate his lunch beside Will under the thorn hedge. Mrs. Sarah had brought down her man’s dinner, and looked evilly at the swathe-turner. Nasty machine doing honest people out of a nice lazy day’s work—plus beer! And would she be wanted in the evening?

“No,” said her man, “you won’t be,”—and was grateful to the swathe-turner.

When he had eaten his bread and cheese and drunk two glasses of beer, Furze lit a pipe and strolled up to the house to see how Croft’s men were progressing. They had bricked in the new range, and were proposing to

tackle the sink when they had finished their midday pipes. Furze found the three of them sitting on his kitchen table. And in spite of it he smiled at them.

“You won’t get that up by to-night—I suppose?”

“Maybe we shall,” said an old fellow.

They belonged to no trade union. Nor did Furze, for the soil, and beasts, and growing things are above trade boards and time-tables.

He went back to Will and his work.

“Had a good drink, Will?”

“I have that, ssir.”

“We are in luck to-day. We shall get three turnings before we use the slide rake. It’s mellowing fast.”

So, the heat of the day passed, and the horizontal sun shot arrows of gold over the tops of the hedgerows and into the western windows of the woods. The dew would be coming down on the shorn grass. Will had gone home, and Furze was idling in the lane, waiting for his beloved. She tarried; she had made excuses to herself, little flimsy excuses; she considered the good opinion of Cinder Town; she went down to Perrivales and tried to persuade Phyllis to join her, but no Phyllis was available. So, she went alone, a little fearfully, with a guilty eagerness and a prudish circumspection that quarrelled with each other. She found her lover by the Six Firs with a face that had the glow of the hayfield upon it. He seemed to smell of hay and of his labour and of the clean linen he had put on before coming out to meet her.

She was afraid.

“Things to show you,” he said.

His possessive arm encircled her, and they went down between the green hedgerows to the farm, and her fear of his sureness contended with the warm lure of the June evening. A tired languor descended upon her. To walk two ways at once in the world of the emotions is exhausting, and as she felt the firm muscles of his arm she herself grew less firm. He smelt warm and sweet to her like some clean, well-groomed animal. He looked at her silently and with a smile of deep meaning.

“Things to show.”

The labours of Messrs. Crofts’ men in the kitchen had left behind them a smell of mortar and brick dust and stale tobacco, but the new grate had a polished and genial face, and the glazed sink was waiting for her hands.

“How’s that for height, Mary?”

She had to try it, drooping pale hands over the edge of it, while he stood and looked and loved.

“You don’t have to stoop.”

“No.”

She was glad when he spoke of going down to the Long Meadow. They shut Bobbo into the living-room to remain the dog in charge, and went down through the farmyard into the Doom Paddock. At the gate by the wagonshed he took her full in his arms and kissed her, and she felt the thrill of her breasts. “My darling.” A bat circled overhead, very black and noiseless. The shaggy old hedges were webbed with gold. A cart track led to the lower field gate, and they walked between the tracks of the wheels, their bodies flank to flank. She looked up and she looked down, but he looked only at her.

“Happy, sweetheart?”

She nodded, but would not speak.

“So am I. Not a little. Isn’t it good to think that we own all this?”

Again she nodded, and under the big chestnut by the lower gate he held her and kissed her with more abandonment. She half closed her eyes, feeling herself floating in a soft green twilight under the dome of the tree. Cows had been sheltering here during the heat of the day. They went on through the gate into the Long Meadow, and her knees felt weak under her, and she let herself hang more heavily in the hollow of his arm. She smelt the hay, and something yearned in her and was afraid.

“Tired, Mary?”

“Just a little.”

“We’ll find a seat.”

Their feet brushed across the fragrant swathes, and over the pale stubble. The dusk seemed to come suddenly, and so still was it in that solitary green valley that the Rushy stream could be heard though it slid through the green like brown silk. The swathes were turning from grey to black, though the trees on the opposite slope remained green towards the glow in the north-west. They went towards Gore Wood and the oaks, and here—in the narrow angle between the wood and the stream—Will had been scything. He had raked the scythe swathes into a cock under the overhang of an oak tree. The grass was fragrant and dry, for the oak leaves above caught the dew.

“The best crop I have had, Mary. Someone has brought me luck.”

He sat down on the hay-cock, and held her hands. She felt the draw of them as she stood, and was both thrilled and dismayed.

“My darling——”

She melted went limp of a sudden. He had her on his knees and in his arms. He was kissing her mouth and eyes.

“My little wife.”

He laid her gently on the hay, and lay beside her and a little above her, looking down into her face. The hay was soft, and smelt sweet. The sun seemed to linger in it, and her languor was like the dusk, sinking into secret and shadowy completeness. He was bending over her, looking into her eyes.

“Mary——.”

For a moment, on that soft June bed, pressed into the tumbled fragrance of it, she forgot to feel afraid.

2

When she left him at the Six Firs, Mary fled down the Melhurst road in a panic. She felt sure that her hair was full of hay, though she had shaken it, and—dissembling her terror—had made her lover comb it with his fingers. Yes, how she had dissembled! And her dissembling had saved her, so she thought, when she had realized that she was ready to go over the edge of things with him if he so willed it. Yes, they had both been very near the edge of things. But suddenly she had struggled up, and had begun to laugh a little hysterically, and to tease him and throw the dry grass in his face.

“Oh,—Arnold,—what a couple of children——.”

She had recovered herself and her breath; and her heart had begun to beat fast for a different reason. Heavens, how near she had been to disaster, the disaster of giving herself to him irretrievably! She had been seized with terror. “Oh, I must go home now. They will be wondering.” And all the way to the Melhurst road she had trembled at the dark places and the shadowy retreats under the hedges, and at the possible descent upon her of a second crisis.

So, when he had kissed her good-night, she ran down the road on the slim legs of a scared and flying virgin. Heavens, what an escape! From herself as well as from him. The sex storm had both frightened her and given her a sort of decisive courage that culminated in her running away. She felt that she must run and never stop, or that old horror of a house would swallow her.

Having begun her running she kept it up. The physical act spilled over into mental movement. She sidled along the Cinder Town fences like any little wretch returning after a breathless adventure, and nearly collided with

poor Coode who was leaning over his front gate and hanging his melancholy on the pegs of the stars. She let out a startled “O!” and scuttled past, though she knew that he had recognized her, and had watched her go out and had watched for her return. Silly fool! She banged the gate of “Green Shutters,” but it was her only act of positive defiance, and Coode was a poor provocation. Yet her thoughts were taking shape as she slipped in at the back door and up the stairs to her room. On all sorts of occasions a woman consults her mirror. No broken glass, thank God! She went downstairs with apparent calmness, and found the old people sitting up and making a state affair of it.

“You are very late, Mary,” said her mother.

“Am I? I had no watch. And these long evenings——”

Old Viner looked self-consciously at the toe of a slipper. Yes, these summer evenings, with the hay lying out, and the stars blinking, and your little girl grown big enough for the arms of a man! Life had all sorts of sadnesses. But,—then—the man was a good fellow.

Mary had possessed herself of the daily paper, and curled herself up in a chair behind it. She read about the French in Morocco, and those unclean people the Communists getting something of what they deserved in Bulgaria; and a girl of ten clubbed to death in a wood by a young boy. Nice, progressive, wholesome world it was. But for all the interest it had for her the printed sheet might have been upside down. It was a screen, and behind it her panic thoughts were changing their garments, and putting on a sudden and definite costume, the disguise for escape. It was not that she had lost her head. She felt it more firmly on her shoulders, though it might be full of an over-excited wilfulness, and a hurry to be elsewhere. The plan came to her quite suddenly while she was glancing at the advertisement columns.

Her people were going to bed.

“Good night, Mary.”

She understood the implied suggestion that she too should go to bed. Well, she would go to bed when she pleased, and get up when she pleased.

“Good night. I am going to read a little.”

But she rose and gave her father a little, impulsive kiss, and he patted her shoulder, having felt the vague compunction in that kiss.

“Don’t forget the lamp, dear,” said her mother, who was full of superfluous promptings.

When they had gone she showed no hesitation. The whole plan had crystallized out and deposited itself upon the thread of panic running through her mood. Yet the reaction was vital. She chose, though she chose

with a furious and trembling haste, and a curious mingling of callousness and compassion. She put the paper away, and sat down at the writing-table in the window, and wrote her letter. It covered three sheets. It was a little hysterical; it accused herself and Furze and everybody; it spluttered explanations; it justified her running away by insisting on her not being able to help it. She said that she was writing to Arnold Furze, but that she did not wish him to know where she was or what had become of her.

When all was quiet she lit a candle, put out the lamp, and took the letter upstairs with her. From under her bed she routed out an old green suitcase, and set about filling it,—largely by a process of exclusion. She would wear her new frock, and pack the second-best one. For the rest she had nothing very new, and her fugitive body would be able to carry most of the newness. She was quite deliberate, and rather pleasantly self-conscious. She was enjoying a little piece of sensationalism. The prospect of a possible return did not trouble her, for in certain emotional crises a coming back may be the last thing a woman thinks of.

She undressed, set her alarum clock for five, and got into bed. Of course she did not expect to sleep, but sleep she did, to be roused by the clock on the chair beside her bed. The morning's adventure rushed into her brain with instant clearness, and possessed it. The great necessity remained, flight from her own enslaving emotions. She felt very clear headed, and not a little excited. She had a pound note, three shillings, and fivepence in pennies. She dressed. She completed her packing. She did not forget her umbrella.

The letter was left outside the door of her people's bedroom. No one saw her flight from Cinder Town, or met her walking to Carslake station. She took a field path in spite of the stiles.

The train she caught was the 6.15, and at an hour when Cinder Town was eating its breakfast she was carrying her suitcase across Hungerford Bridge to Waterloo. By half-past ten she was at Weyfleet.

Arnold Furze was up at half-past four. He came down in his shirt and breeches to light the stove for an early cup of tea, and he saw the sunrise through the kitchen window, a great yellow circle hanging between the gnarled black trunks of the two old apple trees. Another fine day. He stood and looked at the new sink over which Mary's hands had drooped, and the lover in him had a seriousness that did not remember to smile over the fact that a glazed sink could be a vessel of romance. Soon, water would gush into it from new brass taps, hot water and cold water. There was the new grate

too to be christened. She should come and try it; there should be a Viner party, and a baking of cakes.

When he went to the garden door and opened it, everything was wet with dew. White mist lay in the valley, and he could smell the hay, and the smell of it was tangled up in the darkness of a girl's hair. But that mist meant fine weather, and a blazing sun, and the swathes crisped by it and ready for getting in. It would be a busy day, but in the cool of the evening his beloved would steal down to him.

When he had shaved himself, and drunk his tea, and before beginning the day's work, Furze walked down to the Long Meadow. Blackbirds, thrushes, and starlings feeding there were disturbed by him. A thin, vapoury mist hung over the oaks of Gore Wood, and the swathes were sleeping under grey coverlets of dew. He turned one with his foot, and saw that it was dry below, and that after a day's sunning the crop should be ready for carting. Bobbo, following at his heels, saw his master go to the end of the meadow where a hay-cock stood under the overhanging boughs of an oak. Someone had reclined there. Furze picked up a handful of the dry grass and held it to his nostrils, uttering a man's inward prayer. "Wife, little wife that is to be, sacred housewife and mother of children, may this good hay harvest be an omen." And then he took a hay rake that Will had left against the rails of Gore Wood fence, and combed down the hay-cock so that the couch marks upon it were effaced.

The sun ascended in his strength, and the smell of the hay rose like incense. The swathe-turner went to and fro, while Will used a fork on the grass in the dead lands. The day grew very hot, and the shadow of Furze's hat cut a sharper line across the brown of his face. His eyes looked very blue that morning. Eleven came, and the "greys" were put under the shade of the chestnut, and Furze, Will, and the boy sat in the shade of a hedge, ruddy and shining.

"We shall get it in to-night, Will."

"We shall that, sir."

It was the boy who spotted Captain Viner coming down across the Doom Paddock.

"Someone be wantin' you."

Furze scrambled up and went through the gate to meet Mary's father. Life glowed so strong in him that it was not apparent to him at once that old Viner was the wooden soldier, stiff and correct, and buttoned up in a tight distress.

"Good morning, sir. Come down to see our hay crop?"

Old Viner looked through the gateway at the hay field, and pulled his moustache. It began to dawn upon Mary's lover that her father was upset about something, and as much upset for Furze's sake as for his own. A most awkward predicament.

"Can I have a few words,—my dear fellow?"

"Nothing wrong I hope, sir?"

Old Viner glanced at the hedge, faced about, and walked some twenty paces back towards the house before he spoke to the man beside him.

"Fact is, Furze, my daughter has run away. Early this morning. Left a letter."

Furze's eyes looked as blank as the blue sky, and old Viner saw that there was no cloud in them.

"Run away!—But—why——? She was down here last evening,—and we were making plans."

Old Viner looked very upset.

"A great blow to us, my dear fellow. Youth's awkward—very awkward. We all seem to have been to blame—if anybody is to blame——"

"I don't understand, sir," said the lover.

Captain Hesketh fumbled for something in his pocket.

"Better read that, my dear fellow. Don't be shocked, don't be shocked. Young things and young soldiers are prone to panic. Know that—don't you? But I must say—I'm—I'm upset about it,—very. As if you and I had wanted to make her unhappy."

But Furze was reading the letter, his eyes growing strange under the shadow of his hat. He read it through to the end, folded it deliberately, and handed it back to the father.

"My fault," he said.

He stared at the hedge as though he were trying to see through something, and his whole face seemed to grow lean and dusky.

"My dear fellow——"

"But—I don't understand. Loneliness—yes. And a woman's work may be dull. All work is dull—unless you have got the spirit in you. I thought ——"

He turned away to master something in himself, and old Viner's moustache twitched. He stood very still, helplessly still, paraded before life's unexpectedness.

“I’m sorry, my dear fellow, more sorry than I can say. If you can feel _____”

Furze’s voice was very deep.

“Poor little girl—— Fright,—I know,—like the feeling before zero hour. She ought to have told me. Love makes one rather blind.”

He glanced at old Viner, and felt a big man’s pity.

“It was good of you to come, sir. All my fault. Look here,—I’ll take it quietly. The thing is not to frighten her any further. Let her sit quietly on a branch and get her breath back. It’s—it’s just temporary.”

He felt for his pipe, but finding that he had left it and his pouch in his jacket pocket, he went for his jacket where it was lying under the hedge, with Bobbo guarding it.

“All right, old chap.”

His voice was gentle. He put on his jacket, and filling his pipe, rejoined old Hesketh who had been recovering his parade face.

“Don’t worry, sir. We’ll just keep quiet. She’ll get her courage back. I’m not a selfish beast, though I must have seemed so.”

“You are a good chap, Arnold. I—I’d like her to marry you.”

Furze held a steady match to the bowl of his pipe.

“Where is she, sir?”

Old Viner looked very humble.

“We don’t know.”

4

Three days later Furze had his letter. It came to him without an address, and with a London postmark on the envelope. It was the first time that he had seen her handwriting.

He took the letter into Mrs. Damaris’ parlour, and sat in the window-seat and read it. The fine weather had gone, and the rain was coming down upon a green world, and upon the rank growth of sheep’s parsley and pink campion and grasses under the hedges. A south-west wind ruffled the trees, and blew a heavy scattering of drops from them.

“Try not to think hardly of me, Arnold. I ought to have told you before. I’m not fit for the life on a farm. It would have been wrong of me to marry you.

I suppose I have had too much of that kind of work. I’m pleasure-loving, really, and a town bird. I like places where things

happen.

You will say that I am being frivolous and selfish. I cannot help it. I am going to get a job of some kind—but not in a house. I expect my cousin will come to ‘Green Shutters.’ She is forty-three, and her hobby is cooking.

Try and forgive me—and don’t worry. I’m quite all right and feeling so much happier now that I have been honest. And please don’t try and find me. It will only hurt—you and me.”

But that letter hurt him more than she could have guessed. She had let him go so far and plan so much, and then had snatched the fruit away, and broken the picture he had painted of her. Cinderella! Yes, Cinderella married a Prince and not a farmer. And he had idealized the woman in the house, the sacred presence, the beloved hands. Either her love was different from his, or his estimate of woman was masculine and fallacious.

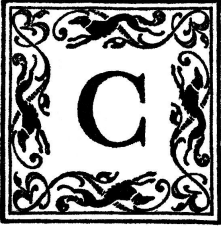
He sat and watched the wet dusk gather. He felt very lonely and sad. He thought of the home he was preparing for her, the lustre tea-service, the simple and secret joy of his contrivings, her pale hands hanging over the edge of the new sink. Romance,—even there, and it clung. O, yes, it could not be final. He would have to fell those oaks in the winter, and she could not let him fell trees and not come to him. This was but a panic mood. She loved him. Why, down there in the hay—almost she had been his wife. Perhaps he had been too passionate, but this panic would pass, and she would come back.

Sitting there in the dusk, a man who had learnt to be patient with things, and who typified the immense constancy of the born tiller of the soil, he felt that he had to be patient with her. She would learn—she would find things out. Yes, it would be like humouring a shy and tender crop.

PART II
THE ORCHID HOUSE

XI

1



LARE BIDDULPH—*nee* Viner—was waiting for her husband.

For a woman who never acted upon impulse she had had no difficulty in understanding the impulse that had swept her sister out of the arms of a man and brought her breathless to Weyfleet.

Seven years ago Clare Biddulph had escaped the same hazardous romance, and come forth from it cool and fresh, like a washed primrose, to hang upon a green and shady bank where the hot sun of a too primitive maleness could not wither her. Seated now at her writing-table in the bay window of the “Caradoc” drawing-room, she looked out upon the drive and the garden, a stretch of grass with formal rose-beds grouped about a bird’s bath, and backed by a belt of flowering shrubs clustering around the trunks of five tall Scotch firs. The garden was small, and yet it contrived to convey an impression of sunlit space and of dignity, like Clare herself who had demanded dignity and a pleasant smoothness, and had attained to them by the wise stimulation of an easy-going husband. A Viner, she had reacted against the cheap scuffle of modern life. Like the rest of the moderns her god was “A Good Time,” but it was a god with a difference, for she had a nice taste, and a loathing of cheapness, and nostrils that could express scorn.

She had had a day of it with Mary, an emotional day,—though her emotions were as well under control as her tongue or her tennis racquet. She sympathized because she understood, but depth of feeling was not her *metier*. She had sided with the woman and the sister against the man and the parents. Mary was lying down with a headache. Clare never had a headache or a heartache. That golden head above the white throat and the black dress displayed a pale and capable fineness. She suggested white light clad in a midnight gown. The room was hers, black, mouse-grey and gold. Her very writing-table had a studied vividness. Made of rosewood it held a cerise-coloured blotter with a jade-green tassel, two quill pens—one blue and one black—standing erect in a gold inkstand, a scarlet lacquer box, an ivory paper-knife with a black handle. She wore her hair shingled, and carried her

head like an eager and questioning boy. Her face had the quality of a face that baffles, and yet shows an easy mask to men. Her eyes were a greenish grey, her lips a little thin but of good colour. She smiled easily, but there was much more behind the smile that listened and watched. She was ambitious. Almost she had a man's delight in accomplishing things, and in her energy she was more male than her husband. She set herself objectives and attained them. "Caradoc" had been an objective, this white house with its multitude of gables and little tricky bits of brown roof, and unnecessary windows in unexpected places. It had a Gothic iron lantern over its loggia-porch. "Caradoc" had spelt accomplishment, and already it was behind her, and as wrong as that Gothic lantern. She had turned herself towards something simpler, more spacious, more Georgian. One can change one's house more easily than one can change one's mate, and it is possible to grow out of both. Clare had grown beyond Leslie Biddulph but not away from him. He had many virtues. He was an ass, but a good ass. He did not know that he was an ass, nor was his assishness too obvious. Moreover, he hailed the angel of the Lord in her wherever she raised the shining sword. He would fit quite well into her Georgian house. For Clare realized early that to be conventionally successful a man must not be too clever. If he can bray heartily and loudly to other asses, and stand upon platforms, and get up and tell fat after-dinner stories, and utter platitudes with emphasis,—so much the better. He is a good citizen.

But what of Mary the refugee, the possessor of a few odd shillings in silver, an old suitcase, and a deplorable wardrobe? "Let me stay here two or three weeks, and I'll get something to do." Something to do! Good lord! Still, the impulse towards freedom was admirable. The simplest solution of the problem would be to get her married to some convenient man; though the competition in Weyfleet was furious, being a simple question of supply and demand. Six marriageable young women to every marriageable male, and the war generation straining against the shelf towards which the budding generation was thrusting it! And why marriage? Yet, marriage was not so hopeless a career as many of the moderns would have us believe. Clare agreed that you should consider the alternatives. Granted that your aim was to live and to attain to as much comfortable and cultivated self-expression as was possible, marriage, with money and no children or not too many children, had much to recommend it.

She glanced at her wrist-watch. If Leslie had caught the 4.40, he should appear in the drive at any moment, his bowler hat well back on his round and baldish head, and his very blue eyes sighting dinner. She would have no trouble with Leslie. He was an adjectival man, fresh and florid, and so

pleasantly pleased with himself that he was an easy man about the house. If you allowed him to show off, and listened to his throaty tenor voice, and did not interfere with his sense of personal picturesqueness he was what is called “a dear.”

Clare Biddulph knew her Leslie through and through. She was aware of the fact that he had just escaped being a philandering ass, but that there was a little kink of self-consciousness in him that stiffened his sentimentality. Hence he was able to call himself a feminist, and to run after some woman or other like a simple and harmless dog who came to heel when his real mistress called him. They were attached to each other, as attached as most moderns can be. She allowed him his tendresse. A man with a round head and a little fair moustache and such very shallow blue eyes, and who wore his hat well back, and had a tenor voice and loved using it, and was a Plus 1 at golf and wore the most flocculent tweeds, and took the daily press seriously, and was particular about his ties, could not be anything but sentimental. His sentimentality would accept Mary and her panic mood. The thing would be to prevent him accepting Mary and her romance too thoroughly.

The telephone rang, and Clare Biddulph to answer it.

“Hallo.”

“Is that Mrs. Biddulph?”

“Yes.”

“O,—this is Mr. Biddulph’s office. Mr. Biddulph told me to ring you up, madam. A client has turned up unexpectedly. Mr. Biddulph is very sorry, but he could not catch the early train.”

“Can you find out what train——”

“The 5.15, madam. He asked me to say——”

“Why didn’t you ring me up before?”

“I am very sorry, madam,—I could not get through. You know what——”

“Has Mr. Biddulph left the office?”

“Half an hour ago.”

“Thanks.”

She hung up the receiver, glanced at her watch, and returned to the writing-table and the window. Leslie was to have caught the early train, and after tea and a change they were to have driven up to the Hills Club to play a practice single. The 5.15 arrived at 5.50. Should she take the car out and meet him at the station?

Meditating upon Mary's revolt and its possibilities, she stroked her firm chin with the feather of the blue quill, and chose to remain at home. She decided that it would be better not to treat the affair too seriously. Her man could be histrionic. He liked to appear as the wonder-working male. He was quite capable of launching an indefinite invitation to Mary: "My dear girl, make this your home for as long as you like——" Men can be so generously vague. It had taken her three years to curb Leslie's impulsive asking of unexpected people to unprepared dinners. "Pot luck, old chap." He was rather regal in his hospitalities. As the angel of the Lord she had appeared in the path of the prophet and had confounded him by having cold boiled mutton and steamed potatoes placed before a very special but unexpected guest. His face! "My dear old girl,—surely—you could have rummaged up something——" But he had sprung no more surprises upon the larder.

She nibbled the end of the quill.

"A month—at the outside. We can arrange something."

2

Leslie Biddulph stood up and gave his seat to a girl wearing a red hat. She had come in with the crowd at Piccadilly Circus, a little, dark, sallow thing who looked tired.

"Please take my seat."

"O,—thanks so much."

He was a very kind creature and a very vain one, and his wife's clever hand had taken hold of his kindness and used it for the controlling of his vanity. He stood quite close to the girl in the red hat, his right knee almost touching hers, looking down at her, and noticing her well-worn attache case and shabby gloves. She was a pretty thing, and inhaling the perfume of her pallor and her poverty, Biddulph felt protective. Little dark women with pansy faces provoked him, especially those like this one who kept her duskiness hidden under the brim of her hat, fully conscious of the sentimental male poised there hanging to a strap. At Waterloo she made ready to rise, and Biddulph stood back and kept the enthusiastic thrusters off her toes. He expected her to give him a glance; he felt that he deserved it; but she went out with veiled eyes, and he followed, walking close behind her and admiring her legs, pretty, slim, feverish legs. He entered the same lift and managed to place himself so that he had a view of her profile. These dusky, pansy faces! How pleasant to possess a garden full of them, and to walk out in the cool or the evening, a male god with a sentimental if polygamous watering-can, while all the pansy faces were raised gratefully to

the dispenser of male dew. From the lift Biddulph followed the red hat up the steps and along the passage-way. He had to walk fast, for she was one of the feverish crowd, rushing homewards like a lot of blown leaves, dodging, making little gusty dashes and circumlocutions. She was out of breath for the suburbs,—“To half an hour’s bumble-puppy tennis,” as he put it to himself, “or a cheap novel in a little back garden, or a cheap boy.” Being bald-headed at thirty-three he liked to philosophize about women. He supposed that the little thing in the red hat disliked work as nearly all moderns disliked it, and his feeling about it was that all pretty women should be lying about in punts or hammocks or on sofas, pleasantly dependent upon munificent males. As for that little tired, dark-eyed thing, she ought to be comforted with caresses. Meanwhile he lost her and her hat. She had scurried through the gates to catch some suburban train, and Biddulph, feeling tenderly regretful, went on to a first-class corner seat in the 5.15 for Weyfleet.

He was filling a pipe when a man named Sark joined him. “Pale hands I loved” was running in Biddulph’s head, and Sark was neither pale nor particularly lovable. He was fifty-five years old, and fat, and seemed to be in a perpetual perspiration. His red face looked as though it had been broadened and flattened by long pressure against the warm bosom of prosperity. He wore spats. Sark did business with Messrs. Thomson and Biddulph. He was a warm man, and in some senses a hot one.

Biddulph nodded.

“Evening, Sark.”

He did not like Sark, though they travelled together, and played golf together, and argued.

“Dashed hot to-day.”

“It is.”

Biddulph opened his evening paper, and Sark eased his trousers over his fat knees, and after staring rather brutally at a girl who was passing the window, seemed to sit and possess the vision of her.

“Fixed up for Sunday?”

“I’m playing tennis. Wife wants some practice.”

“She’s hot stuff these days.”

“She plays a nice game,” said the husband.

Two more men entered the carriage, and lit pipes and opened papers, and sat at their ease while the hurrying thirds pressed forward strainingly, looking for places. Sark watched the hustle of the lesser people and enjoyed

it. He never failed to enjoy it, the sense of superiority that it gave him, for—after all—when you are five-and-fifty and own two motor-cars and a house with “grounds,” it is pleasant to sit in a secure and well-padded corner and watch the cheap folk getting the knocks. Sark was honest about it. He thought of the crowd of underlings as silly sheep. He liked to sit in a first-class carriage or in his big car and see the sheep being thoroughly uncomfortable.

Biddulph read his paper. He was not feeling conversational, or interested in Sark’s views on the coal-miners and their spokesmen. Who was interested in miners provided that your coal was forthcoming at a reasonable price? Red hats were much more piquing, and people who smelt dainty. At Weyfleet he dashed to catch one of the station buses. It dropped him at the end of Oak’s Road, a pleasant and shaded highway, the newness of its houses softened by the presence of old trees. Here were Scotch firs, oaks, limes and acacias. And hanging over the oak fences lilac and laburnum, and red thorn, and syringa, and purple buddleia, and pyrus floribunda. Oak’s Road had a quiet aloofness. Little common children were not known in it. Clare—in her wisdom had said—“Never live where there are cottages.” The democratic illusion dies in a garden.

Biddulph passed through the oak gates of “Caradoc.” He talked a good deal in the train about his roses. “Must have loam—you know,” and he pronounced it “loom.” “Caradoc” made him feel good, just as a nice white dress shirt did. Not so bad for the junior partner in the firm of Thomson and Biddulph, solicitors!

Then his wife saw him, and a something that was motherly came into her eyes. A woman may surrender many illusions, but the feeling of motherliness to the whimpering pup in man may last her her lifetime. She saw Leslie so very clearly, hat well back, round face buxom and self-pleased, black coat cut just so, his striped trousers perfectly creased. He called her darling a dozen times a day, when he had lost his socks or his cigarette case was empty. His blue eyes saw the surface of things and women. She was quite sure that some day she would get him into the House of Commons.

“Leslie.”

She was playing with the blue quill, and her voice fastened upon him as he reached the porch.

“Hallo,—darling.”

He came to the window.

“Awfully sorry. A blighter up from Manchester. Simply had to see him
_____”

“Oh, of course. I got the message.”

“I’ll rush in and change, darling.”

But Clare, balancing the blue quill like a miniature spear, looked upwards. The pink room was nearly overhead.

“No hurry. Come in here.”

She had to tell him to close the door; he had a way of leaving doors and drawers open, though he spoke of himself as a methodical chap.

“Mary is here.”

“Mary!”

He was tapping a cigarette on a silver box.

“Yes,—a little trouble. The romantic moment arrived, and she ran away from it.”

Leslie looked solemn and a little shocked. He took romance very seriously.

“Love affair?”

“Well,—yes,—and a general reaction against Sussex clay. We have got to be kind to her, Leslie, for two or three weeks.”

“Of course, darling.”

He sat down on the back of the sofa. It was obvious that he wanted to know exactly what sort of kindness he had to display. Besides—his wife’s sister was one of the dusky, poignant women.

“Anything serious?”

“A woman’s first love affair always seems serious—to her.”

“Of course, darling. But I don’t quite see—unless the man is a blackguard——”

“There is such a thing as being too much in love—with the wrong person.”

Biddulph’s voice grew throaty.

“O, that’s it,—a married man, one of those polygamous fellows——”

“No,—he’s not married.”

“Not! But do I understand—she cares?”

“In a sort of way. She’ll get over it. We must help her to get over it.”

“Of course,—darling,—rather.”

And then, when she had told him just as much as she thought it good for him to know, and had tinted the picture to her fancy, she chose to remember the John Bull in him, also that he was a legal light, and rather punctilious about it.

“As a man of the world,—Leslie,—don’t you agree?”

Of course he agreed. He mounted his chivalrous horse. That farmer fellow deserved to be kicked. Selfish, tyrannical, obsolete fool! To expect a sensitive modern girl,—and a gentlewoman—mark you—to bury herself in an old barn of a place, and scrub and cook and mend and make butter! Preposterous! Did the fellow think that a wife was nothing but a servant? No,—by Jove! Sort of case that made you feel hot—because you knew just where it would end. The Divorce Court. O, yes, as a lawyer, he knew a little. And the old people too—they appeared to have encouraged the affair; having made a slave of poor Mary, they had been for pushing her into married slavery. Not that he was saying anything against “Darling’s parents.” Old people were old people. Let them send for their Cousin Nellie. Meanwhile poor little Mary should be comforted. And she wanted to work—did she? Splendid! O, yes, he was quite sure that he could find her a job, not too onerous a job. Yes, but it was their business to give her a good time for a month or so; she needed a holiday, rest. And supposing that fellow Furze should try to follow her up and make trouble? Leslie the lawyer—the man of the world—would deal with him; he would enjoy it; he would open the fellow’s eyes.

“You are a dear,” said his wife. “I like a man to be a rock, but a kind rock.”

So, Mary was persuaded down to eat a little dinner. She was made to drink two glasses of port, poured out in person by Darling’s husband. He was consciously tactful, and you could see him exercising it, riding it with dignity. Nothing was said about the Sussex romance.

Mary must have a good time. They would put her up as a temporary member at the Hills Club. Did she play much tennis? A rabbit! But he was sure that she was such a nice brown rabbit. Clare, who was a regular pro. these days, would give her some coaching. And, of course, they must go to Wimbledon. And Henley. He might manage a day off for Henley; he would arrange for a punt.

His kindness reduced a young woman, who was still in a very emotional state,—to tears. It was a signal triumph; he was quite moved by it.

“What a dear Leslie is,” said one sister to the other.

“Yes, he’s a kind old thing. I’ll come and tuck you up,—baby.”

“Does Leslie know—everything?”

“Not—quite—everything. But he approves. That man was expecting the impossible from you.”

3

Mary had spent a week at Weyfleet three years ago, but that was before the Biddulphs had climbed as high as “Caradoc.” They had lived in rather a stuffy little red villa near the river. A lucky speculation in real estate, and an alliance with an enterprising building contractor had given the firm of Thomson and Biddulph considerable pickings. “Caradoc” was half-way up. The Biddulphs had left the Valley, but they had not quite reached the Hills, though they played tennis, and golfed and danced there. Clare had her eyes on the heights, and she meant her man to scale them.

In order to live upon the Hills it was necessary to possess a considerable income. That and that alone was necessary for the near dweller upon Olympus. A crude criterion, but capable of much refinement, and Clare Biddulph was not crude. That mysterious community living in spacious seclusion among the pinewoods, and much beauty of bracken and tall trees and gardens, did not cohere in the matter of self-consciousness. Much of it was very self-conscious, but not quite self-sure. It was a mixed community; you met Midas and you met his Master, and it was the Master who mattered. That Clare knew. You had to back your money bluff with something better if you desired to be the real thing. There were other values. To play games rather superlatively well was one of the most important. Smartness counted, that ultra refinement of smartness, expensive simplicity. You must dance well, and play a good game of bridge, and be able to look other women calmly in the eyes, and “my dear” them with complete composure. If you had one or two little cultured hobbies, and did not advertise them too flagrantly, a little mysterious radiance was added. It was allowed that you might know something about mezzotints or lacquer, or dabble nicely in Theosophy, or be an amateur connoisseur of the dramatic or collect first editions. The Hills had their select few, some really charming and notable people, and Clare had her eyes upon these.

She was not one of those who pressed blindly upwards clutching a purse. She was not prejudiced. She had never—like many of the Valley women,—spoken sneeringly of the Hills—because they would not be able to arrive there. “Just a lot of Jews, my dear, and Central Europeans.” Clare knew better. What that mysterious community signified was a problem in

psychology. Certainly—it did not itself know. Self-analysis is not for the many, nor is self-realization. But Clare had vision.

Clare had understanding, and so had Mary Viner. She was less clever than her elder sister, but she too knew instinctively all that the Hills offered to a woman. It was a porcelain bath, a new art garden, a jewel case, a perfect motor-car, a ballroom, a sumptuous little corner full of cushions. Life was very easy, or seemed so. A little pleasant boredom sent you off to Switzerland or Spain or the Riviera or Dinard. You were less than twenty miles from New Bond Street.

She lay in bed and felt both miserable and happy. She had run away from her poor lover, and her running away had made her angry with him. Clare and her husband had reinforced this anger, insisting that she had been shamefully proposed to, and threatened with exploitation. A common drudge in a farmer's house! So she too insisted upon her anger, because she was not quite sure of it, but she meant to be sure of it. She would take Clare's advice and quickly forget those kisses, his possessive but devoted strength, that fragrant and tumbled hay-cock. He would find someone else with a broader and easier lap. She was too slimly built for that sort of love.

As Clare had put it—"My dear, woman's most blessed escape is from the first man she falls in love with. Leslie was my third."

So Mary let herself be spoilt and persuaded. No, she could not go back to Cinder Town, not permanently, and Cousin Nellie could carry on. Of course, when she got a job she would help the old people, send them presents, go down for week-ends. But she wished the break to be final, a hiatus that could not be bridged with useless sentiment.

"I feel that the life would have killed me."

Clare was more of a realist and less emotionally emphatic.

"It would have bored you to skin and bone, my dear, which is worse than being killed."

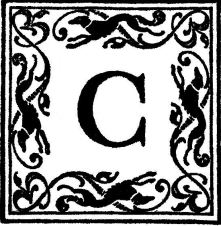
Mary wrote her letters. Furze had read two of them, and her people read a third. Meanwhile Cousin Nellie had arrived, the devoted and predestinated stop-gap, and built for it, being rotund and busy and cheerful, with a passion for doing things for other people. She had little to say about Mary, and that little was kind and to the point. "I felt like that myself—once. These young things! Now—I wonder where on earth she put the fish-kettle? There—must—be a fish-kettle—somewhere." She was more sorry for Furze than for anyone else, for Furze came to "Green Shutters" and looked many things and said little. "Well, she has missed a man anyway, if she has missed him. Still—we are not all made the same." Cousin Nellie was a philosopher.

Yet, at Weyfleet, there was a secret part of Mary Viner that was a little sad and ashamed. She was not being selfish; O—no; she was only seeking self-expression. None the less there were times when that old Sussex house haunted her, seeming to project its softened gloom into the bright and pagan life about her. It reproached her. That new kitchen range, and the sink, and the hot water, and the rose-coloured china! “Traitor,” it called her; “you will let him sacrifice his trees.”

Yes, but better the trees than herself. Diligently she set herself to repress awkward memories. Darling’s husband, generous fellow, had given Clare a cheque for her sister, and Clare, knew of a clever little woman in the place who made you delightful frocks for half the price you had to pay in town. Mary hid herself in a thicket of pretty-pretties.

XII

1



LARE BIDDULPH had been given tickets for Ranelagh.

She parked her two-seater car on the grass under the elms beside the drive, and smiled at a large-eyed child of a sister who stood there between fear and wonder.

“What a lot of cars!”

The world streamed cars, cars of all sizes and colours, and of every degree of luxuriousness. A haze of dust hung in the sunlight between the trees, and while one sister spoke to a one-armed man in charge of the cars, the other stood in the shadow, a little shrinkingly, like a woodland spirit brought suddenly to the edge of a glade in the forest of the Roi Soleil. Here was a Fete Gallante, and brown eyes gazing at the beginnings of a world that possessed those things that the heart of her desired.

Mary was scared.

“It’s awfully smart.”

Clare had given her sister one of her last year’s frocks, a black mannequin dress, and a little cerise-coloured straw hat. “O, my dear, how generous of you!” had been Mary’s cry, though as Cinderella she had not probed too carefully for motives. Clare herself was wearing painted chiffon, a beautiful, fluttering gauzy thing, with the texture of a butterfly’s wings, a blur of soft blues and greens and greys and purples. Her eyes were serene and cool under an amber-coloured straw. Could anything be more satisfying and fascinating than dress? To be smart and to look smart with the perfection of easy simplicity. Mary fluttered a little and was shy. Really, Clare was wonderful, and Clare had the pleasant sense of being felt to be wonderful, and generous, and wise, a complete woman of the world.

“That’s the club-house. We’ll have tea—presently—on the lawn.”

Her voice was casual. She dawdled. A well-dressed woman should never hurry, or be caught in a moment of breathlessness, physical or spiritual. The thing was to trail coolly in the sunlight, or under the shadows of the trees, while other women gave you those little significant glances which you noticed and yet did not appear to notice. A perfectly dressed sang-froid

could approach very near to the holy of holies. Moreover, it was of much more importance to impress women—the real critics with eyes that could pull you to pieces. “Shaftesbury Avenue, or Leicester Square, or St. Paul’s Churchyard, my dear!” No, that must not be whispered. The men were far less important. They just thought a woman looked nice. Not one man in a hundred could discern details.

Mary was crude. She looked about her too much, like a young person at a fête. She was a little scared, and inclined to exclaim and ask questions.

“They have a golf-course!”

“Yes.”

“And tennis-courts.”

“Of course.”

“What are all those coloured things over there,—where the horses are?”

Those liquid browns of her eyes suggested a melting short-sightedness. Almost she was pointing a finger across the polo ground. Her colour came and went quickly.

“Turbans,” said her sister, “Indians, grooms, syces. An Indian team is playing.”

“They look like great red flowers.”

Clare’s voice was casual.

“The thing is to get a seat in the shade. Which side shall it be? Polo—or the pony show—and the four-in-hands and the ladies’ hacks?”

“I want to see everything.”

Clare smiled. Would this eager breathlessness appeal to some man? The male was supposed to be more vulnerable when innocence, the Arcadian nymph, shot her virginal and haphazard arrows. Men were so obvious and yet so unexpected.

Casually she appropriated a chair under one of the chestnut trees close to the white kiosk where the orchestra sat.

“Going to be a big crowd.”

Mary took another chair like a child seizing a cake. Yes, it was a crowd, such a crowd as she had never seen. The dresses! These painted chiffons, and muslin and laces, floating, softly brilliant, beautiful with a beauty that made her afraid. She was happy,—and she wanted to weep. She adored beauty. She thrilled to a beautiful frock, a hat, the pattern of a sunshade. She felt like a thirsty child in a garden full of fruit. It was wonderful and exquisite and frightening and tantalizing. All these colours! And the men in the red jerseys with the red bands round their straw hats! And the other men

in top hats, grey and black, and bowler hats, and soft hats. The orchestra was playing a fox-trot. She dreamed and gazed, and drummed with her fingers on the back of a chair.

“Everybody must be very rich.”

“You are as rich as you look, my dear.”

For a while Mary was voiceless. She palpitated like a bird. She gazed at people, other women, and now and again a man glanced at her. What a world—what an exquisite world! She thrilled between the polo and the horse and pony show. She kept jumping up and going from one side to the other, flying like an eager shuttle through the web of sunlight and shadow. Clare, cool and serene, moved very little, and when she did move it was to be looked at.

It was Mary’s first game of polo and she watched it like an excited child. The verve and the virility of it set the feminine part of her stirring. These brown, lean men on the little galloping ponies! How they rode! Surely, someone would be hurt! And when they came galloping to the boards after the white ball she felt that she was in the face of a cavalry charge and flinched a little, but with the delight of the woman in the hot and the helter-skelter courage of the men. She thought only for a moment of that other brown man cutting hay in Sussex, and she put the thought aside with a quick qualm of pity. He seemed poor and obscure beside these galloping cavaliers, a fustian figure.

She asked questions.

“Why do they keep riding off the field?”—“Aren’t they clever with their mallets.” “Why are the ones in blue and white knocking it the other way now?”

Clare had to muffle up these crudities. Mary had yet to learn her lesson, to keep her mouth shut unless she was sure of bringing out the right word when she opened it. Mallets—indeed! Her sisterliness sat poised between amusement and the urgent need of hinting. But when someone stood up and opened a sunshade, and Mary was for climbing on her chair, Clare gave a tweak to the black frock.

It restored Mary to self-consciousness; it brought her childishness tumbling like a winged bird. From that moment she was the woman, painfully so, but in a way that was good for her own soul. Caution came to her, and the eye that looks slily round; her face became expressionless, and a little moody; she remembered the other women; she became aware of a frock. Everybody—or nearly everybody—was wearing colours, and she blushed suddenly for her blackness. But what an ungrateful blush! She

looked anxiously around for other figures in black, and was a little consoled when three smart French girls passed by in the colours of night. She scrutinized them interestedly, their frocks, their hats, the white creaminess of their skins. She realized that she was too rustic and too ruddy.

Clare's voice drawled.

"What about tea? I hate rushes. We may as well make sure of a table in the shade."

They went, and on the way Mary surprised her.

"Thanks—for pulling me off that chair."

"My dear——"

"No I'm not narky. I needed it."

They strolled across the lawn and possessed themselves of a table under the shade of an acacia. A red-coated waiter brought them tea. The crowd grew thick about them as other people sought the shade, and Clare became aware of a change in her sister. Mary was controlling her glances and her movements, cloaking too provincial a curiosity, powdering out the flush of her self-consciousness. Clare's soul gave a little, approving nod. Mary was quick; she had the understanding that could keep quiet, and muffle the too obvious ticking of her cheap clockwork. Good girl! The woman who can smooth out her face and hold her tongue can conjure up possibilities.

"Enjoying it,—Baby? That frock suits you."

"It is lovely here."

She spoke as though she had tasted some new and exquisite fruit, and its luscious mellowness was all to her liking. Only a week ago she had been gnawing a crab-apple sort of life in Cinder Town. Good heavens, had Arnold really made love to her by offering her a kitchen range and a new sink? She smiled at her sister.

"I like this. So complete and well done, isn't it?"

"Pretty fair."

"Not my world, of course—but I shall hope to get glimpses of it—even though I may be working in an office."

"O,—things happen," said her sister.

The drive home was a silent one. Clare had the sun in her eyes, and she did not like talking when she was driving a car. "Too many fools on the road, you know." She drove very well, better than Leslie did, but then she did most things well. Mary lay back and was full of the afternoon's significance. She had no doubt at all but that this was the sort of world to which she wished to belong, for even if you did not quite belong to it you

could share much that it enjoyed. She allowed herself to dream. The dream might be absurd, but then all dreams are supposed to be absurd, and even a pretty girl with three half-pence in her pocket and wearing her sister's cast-off clothes can venture beyond realities.

In a narrow road beyond Esher they had to pass a wagon loaded with hay, and the smell of it was a sudden shock to her. What a complex structure was the human heart! You had cupboards in it, and rooms, which you had to shut up. That Sussex hay field, and the moon and the dew, and a man's arms, and his kisses, and the weight of his love upon her bosom! She struggled to free herself from the memories, as she had freed herself from his passion, urging herself towards resentment, because she was able to tell herself that Furze would have dragged her down to a cheap struggle with poverty. She did not want to be poor, and if she had to be poor she would prefer to be poor by herself. Moreover, he was just a common farmer, with no mystery about him powerless to give her the things she desired. He would have looked clumsy on one of those polo ponies.

Her warmer self reacted. Poor Arnold! How beastly of her to feel ashamed of him. She humiliated herself for a little while, and tried to escape from her heart's accusations by assuring herself that she had been kind in being cruel. Yes,—even to her parents. They would be far happier with Cousin Nellie. And yet she was one of those creatures who like to be propped by someone else's opinion, and to be reassured by sympathy.

“You don't think me too horribly selfish, Clare?”

Her sister did not take her eyes off the road.

“For wanting to be yourself?”

“Yes. I expect they are saying terrible things about me—down there.”

“Let them. Better to have terrible things said—than to be terribly bored. Words break no bones. The thing is—in these days—to keep your eyes on the road.”

“You have such pluck. You always had. Do you remember fighting that horrid boy on Hastings beach—because he threw sand at me?”

Clare smiled.

“I do. How old was I then? Ten. Don't be too soft-hearted, Baby. We have added a duty to all those other duties to one's parents and neighbours and the Deity—duty to oneself. And it comes first, my dear. Charity begins at home.”

She looked kindly at Mary as she turned the car into the Oaks Road.

“If we listened to all that the previous generation said of us! But we don’t. That’s youth.”

2

Bobbo the dog had been run over by a lorry on the Melhurst road. It had been a hopeless case from the first, in spite of the veterinary surgeon from Carslake, and Furze’s gentle and devoted hands.

“Better shoot the poor beast.”

“I can’t do it, man.”

The vet. looked pityingly at both dog and man.

“I know. Like shooting your best friend. But if—you like——”

“Chloroform—or something.”

“A shot is quicker—and as kind. If you’ll send your man in——”

Furze went into Mrs. Damaris’ parlor and shut the door, and sat down on the sofa. With his elbows on his knees, and his hands over his ears, he waited, hearing what he did not wish to hear, the low voices and the movements of the two men, and a whimper from the dog. He set his teeth, while his heart was the heart of a little wailing boy. He heard them go out; they were carrying the dog between them on an old rug, and presently from somewhere he heard the dull report of the gun.

He stood up, quivering, conscious of a sudden and deep anger, a voiceless rage against fate. His dog! Such a kind-eyed, trustful, wise creature. Just an inert and bloody mass—now. He hoped that Kelly had not shot him in the head. But did it matter,—if Bobbo’s suffering was over? And yet his anger spread. It enlarged itself like the red glare of a fire seen through a fog, and until it included in its glow half the field of his consciousness. Love had let him down a second time. Meanwhile, Will Blossom had got poor Bobbo into a sack so that Furze should not see the dog’s dead body, for Will as a man had a man’s understanding of certain things. Kelly the vet. had mounted his horse and ridden off.

Will came to the door.

“Kelly be gone.”

Furze stood up.

“I’ve put he in a sack by t’ gate.”

“Thanks, Will. You are a good chap.”

So, Furze went out and buried his dog, digging a grave in the grass under Mrs. Damaris’ window. And when Bobbo was laid in his brown hole, the

anger went out of his master, and pity entered in, compassion for all dumb, and unfortunate and gentle things. It spread to the woman who had given him kisses and then run away from him. Poor little Mary. Timid, quick-breathing, brown-eyed thing. Marriage had frightened her, and all that marriage implied. The strangeness of it. And children. Yes, perhaps some women dreaded that ordeal, the sickness, and the pangs, and the vague terrors. He had not thought of that before.

His face cleared, and his eyes grew gentle. He went to call the cows in from the field at milking-time, and as he sat with his head pressed against a warm flank, and watched the white milk purring into the pail, his compassion deepened. These cows of his were gentle beasts, and life should be gentle, and full of the wholesomeness of good milk. Things seemed to be simple when you had understanding, the understanding that a deep love gives; it was the greeds and the prides and the restlessnesses that turned life sour. Why were people restless? Because they were not happy with simple things, and wanted elaboration, and ceased to want it when they had got it, and started wanting something else. Hard work kept a man straight, the work that entailed the care of live plants and creatures, and taught him sympathy for them, and convinced him of man's elemental duties. Having a good time! Man was not on the earth to have a good time. "By the sweat of thy brow——" Great men those old Hebrews. When man—and woman with him—ceased to labour they cease to live.

In the cool of the evening he went down to Cinder Town, taking a basket of eggs with him. At "Green Shutters" he found old Hesketh pottering in his garden, tying bast round his sweet-pea sticks. Poor Coode, with a curly and melancholy pipe pendant from his mouth, was hanging over the fence. He slipped away when he saw Furze.

"Brought you a few eggs, sir."

"Thanks, my dear fellow."

Old Hesketh looked tired. Youth had departed, the young bird had flown, and though he had recognized the inevitableness of it more readily than his wife had done, something had gone out of life. He was at the end of the last lap. He looked gentler; the lovable awkwardness of his long legs and body suggested a new feebleness. The old people had taken it very well; they had naturalized the adventure. O, yes, Mary had gone to her sister's to take a post in London. Very natural and proper; young women had to work these days; his pension would be reduced to a minute allowance to his wife when he died. He had very little to leave. Mary had looked ahead. Young women had to think of the future.

Furze did not tell old Viner about Bobbo. He was the sort of man who kept his troubles to himself.

And how was Mary? Had they heard again?

Yes, Mary was with her sister. Her brother-in-law was looking out for a post for her. A secretaryship, something of that sort. After all, you could not blame the girl.

“I blame myself,” said Furze gravely; “I frightened her.”

Old Hesketh unravelled a length of bast.

“Oh,—I should not say that, my dear fellow. We have to live and learn—you know. Let her try another sort of work——”

“To my mind—work is the only thing that matters, especially when there is someone else——”

“Ah, just so. Women find that out—I expect. You’ll come in and have some supper with us. Miss Farren has made a gooseberry tart. And there is the cream you sent us this morning. Very good of you, my dear fellow.”

Furze stayed to supper, for in that little house the scent of a girl’s hair seemed to linger.

3

It was three o’clock on the Saturday afternoon, and a day of heat and of pleasant languor, and Mary, standing in front of the long mirror in the white wardrobe, saw herself as June. White muslin with a patterning of blurred rose upon it, a present from Uncle Leslie. He had claimed an avuncular interest in her, and now he was out there in his flannels, sitting in the car, and squeezing the bulb of the horn.

“I say—you two—it’s three o’clock. I fixed up with the Ryders for three.”

Mary went to the window and looked down at him lounging in the car.

“So sorry, Uncle Leslie. I’m ready now.”

“O, you are—are you.”

The upward glance of his appreciative blue eyes assured her that she was a pretty thing, and that she looked charming in that white-brimmed straw with its black ribbon and gold medallion. Leslie had views upon hats. He disapproved of the “cloche,” and said that a woman’s eyes and forehead should be shaded. “Bit of mystery—you know. Who wants to look at a Spartan wench in a hard thing like a helmet?”

They were going to the Hills Club for tennis, Mary in the dickey, Clare beside her husband, and the car ascended towards those fortunate regions. To one of the three it was a sun-chariot. She had come fresh from a scented bath into her muslins, and she felt exquisitely cool, and the smell of the bath-salts lingered. Blessed symbolism, a perfumed bath! And she could smell the pines, and had glimpses of big houses and gardens, and spreading lawns and roses, and herbaceous borders threading strands of colour. The car turned in at the white gate and glided along the avenue to the club-house. On the left stretched the courts, and they seemed to Mary to be innumerable with the high stop netting on green standards, and their yellow posts, and upon them happy figures, men in flannels, young girls—short skirted and short sleeved and white armed in the sunlight. High woods of beech and pine threw a protecting greenness about the place, and all those sleek lawns ended in soft shadows.

Biddulph drove to the broad space in front of the club-house and turned the car there. He need not have driven so far, but the pomp and the joy of life prompted him to it. The high terrace in front of the neo-Georgian house was crowded with people, girls and women in Dryad chairs, or sitting upon red cushions laid on the coping of the terrace wall. Scores of eyes looked down at them. And Biddulph turned the car at his leisure, smiling at friends, knowing that he had two pretty women to show off, his women, and that he himself was a good-looking chap and a successful one, and no rabbit at games.

Clare understood the manœuvre, and approved. That was why she and her man ran so well together in double harness, for they liked high-stepping and showed each other off, but Mary had less right to be confident. Her eyelids drooped under the gaze of all those other eyes; she felt perched up,—and too prominent.

“Where are you going to park?”

“Under one of the trees, darling.”

He turned the car to the left of the club-house where a grove of trees threw a pleasant shade, and a little lake lay cool and placid. There were other cars here, and Biddulph had to insinuate the two-seater into the shade. He struck a patch of sunlight.

“I’ll have to back a bit.”

Behind him rose a warning hoot, and Mary’s voice quickly anxious.

“A car behind us.”

Biddulph put in the hand-brake and looked round, smiled, raised a hand.

“Sorry, Fream. Didn’t know you were there. I’ll crawl up a bit farther.”

Mary had exchanged glances with the solitary man in the other car. She thought that it was the biggest car that she had ever seen, a blue monster, the colour of a blackbird's egg, and all a-glitter. Its immense balloon tyres looked as big as bolsters. The man in it had a very pale face, and wore rimless pince-nez. He sat there with a stiff passivity and in complete silence.

Biddulph was helping her out of the dickey, and keeping her muslin frock away from the grease-caps on the back springs. He smiled over it,—and enjoyed it.

Clare had drifted back to the blue car and was talking to the man in it, and her eyes looked round at Mary.

“We have my sister with us. She's a nice child, but rather shy. Mary _____”

The man in the blue car raised his grey hat.

XIII

1



R. FREAM,—my sister—Miss Viner.”

The man in the car did not smile, but he gave her a sort of stiff movement of the body, nor did Mary then know that he was incapable of smiling. His age was an uncertain quantity; he might have been an old thirty or a young fifty.

She was looking into a large, firm and expressionless face. It was very flat and white, and the pale blue eyes seemed to flatten themselves behind his glasses. He was clean-shaven, his hair very black and lustreless, and growing too far down the nape of his neck. When he got out of the car she realized his height. It seemed to exaggerate the narrowness of his shoulders. He held himself stiff as a poker.

Yet he had a certain presence, an imposing stiffness, a negative dignity that owed its quality to the fact that it was perfectly expressionless. Everything about him suggested wealth; he was admirably tailored; and yet he lacked something. And he seemed to know that he lacked it, and wore steel corsets to hide the secret from the world.

“Delighted,” was all he said.

Biddulph bobbed beside him like a white yacht in the neighbourhood of a lighthouse.

“We are supposed to be playing Tom Ryder and his wife at three.”

“Are you?”

Fream looked supremely uninterested, but his length attached itself to the Biddulph party. He walked as though he were on stilts. He was not in flannels, but wore a grey tweed suit, black socks and shoes, a soft white collar and a black knitted tie. He looked at neither of the women, and yet his expressionless rigidity was not exactly indifference.

Clare suggested that he should come and watch their match with the Ryders. There would be just a trace of healthy venom in the game. The Ryders fancied themselves in a mixed double, and Clare had made up her mind to beat them.

Fream expressed no opinion, nor did he show any desire to watch the game or to avoid watching it. He was never heard to express a definite opinion on any subject, or to betray an inclination or a liking or a prejudice. He stood on his long legs, with that perfectly expressionless and pallid face of his looking down on the lesser people with the impartiality of a full moon. He would listen and not utter a word. He cast a chill over a cheery soul like Biddulph who was a Sun in Taurus. His enemies—and he had not a few and mostly envious males, called him the “Whited Sepulchre.” But he went along with the Biddulph party to No. 3 Court where the Ryders were waiting, and stood with a pallid silence in the midst of the chatter, his arms pressed to his sides, his right hand grasping his left wrist.

Hence, when the Biddulphs and the Ryders went on to No. 3 Court, Mary was left beside Mr. Fream to share his uncomfortable silence, for his silence did make her feel uncomfortable. She wondered why? Or was it wholly due to her own shyness? They were standing, and she stole a look at him. “I should like to sit down,” she thought, and her thought seemed to penetrate, for he went off and fetched her a chair. He came back, holding it very stiffly, almost as though he was competing in an egg-and-spoon race.

“Won’t you sit?”

She sat. She had coloured up and thanked him, and had caught a vague something in his eyes that she had not been able to interpret. He stood beside and slightly behind her, and the silence continued. They watched the game as it was played by four people who had some right to consider themselves to be experts. Mrs. Ryder was a lean little woman with a yellow face who popped her tongue out whenever she hit a hard drive. Her husband was an irritable and busy player, all red where his wife was yellow. The Biddulphs were much more pleasant to look at: Clare gracefully intent, and clean in all her movements; Leslie smiling like the perfect sportsman.

The silence continued. Mary had a feeling that unless she broke it she would lose her self-respect.

“Don’t you play this game?”

His reply arrived after a moment of deliberation.

“Not often. Do you?”

“O, very badly. I am not very good at games,—not like my sister.”

After that—he went and fetched another chair, and placed it within a yard of hers, and for fully a minute neither of them uttered a word. Mary caught her sister glancing at them as she came up to the net before Leslie’s service, and the glance had a quality of interest and of slight surprise. The silence continued, and she continued to be piqued by it. Either he was

completely bored or wholly indifferent. Or was it that he did not consider it to be good form to talk when four people were playing a grim and friendly game? He sat perfectly still, following the ball with his eyes.

“Good style—your sister.”

He fixed the remark at her suddenly, but without looking at her, and when he had fired that one shot he withdrew to reload.

“Clare does things so well.”

He nodded very slightly.

“Four—two to them, and thirty love. Want them to win, don’t you?”

His aside was almost intimate, though it appeared to cause him trouble with his collar. He tugged at it as though he found it too tight.

“I’m afraid I do.”

She was smiling, and he was the receiver of the smile. For quite a minute he sat beside her with the air of a man who had made a discovery and was pondering it and turning it over in his mind. Once or twice he looked intently at her profile. She was watching the game, and the softness of that smile seemed to linger. He brought out a cigarette case. It contained three different kinds of cigarette, and he chose a cork-tipped Virginia. His face expressed effort, an inarticulate striving against a queer form of self-paralysis.

“Been here before?”

Again an abrupt question, but she had begun to feel that the abruptness was not intentional. She was provoked to curiosity. He did not seem to her to be an ordinary sort of man, and she had begun to wonder about him.

“No,—not here. It is a lovely place.”

“Staying long?”

“Three or four weeks.”

“Come from the country?”

The question annoyed her slightly. Why should he assume her to be a rustic?

“Unfortunately—yes.”

Again he sat in silence as though he were doing figures in his head.

“You don’t like the country?”

“Not being buried.”

“No.”

“The joy of life. That’s it.”

His way of uttering those last words made her jump like a fish at a strange and compelling fly. What a strange twist in his voice, a mocking flick, something of a sneer! Yes, and more than that,—a twinge of pain. Was he mocking at her little confession, her eagerness to enjoy things?

“Why shouldn’t one?”

Her colour had quickened, and her mouth and eyes were poignant.

“Why not? Of course,—why not?” he said.

Almost he had a startled look. He dropped the half-smoked cigarette and placed his heel upon it.

“Quite natural—what! Suppose people feel like that. Hallo,—they have won the first set.”

And then his voicelessness seemed to grow more profound. He sat without a movement through the whole of the second set, a veritable William the Silent, the strong and silent man—if a girl chose to think of him in that sort of way. Strong and silent and laconic, with more understanding behind those glasses than the world knew of? She felt that she was getting her picture of him, and the picture was a little mysterious. She wanted to hear about him, what he was and what he did.

The Biddulphs won the second set, but just before victory declared itself Fream rose on his long legs.

“Tell them I’m going to get a table for tea. You and your sister and Biddulph. Not those—others. My tea—you know.”

He went striding away towards the club-house with that queer, constrained, mechanical walk of his.

2

“O, Clare; Mr. Fream wants us to have tea with him. He has gone to get a table.”

Clare gave her younger sister a look that was surprised and intent and calculating.

“Wants us to have tea with him. O, very well.”

Clare had a funny look. She went across to her husband who had left his sweater, scarf and jacket on a green seat on the other side of the court. The Ryders, a little heated, and on the edge of a squabble, were disappearing towards the club-house. The husband had been criticizing the wife’s lobs—“You don’t get down to ’em properly; you play ’em with too stiff an arm. Biddulph was killing ’em.” There were lengthy arguments between the Ryders whenever they lost a match.

“Old thing.”

“Yes, darling.”

“Fream has asked Mary to ask us to tea.”

She smiled suggestively at her husband. She saw his blue eyes grow more round in his hot and shiny face.

“By jove! Not really——?”

“He has gone off to get a table.”

“By Jove!” said Biddulph again, and pulled his sweater over his head, and emerged looking more ruffled and astonished.

“Bit dramatic,—what! I say,—old thing——”

“Well?”

“He’s a funny devil—you know. I suppose it’s——.”

His wife’s serenity waited upon him.

“Well?”

“Oh,—I don’t know,—funny—awful boiled shirt. Must have brains—though! Pots of money; made it himself.”

“I think he is rather—interesting.”

Her husband stared.

“Interesting! Good lord! Well,—I suppose women look at things differently. You don’t mean to say that you think he has developed a sudden pash?”

Her glance said—“Don’t be so crude, my child,” but she smiled, chin up, head slightly on one side. A wise woman allows for man to rediscover the things that she has discovered for him.

“Hardly. See what you think.”

“See!” said her husband. “Why—you never see anything on Fream’s face. It’s as flat as a wall. Personally I don’t believe there is anything to see.”

“I wonder,” said his wife.

They had tea on the terrace. Mr. Percival Fream had secured a table for four in a shady corner under one of the red-brick arches, a much-coveted corner. The steward had pocketed a ten-shilling note and prepared a polite lie for the other people who should have had the table. Fream’s eyes had a bright and glassy look, and his long body seemed slightly less rigid. Would Mrs. Biddulph pour out for them? Good. He drew back Mary’s chair for her, and finding himself both seated and voiceless, he began pushing dishes jerkily at his guests. There was only one sort of jam, and the lack of any

other sort of jam stimulated him into breaking silence. He called up their waitress. "This yellow stuff. Do you never have anything else?"—"Sorry, sir, we have nothing but apricot." Fream apologized for the "club," and his apology was wafted towards Mary. He said that the next time they had tea with him he would bring his own jam, real jam, and in six different varieties. It was a joke, or the Biddulphs accepted it as a joke. His guests laughed. Laughter eased things a little. It was Leslie who said—"Like you—I prefer my stuff red, old chap." His wife suppressed an inclination to raise her eyebrows. Her husband had called Mr. Fream "old chap." After all, the world was very human, like her Leslie.

Meanwhile Cinderella had nothing to complain of. Posed on this spacious terrace, and wearing a smart frock, she looked at the world of the Hills, and found it good. Here was the atmosphere that she dreamed of, green lawns and pleasant woods, a stage for people who led pleasant lives. She appreciated the quiet sumptuousness of the scene,—yes, she revelled in it. The butter was spread on fairy bread. She looked at all those cars parked along the avenue, at the well-dressed women and the girls in their simple tennis frocks, at the men who looked as though they had parts to play in the great adventure. There was money here and taste and ease and no soiling of hands, and no paltry contrivings. Moreover, to the two men at her table she was obviously a pretty thing, though she suspected that a man of Fream's largeness asked for more than prettiness.

At the point where Fream was offering them cigarettes Biddulph lapsed like the unseeing male that he was.

"We'll have a knock up, Mary; make up a four."

But she did not want to play, and Clare understood her sister's disinclination, but closing the lid on Leslie was at times like suppressing an amiable jack-in-the-box.

"It's so hot, and I'm afraid I'm lazy."

"O, nonsense."

"But I would much rather watch."

"We can't allow it, my dear."

Clare blew a little cloud of smoke at her husband.

"You are too energetic. Like Mary—I am going to sit out and watch. Get up a man's four."

The suggestion germinated. If you cannot persuade a pretty girl to play with you, you can show off your own play before her in a virile game with three other men who are just nicely your inferiors. Biddulph was what is called "a pretty player." He was watched by Mary,—but with less interest

than he deserved, for when the imperceptible fruits of a potential conquest are lying in a woman's lap she must be allowed to consider their bloom and their ripeness. Fream was sitting beside her. Clare had drifted away, ostensibly to fix up a four for the afternoon on Sunday.

"Never was much good at games."

Mary understood that he wanted to talk, and perhaps to talk about himself.

"Nor am I."

Glancing at him she had an impression of strained solemnity.

"Keener on my job, you know. Always was."

"Well,—I suppose a man ought to be."

"More results. Though—mind you—I like my own sort of play——"

"Of course. It need not be hitting a ball—need it?"

She was watching the game for the moment, and he looked at her intently as a man might look at a financial page in his morning paper, or at a rare print, or a horse, or at the shadows under a beech tree. His glance seemed to grope. It was both shrewd and perplexed and troubled. It suggested that he was out of his element, as much so as a coalheaver posed in front of the Mona Lisa. He mistrusted himself in this particular situation.

"Glad you feel like that."

She coloured very slightly, and he went on, jerking out the words with a kind of spasmodic abruptness.

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Most women—these days—think a man—silly ass—unless he can hit a ball or something. Hit it well,—you know. Got to be able to follow up your service—and volley. Think more about that than their business. Prefer something more solid—personally."

"I think you are right," she said.

And there this advance towards a possible intimacy halted for the day, and Mary returned to "Caradoc" in the Biddulph car and was somewhat silent during the Biddulph dinner. Later, alone for twenty minutes with her sister in a corner of the drawing-room, she regarded the sunset with eyes that asked questions.

"What does Mr. Fream do?"

Clare had expected some such question.

"Financial expert,—runs companies—and all that."

Finance was Einstein to Mary save in its personal significances.

“He seems very keen on his work.”

“Well, he is pretty good at it. I suppose he is the richest thing in Weyfleet. Married before. Divorced his wife. They did not get on.”

Mary’s eyes were sympathetic.

“Rather sad.—Men are such lonely creatures.”

“And difficult—sometimes,” said her sister, with a feeling that she had a duty to Mary.

“Oh,—I suppose so.”

But her tone was cheerful; she was looking at a richly coloured sky. To a woman the “difficulty” of a man who is inclined to admire her may not seem so very insuperable.

3

“Hill House” was the only old building in the Hills, and Percival Fream lived in it.

Built somewhere about the end of the eighteenth century, its grey façade looked across a terrace towards a piece of parkland that still held the barbarians at a distance. The house had long windows, a balustraded parapet, and an Ionic portico jutting out with unconvincing shallowness over its big central doorway. There were those who compared the rather expressionless flatness of the house to its owner’s face, but like Fream it had a grey “presence,” a constrained dignity. In old Weyfleet it had been spoken of always as the “House,” just as its owner was referred to as Mr. Fream, or perhaps as Mr. Percival Fream. No one ever “Percied” him. An irreverent person had referred to him on a pantomimic occasion as “Pallid, pontifical Percy,” but affectionate diminutives were not thrown in his face. He was Mr. Fream of Hill House. “Sir Percival—some day—my dear,” was a prophecy thrown out by Clare Biddulph, and a hint that somebody might yet be Lady Fream.

Fream drove his car up the drive and brought it to rest outside the portico. A chauffeur was waiting. He opened the door, and his master got out. The man took Fream’s place at the wheel, closed the door gently, and turned the car on the gravel. Nothing was said. A like muteness met Fream in the hall. Jessup, his man, standing there like a lay figure which uttered no sound unless a string was pulled, took Fream’s hat and gloves and sank away into the prevailing silence.

This silence was the most noticeable of the house's qualities. It seemed to fall like a curtain when Fream had passed between the pillars of the portico, a voiceless silence, suggesting—not peace, but rather—an unhappy dumbness. As a rule Fream did not notice the silence, for it was a part of himself, but on this June evening he seemed to question the inarticulate muteness of the house. He paused in the hall, looking about him somewhat aimlessly, as though he had mislaid his self and had suddenly remembered its existence. A little tremor passed over his face. He took off his glasses and polished them with the corner of a blue silk handkerchief. He looked a lonely figure in the great dark space of the hall. It was panelled in oak, and the portico darkened its two long windows, turning the brown of the walls and of the parquet floor to a subdued blackness. It was full of furniture, beautiful pieces, armoires, Jacobean cupboards, cabinets on legs, clocks, tables. They were possessions. They had been bought at high prices by a man who had tried to understand them, and had not been able to get nearer to them than the appreciation of what they had cost him. Furniture can be misunderstood as well as misplaced. These pieces of oak seemed to share in the house's silence. They stood there mute and dark and shadowed.

Fream replaced his glasses. It had occurred to him before that the hall needed more light, and on this evening there was a part of him that resented the darkness. "That damned portico!" It had an imposing appearance, and in Fream's world imposing appearances were of supreme importance. But what if appearances kept out too much light?

He opened a door and entered the library. Yes, this was a cheerful room, and he stood by one of the western windows with the Turkey carpet spreading its blues and reds behind him. He stroked his right eyebrow with the tip of his right forefinger, a trick of his when he had a problem to solve or a decision to consider. Yes, he could have the lead roof of the portico replaced with glass. The alteration would lessen much of the darkness. Light was good, and so were other lightnesses. By George, what a pretty neck Biddulph's sister-in-law had, that little triangle of soft white skin above the collar of her dress, with the curves of neck and shoulders bounding it! And above it the soft black wreath of her bobbed hair. Yet, how absurd that those inches of white skin should be so disturbing! And yet that was but a part of her that had disturbed him. His interests had lived celibate for years, and now of a sudden he had found himself conscious of the provocations of this pretty creature. It was as though his thoughts had fallen to the rush of male feelings after years of concentration upon other figures. Yes,—a figure, curves, swelling softnesses, arms, the glint of light in brown eyes, the arch of an eyebrow, the shadow of a hat.

He remembered that he had felt very bored when driving down to the Hills Club. His financial world was very dull for the moment. He sat on the windowsill, with his back to the open window, and lit a cigarette. This room was full of possessions, packed with them like a spoilt child's nursery, books, thousands of books which he had never read and would never read. A wireless cabinet—a sumptuous affair—stood in one corner, and a three-hundred-guinea pianola occupied the space between the windows. A gramophone stood open with a record on the wheel, and he crossed the room and pressed the lever, and stood listening to a sentimental waltz. He had tried that record after lunch, and had thought it a poor thing, but now the effect was different.

He took rather a long time dressing for dinner. Jessup had laid out the clothes in the little blue and white dressing-room. His master was always buying clothes; there were two dozen or so coats hanging on the hangers in the patent wardrobe; three different trouser presses saw to it that the creases were as they should be. Jessup calculated that Mr. Fream's shirts must be legion. Boxes were always arriving from Melody's in New Bond Street, boxes full of silk pyjamas, ties, socks, collars, shirts, and Jessup had his pickings. Three differently coloured dressing-gowns hung on the pegs fastened to the white door.

Yet Fream put on a ready-made black tie, for the fact was that he could not complete a hand-made bow with any niceness, and he would not confess to the failing to Jessup. A ready-made tie saved time. That was his justification. He tucked a white silk handkerchief up his sleeve and went down to dinner. The walls of the staircase were lined with prints that would have kept a collector dawdling on the stairs for twenty minutes. Fream knew the names of them, and on the back of each print was scribbled the price that he had paid for it,—but he had had them framed in polished oak. And very rarely did he look at them, save with a vague and empty glance that included them among his possessions.

He sat down at one end of the Georgian mahogany table. It was some four yards long, and the polished surface of it stretched away from him like one of those formal water-tanks that the garden artists impose upon their patrons. A little gathering of silver and Sheffield plate and glass kept Fream company at the extreme end of the table. A silver rose-bowl full of red and white roses occupied the centre. Jessup stood behind his master's chair, between it and the Sheraton sideboard. The walls of the room were panelled, and painted white, with the mouldings powder blue. A Romney, two Kuyps, a Reynolds, and two flowerpieces by Baptiste hung on them. The carpet was Chinese; the chairs Sheraton. A china cabinet full of Chelsea and Worcester

ware stood between the two long windows. Through the windows Fream could see the evening sunlight upon the old trees in the park.

Jessup, mute and efficient, dealt with plates and dishes and decanters. It struck him that his master had a better appetite than usual.

“Roses smell nice, Jessup.”

“Very nice, sir.”

That roses should emit a perfume was not a surprising phenomenon, but that Mr. Fream should make a remark upon their perfume caused Jessup to experience mild surprise.

4

In the library Fream unlocked his cigar cabinet and chose a cigar. He lit it, walked to the window, and stood looking at the formal garden and the park. A dancing faun,—joyously exultant upon a pedestal,—faced the setting sun. The foliage of the trees had a tinge of gold.

How much or how little he saw had no part in his decision, for to some men all that is possessed is nothing, and that which is not possessed but desired is the one thing that appears desirable. He sat down at his big desk, took a sheet of paper from a drawer, and remained motionless for a while with the hand that held the pen resting on the paper.

Presently he wrote:

DEAR MRS. BIDDULPH,—If you are not booked for anything will you and your husband and Miss Viner dine with me to-morrow night at eight? I expect you will be playing tennis late, so tell your husband not to change. No formalities. Or he can bring his things in the car and change here if he wishes to.—Sincerely yours,

PERCIVAL FREAM.

He considered the letter before placing it in an envelope and ringing the bell attached to his desk.

“O, Jessup, get Barter to take this letter down to Mrs. Biddulph’s at ‘Caradoc’ in Oaks Road, and to wait for an answer.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By the way—dinner may be for four to-morrow. It must be the best that Mrs. Cox can do. Tell her so.”

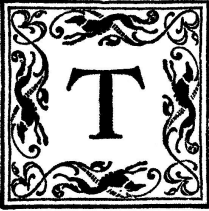
“Yes, sir.”

The letter went by Fream's chauffeur, and in half an hour he was back with the answer.

“Delighted.—”

XIV

1



THREE tiers of stone steps led up to the portico of Hill House, and as Mary climbed them her knees felt smooth under the skirt of her black frock. Delicious sense of smoothness! She stood at gaze a moment, forgetful of the other two, looking back and down over the park with its old trees spaced upon the evening grass. The slanting sunlight touched everything and smoothed it, and even the shadows looked sleek and gracious, like soft eyes—meditative and gentle.

Fream met them in the hall, appearing in a doorway like an automaton that had been set in motion by the sound of their voices. Jessup stood to take wraps and coats. There was a moment's chatter.

“Good of you to come——.”

“Well, we wanted to——.”

“I took you at your word, Fream,—about changing.”

“Quite right.”

The brown gloom of the hall was flecked with gold. Its cool loftiness seemed to offer a spacious entry to Mary Viner's dreams. She stood looking about her, absorbing the quick impressions of coolness and largeness, and of silence, with the sunlit park lying behind her, and all the discreet mystery of the house yet to be discovered.

Fream was speaking to her.

“I hope you will like my house.”

She looked up quickly into his face.

“It's lovely, so cool and restful.”

She was given a little, abrupt nod, and a fleeting gleam of his glasses. His self-consciousness, exaggerated by the occasion, stood up stiffly, while the man in him tried to unbend. Yet, from that very moment she knew that she was the live flame, and the others mere accompanying shadows, and that the very silence of the house and its owner was spread out at her feet like a Raleigh's cloak. She was conscious of a tremor of excitement. She felt

enlarged, smoothed out, raised to a new dignity. Her self-confidence caught the rebound of her quickened vitality. She felt at ease, able to talk securely, and to fit herself into this comfortable corner. Without realizing it she had become more vivid to herself and to others; a sudden bloom came to her; her femininity exhaled a richer perfume.

Biddulph was talking. He always made a cheerful, social noise.

“I say—your oak—Fream. Priceless,—what! My wife will be wanting to burgle the place——”

“That cupboard—I must stroke it.”

They drifted pleasantly into the drawing-room. The others might chatter, but Mary floated, and the man of silence moved long-legged beside her. He seemed to hover like an awkward bird, but to her he was supremely interesting, surrounded by the aura of his material significance. She liked his stiffness and his silence; she thought that there was something Spanish and pale and intense about him; he was her reaction, the stately couch, the black velvet curtain—after that hay-cock and the smell of fustian. Her inclination was ready to acclaim the grandee, the man of exciting reservations and of power. She was a woman, and for a woman he could smooth things out.

Jessup was there with a tray of cocktails, some amber-coloured stuff in little tapering glasses. She took her glass and her drink; the stuff went blandly down the velvet of her throat; she sat on a brocaded sofa. Impressions came to her quickly, of the long white room with its cerise-coloured carpet, and its air of lightness and of space, and of the gilded but sunny extravagance of its old French furniture. She had an impression of richness, of Clare poised on an amber-seated fauteuil, of Leslie radiantly absorbing cocktail, of Fream standing stiffly with a glass in a wooden hand and looking down at her with round, glazed eyes.

She was conscious of a triumphant tingling of her senses. His glance dropped slightly. It investigated, and was captured.

“I say,—Fream, this is a jolly good drink. Would it be rude to ask——?”

Fream came out of a set stare, and from a consideration of his preference for curves in contrast to the prevailing modern flatness. He could see no harm in an angular chunk of a woman.

“Don’t know—I’m sure. Jessup makes them. He’s rather good at it.”

“Dinner is served, sir.”

Her impressions continued. The Hill House dining-room conquered her with its air of distinction. Her soul felt as smooth as the polished table. What silver and glass! And the food! Exquisite sensations! And he did not give them champagne; champagne was so obvious. She put her lips to a very

beautiful and soft red wine, and wondered what the sauce with the fish was made of. They were using only a third of the table. She sat on Fream's left, with the Biddulphs opposite her, and Leslie's face shone like a cherub's. "Scrumptious" it said,— "scrumptious. And why not?" And she agreed with Leslie's face, and admired her sister's deliberate and calm feeding. You could not get Clare to betray the greedy child that lives in every healthy person. Fream said very little. His queer, expressionless, but polite stare came to her very often, and lingered, and managed to suggest a live smile.

Roast duck and new peas! She purred. The wine warmed her. Through the window she could see the dancing faun exulting on his pedestal. It seemed to her that Fream grew more Spanish and mysterious and pale and restrainedly intense. She rather liked his pallor; it had ceased to be chalk and had become marble, Parian marble.

Biddulph made social noises. He told a funny tale or two. They laughed. Mary laughed. She had the impression of the pale man inhaling her laughter and drinking it in. O, yes, she enjoyed things; it was very obvious that her senses could draw quick breaths and flush and struggle and quiver. She would know how to spend money, and to enjoy it; he felt her youth like a tremor down his straight, stiff spine.

Fream's little party was proving a success. Two bottles of exquisite red wine between the four of them, port,—and then liqueurs. A great mellowness descended; they were pleased with each other. Delightful people—all of them.

Fream and Biddulph, lingering for five minutes over coffee and cigars, felt warm and brotherly. Even Fream's pallor had decreased; the ice had thawed; in handing Biddulph the cigar box he had laid a large white hand on Leslie's shoulder.

"Charming girl your sister-in-law."

"Rather. And as good as she is charming, old chap."

The two women heard laughter as the men came across the hall to the drawing-room, and the laughter was Leslie's. Really—Fream had quite a nice, dry wit.

"Oh—I say—you two, don't be shocked—but Fream——"

He was interrupted by Fream asking permission for their cigars to be kept alight, and though his first and proper glance was given to Clare, it was the second glance that mattered. He stood looking down at Mary on the brocaded sofa.

"Sure you don't mind?"

"I like it."

Biddulph, momentarily interrupted, gushed forth again.

“Don’t be shocked. I’m going to see it. Fream has been telling me——.”

Clare’s eyes were on her husband. He had dined just a little too well.

“What,—old thing?”

“Fream has a new bath, a super-bath——. I say, let’s all go——.”

Fream, very erect, and properly presiding over the dignity of the occasion, kept a hand—so to speak—on the handle of Leslie’s humour.

“An idea of my own.—All marble—you know. Of course——.”

Clare laughed. The best way to deal with a delicate problem may be to laugh at it.

“Why not? I’d love to see it——.”

So, the four of them, on that first social and historic occasion, went upstairs to be shown Mr. Percival Fream’s new bathroom. He had taken a room, and had it marbled, and the bath, a marble cistern, lay sunk in the raised floor. Every sort of device had been installed for providing every sort of spray and douche. The curtains were of old rose, and the shades over the lamps of the same colour. Fream switched on the lights, and the whiteness of the room became tinted like the petal of a wild rose.

“Perfect,” said Biddulph’s wife.

“You like it.”

“It’s the poshest thing I’ve ever seen, old chap. Like a picture by one of those Classic fellows, Alma Tadema or Leighton. You only want——”

But Fream’s sudden hand switched off the lights, dimming the unconventional friendliness of the adventure. Clare’s voice trailed itself across a silence that needed linking up. She slipped an arm under Mary’s.

“Yes, quite charming.”

She was annoyed with Leslie. A bathroom might be a thing of beauty, but why blunder in and suggest the nude, especially feminine nudity? The broad staircase was descended with gravity, Fream bringing up the rear. He was examining the ash on his cigar.

“Suppose we try the library. Excuse me——.”

His stiffness retrieved the dignity of a situation that had been shaken by the cheery Sun in Taurus. Would they care for any music? He could switch on the wireless, or start the gramophone, or give them the latest thing on the pianola? Had Miss Viner ever tried a pianola? No? Well,—why not now? It was supremely easy. He would show her.

And so Mary and her grandee sat solemnly on the cushioned bench that was like an organist's seat, and produced music together, and Clare watched over her husband, and pointed the toe of an admonishing shoe at him.

The first stars, looking in through the kitchen window at "Doomsday," hung as silver points in the criss-cross of the casements, and fraternised with the flame of a shaded candle. A small fire reddened the bars of the new range. In the centre of the brick floor a big galvanized bath stood in a circle of wetness.

Furze had stepped out of it. He was towelling himself, standing very erect with hollowed loins, his skin showing very white save where the work of the day exposed it to the sun. His forearms, neck, head, and the V of the chest where his shirt would lie unbuttoned were brown as scorched grass.

A pair of pyjamas lay on one kitchen chair; his clothes on another. He had had a hard day, though all days were hard, and as he flicked the towel over the back of a chair and reached for his sleeping-suit his face came nearer to the light of the candle. It was the face of a man who was tired both in spirit and body, and to whom sleep would mean a little period of forgetfulness, a short truce between himself and nature. He had slipped on the jacket, and had the trousers in his hand when some sound breaking in on him out of the night's silence caused him to pause. He knew every sound that could come to him from the little world lying about his house, more especially such rare sounds as the night gave, the wind in the chimney, a branch tapping a window, a horse pulling grass close to a hedge or wall, the squeakings and screams and twitterings of the creatures of the night. A farmer has to be familiar with such sounds; he must be able to detect a note of pain in a beast's lowings, or restlessness in the stable. And Furze listened. The silence was profound, but his countryman's ear detected something that was disturbing. He had heard a sound of crackling as of the brittle sticks of an old faggot being broken, and now there was another sound, very faint but familiar.

He slipped out of the jacket, and put on breeches, shirt and shoes. Bobbo would have been giving tongue long ago; the new dog—Jim—was young and not much use as yet. "No peace for the wicked—and for farmers," was his thought, but he went patiently out into the darkness by the back door leading into the vegetable garden. He stood very still,—listening.

Heavy breathing—and the sounds of big beasts feeding! Yes, there was no doubt about it, and a little flame of anger was lit in his brain. A thistle-

spud was leaning against the wall. His hand touched and grasped it. He went softly past the well-house, and in the tangle of the garden's gloom he could make out the vague bulk of two or three cows. They must have broken through two hedges and got in among his young winter greens.

"It's Doll," he thought; "what's come to the beast? The quietest of the lot."

He went forward, conscious of a fierce restraint. He wanted to be angry; his tired brain and body rebelled against this last wanton labour, but a man has to keep his temper with the beasts of the field. He called softly to the cows—"Come then—coop-coop.—Doll, come then you mischievous girls." But the beasts were guilty and scared; they blundered away from him, trampling, and breathing heavily. He shut his mouth hard. He knew that he would have a devil of a job getting them out of the garden, and that if he lost his temper the game would be more serious. He searched for and found the gap in the broken hedge. The beasts must have come through from the "Gore," breaking the hedge on that side of the lane. There was a gate at the corner near the pond. He went and opened it. He fetched and lit a lantern. He began the game of shepherding the animals out from among the garden crops and bushes.

It was an exasperating amusement. He persuaded two of them out into the lane, but the last of the three led him a devil's dance. He got her cornered at last. He worked her down the hedge to the open gate, and there she frisked and tried to cut away. He lost his temper, dashed to cut her off, and struck her with the spud.

"Damn you."

After that he had to chase a mad creature and two tricky followers up the lane. He was afraid that they would get out into the Melhurst road, but he managed to slip past them and to turn them back. Luckily for him one of the three broke back through the gap in the hedge into the "Gore," but he had to go and hunt out a hurdle and a beetle and set the hurdle up in the broken hedge.

He was sweating. He stripped again in the kitchen, rubbed himself down, put on his pyjamas, and taking the candle, went up to his room. He felt angry and discouraged. He was sorry that he had struck Doll, for roughness with beasts was against nature and his traditions, and yet there was a part of him that was not sorry. A man must let out sometimes when he is overtired or pushed beyond the limits of his patience.

But things had gone so wrong lately, ever since love had failed him, and Bobbo had died. There was no reason for his wrongness; it seemed to be just

the cussedness of circumstances, and yet he was used to the eternal cussedness of the things that man strives to control. To men who live on and by the soil it is the most familiar of experiences, and as old as Job.—Cursing God did not help one. Nothing helped but patience and knowledge, and the doggedness of footsteps treading the same purposeful road. Character! O,—yes, plenty of character was needed on a farm, and he blew out the light and lay down in his bed. But there was no relaxation of his body. He felt all strung up and restless, and now that his muscles had ceased to contract, his thoughts took on a troublesome activity. All the worries and the disharmonies of the day, and of many previous days, came and stood about his bed. Confound them! He felt most damnable wide-awake. Why was it? He had had wagonloads of worries in the past five years, but always he had felt himself the driver of the cart, and able to tip it when he pleased. Nothing had ever kept him from sleeping,—but now he was not sleeping so well. There were thorns in the bed, lonelinesses, yearnings.

Passion denied,—tenderness balked? O, no doubt, for he would lie and think of her, and try to be patient. After fluttering her wings she would come back. His dear bed-mate and fellow-worker, breathing quietly beside him after moments of fulfilled desire. The quiet breathing of a mate, the soft touch of her limbs, the comforting warmth of her! All this would give him courage and constancy; in touching her body he would be like Antaeus touching the earth. Patience,—loyalty! But why was it he cared so profoundly, as he had never cared before? What was there about her——?

He lay and looked at the stars, and her vision paled a little. He had not seen her for a month, and there were times when her face would grow unaccountably dim,—as though she were ceasing to exist, had never existed. That dear face! And there were times when she was so vivid to him that he would clench his hands and shut his eyes as though to hold and confine the vision of her. Her hair was just of that blackness. And that wavy, poignant mouth, with its wreathing upper lip, and her quick colour, and the way her eyes filled with a broken light of splintered brown and gold! O,—beloved!

But other things vexed him that night. Damn it,—why didn't it rain? He wanted rain. His roots needed it,—his grass. He had been hoeing the Sea Field all day to make a mulch for his mangles. And Will had a poisoned hand. And that damned new dog of his had killed two chickens. And he was worried about Betty.

Yes, Betty's case was the most worrying thing he had. One quarter of her udder had become hard. There had been thick curds. He had tried massage.

Mamitis was a serious affair, especially the infective form. He would have Kelly the vet. over.

But meanwhile, he wanted to go to sleep, and couldn't. The breaking of those three cows into the garden had left him on an edge of painful wakefulness.

3

Furze was up at half-past four. He made himself some tea, cleared away the bath from the kitchen and went out to see what damage had been done in the garden.

The dawn lay like a grey sheet upon the earth, with a pearling of dew, and a silvering of the grass and the hedgerows. Not a leaf stirred. The freshness of the dawn had the tang of a first kiss, some of its shyness, its chilly tremors. The earth smelt sweet. There would be a fog at sea, and heat to follow, and as he stood in the greyness, wishing that he could change the dew to rain, he heard the dolorous complaining of a ship's syren far away like the crying of some great beast in pain.

But the beauty and the secret stealth of the morning seemed to slip a soft hand into this. Was it true that men who lived by the soil had no eyes for beauty, and skins so tanned and furrowed that they were insensitive to the breath of it? He felt soothed, more ready to take the day's work calmly, for there is a calmness of the land, the steady rhythm of the inevitable. He found that no great damage had been done in the garden, less than, in the darkness, he had feared, and he brought up another hurdle from the yard and closed the gap. He felt that he had his peace to make with his beasts, for the peace of the morning was upon him. In the "Gore" some of the cows were nosing the dew-wet grass, but Doll—the arch offender of the previous night, was lying under an old thorn. Furze went up to her.

"Well,—Doll, old lady?"

He saw a mark on one of her red-brown flanks where the edge of the thistle-spud had cut the hide. He was sorry.

"I ought not to have done that, Doll."

The cow looked at him with liquid eyes. She lay quite still, and allowed him to rub her poll, for Furze and his beasts trusted each other.

"Well,—that's that, old girl. Animals forgive. Or is it that they don't remember?"

Afterwards he went up to the Sea Field and stood there looking down at the haze in the valley and at the misty woods, and the haste died out of his soul. Why fret? Worry kills no weeds nor brings moisture to plants root-

hairs. His young mangels were standing up sturdily, their leaves all grey with dew.

“The sweat of a man’s brow is his dew,” he thought.

He turned and looked towards Cinder Town, and his faith in the future seemed to return. His love felt tranquilized. Surely she would return? Had he not sealed their love with his kisses, kisses that she had given back to him with ardour. That panic mood of hers would pass. He could picture himself being very gentle with her—“There,—there, my beloved. I’m strong enough for both of us.”

As for the house and the work, O—well—he could get help for her. They could go into one of the sea-coast towns once a week. What was wrong with the rhythm of a country life? Nothing that he could see, provided that you had the unspoilt ear for it. Was not work inevitable? Did everyone want to play these days, and to keep their coats on, and their collars dry? He must have faith in her. She would come to understand that a woman has work to do, and that no shirking of it will bring her ultimate satisfaction. In fact he was a little blinded by his own natural sweat; he could not understand a healthy girl either disliking work or shirking it. After all—Mary was not a child.

Out at sea the ship’s syren wailed, but Furze was looking into the dewy eyes of the morning. He saw in them and in his fields and in his coming labours the eyes and the face and the tremblings of his beloved.



XIT June!

Though June had died in a blaze of heat more than three weeks ago, and if the rain was still denied to the thirsty soil, news was more drenching and plentiful. Old Hesketh, most upright of men, had to shelter under his umbrella. Mary had written to say that she was engaged to be married to a Mr. Percival Fream of Hill House, Weyfleet, and that the marriage was fixed for the end of September. Mr. Fream wished to see her parents. He proposed to drive her down in the car for the week-end; he could put up at "The George" at Carslake, and no doubt someone in Cinder Town would lend the bride-to-be a bedroom.

Old Hesketh was shocked. He had the military mind, and when men were ordered to form fours they did it and remained in that formation until another order was given them. But women——! He sat over the breakfast table, and discussed Mary's letter with his wife.

"Nothing about Arnold, my dear, not a word."

Mrs. Charlotte understood the reactionary impulses of human nature much better than did her man.

"After all—there was nothing settled."

"Nothing settled!"

He looked so upset about it that his wife had to go round the table and kiss him. He was such an old Newcome. White was white and black was black, and a love affair was a love affair.

"My dear, doesn't she say that she is very happy?"

She took the letter from him, and skimmed it over a second time, holding it in both hands.

"She says—'Percival is so kind and generous.'"

Hesketh filled a pipe with perturbed fingers.

"The other man was that. So far as he was able. Sounds very much like shirking, my dear. I wonder if she has written to Doomsday."

Mrs. Charlotte smiled gently.

“Why should she? She had told Arnold quite frankly.”

“Just six weeks or so ago. He did not regard it as final.”

“But this is, Hesketh.”

Her husband fumbled with his matches.

“He’ll feel it. He ought to be told. I shall go and see him. He is a good fellow. This other chap, his name——?”

“Percival——”

“Percival! H’m——”

“Mr. Percival Fream of Hill House. He appears to be very well off.”

Old Hesketh struck a match with a sound that was like a “Damn him.”

An unpleasant prospect, but old Viner was a Victorian, still believing that a back should be stiffened against unpleasant duties. He had an old soldier’s sense of rectitude; Gordon had been one of his heroes; there had been an occasion when he had got up and walked out of a theatre with a tall hat held severely against his chest. He advanced upon a duty as he would have advanced upon a hostile battery, very stiff in the back, convinced that to shirk a crisis was the unforgivable sin. He put on his old Panama hat, and took his ash stick from the umbrella stand, and marched off down the cinder road, leaving two women behind him. Cousin Nelly had to be told, and she had something to say on the matter. She—too—was sorry for Furze.

Thus—her father set out at the very moment when Mary was curled up on a sofa at “Caradoc,” with Leslie Biddulph’s copy of *The Times* to keep her company. “London Fashions.” A very excellent article it was. It thrilled her. “Coral, lavender, fawn, and ashes of roses tissues and chiffon make light cloaks. Many wraps are bordered with summer fur, the favourite being fox dyed beige or pink, or with chiffon.—Neck openings are lower than they were.—Some of the simple dance frocks of bright flower coloured chiffons have a wide flat applique girdle of roses or petals.—There are a few black dresses relieved in various ways—black chiffon and flesh chiffon, black net and steel lace——”

Captain Hesketh found nobody about the house. It was to be supposed that Furze was up the fields, but carrying his sense of duty with them into the farmyard the captain found Blossom’s boy holding a saddle-horse.

“Mr. Furze at home?”

“In t’cow-lodge.”

Old Viner paused in the doorway of the cow-house. The smell of the byres rose in the summer heat, and flies were ready to make you a living halo. After the glare of the yard the interior of the cow-house had a pleasant

gloom, with the clean straw the colour of amber below the blue of the roof shadows. Little shafts of sunlight speared in between the sun-shrunken weather-boarding, and painted blurs of light upon the walls, and upon the mangers and the straw. There were only two cows in the house, roped to the rings. Furze and Will Blossom were standing by the cows, while a third man, Kelly the vet. examined the udders.

“Mamitis—all right. Afraid so.”

Furze was in the shadow, and it seemed to old Viner that there was a streak of gloom across his face.

“I wonder how she got infected?”

Kelly glanced up over a shoulder at Will’s bandaged hand.

“Does he do any of the milking?”

“No. But wait a bit——”

“I did it for you—last Sunday week, ssir.”

“So you did, Will. But your hand wasn’t bad then.”

“No, ssir.”

“Anyway,” said the vet. straightening his back, “here it is. Infective form too—I’m afraid. Just these two cows?”

“So far.”

“If you can manage it—keep ’em away from the others. Milk ’em last. Be careful about disinfecting your hands afterwards. Treat their milk with a disinfectant, and get rid of it where it won’t spread infection.”

“Right. What can I do for the udders?”

“Oh,—inject chinosol twice a day, night and morning. And keep an eye on the rest.”

The three men turned. Their feet and legs were in a pool of sunlight, their bodies in the shadow. They saw Captain Hesketh standing there, prodding the straw with his stick. He looked at Furze, and in the shadowiness of the cow-house Furze’s eyes seemed sunk in the brown of his face.

“Good morning. Trouble—I’m afraid?”

“Yes, trouble,” said the farmer.

It was there for him in the cool gloom of the cow-house, nor was he conscious of that other trouble in old Viner’s eyes. Sufficient unto the moment was the evil thereof. His face had a dark thoughtfulness. He came out into the sunlight, and looked back at the straw.

“I’ll be free in a minute, sir.—Had we better clean all this, Mr. Kelly, and burn it?”

“Might be as well. Anywhere where I can wash my hands?”

“I’ll take you in.”

He smiled round at Captain Viner, but the smile was a tired one.

“Go in, sir, won’t you? Or have a look at the garden. It’s rather burnt up—I’m afraid. I haven’t much time.”

Old Viner, pottering off on those long legs of his into Mrs. Damaris’ sunk garden, felt himself going into action at an unpropitious moment. He was sorry for Furze, more sorry than he had expected to be. The lad’s cows were sick. Yes, life was like that; troubles came to you tied up in a bunch. But there was a wrongness about the situation. Assuredly so. If Mary had cared——. Yes, a warm-hearted girl ought to care——. And marrying this other fellow, a Percival——! Old Viner, discovering a young thistle spearing up in one of the beds, attacked it with the point of his stick.

“Sorry to keep you, sir.”

Furze had come down into the garden where the plantains were the only green things in the dried-up grass. The flowers of June were over, spread for a lover’s occasion, and now gone to seed. Old Viner, feeling that if you had to fire bad news at a man it was best done quickly, left the uprooted thistle to wilt on the caked soil.

“We have had a letter from my daughter, my dear fellow.”

“Mary is coming back?”

“No. She writes to say that she is going to be married. I thought you ought to be told. I’m sorry about it.”

2

Captain Hesketh returned to “Green Shutters” looking hot and unhappy. Questioned by his wife as to how Furze had taken the news, he had air of a man with nothing to communicate.

“But what did Arnold say?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“He asked who the man was. Took the shot standing, my dear. I’m sorry about it.”

“So am I,” said his wife; “poor Arnold. But Mary is not made for that life. I think it is better as it is.”

Old Viner betrayed a sudden and unusual peevishness.

“O,—no doubt. But there are different ways of doing things, my dear.”

Furze had said nothing,—for there was nothing to be said by a man who had spent five silent years in recovering a derelict farm. Old Viner had gone off rather hurriedly. He had pressed Furze’s brown hand with his thin fingers. “I’m sorry, my dear fellow. Hasn’t happened as I wished it. Hope it won’t make any difference between us—personally.” And feeling a curious numbness within him Furze had taken a hoe and gone up to the Sea Field where the mangels stood out in green tufts against the baked and cloddy soil. He wanted to be alone, completely and utterly alone, to face the sudden realization of a new loneliness.

He hoed a row, working mechanically, a solitary figure under a cloudless sky, but the work irked him. The soil seemed to have lost its virtue; it was dusty and caked and lifeless; and presently he paused, and leaning on his hoe, looked out over the landscape. The woods were a heavy green. He could see a strip of hazy grey sea in the distance. The parched fields seemed to crackle in the sunlight, and the yellowing meadows looked sore and starved. Five years of sweat,—and then—this!

But what of it? Was he going to whimper because a girl had gone elsewhere for her kisses, and because his kisses were like those fields, poor and distressed? O, damn sentiment, and damn the balked years in him. What was it—after all? He had seen a boar refused by the sow turn and lash at the pig-bound palings. Was he to behave like that?

The hands clasped on the top of the hoe’s handle supported his jaw.

Wounded, he did not turn to melancholy. “Doomsday” had wrung his strength, but he had laboured and endured. It was his life.

And that poor, sensuous, pretty creature, running away from life and the sweat of it, hoping to wrap her body up in soft tissues! Well,—well! Never to smell of sweat; to be perfumed and cool and nicely draped. Some fellow with money, some city merchant——?

But he cared. The smart in him was savage, and he went on with his hoeing, jabbing at the caked soil, feeling the sun hot on his neck and back. The pain was fierce, and his labour was like the pain. Damn these clods! Why didn’t it rain?

There was sweat in his eyes, or was it something else? He paused savagely, and looked up at the cool shade under the great green cliffs of Beech Ho. Shade,—ease, no sweating in the sun.

But—by God—that was the bitterness of it. She had not only humiliated him; she had humiliated his job. She had taken his life’s work and thrown it

back at him like some green, pulpy, rank-smelling cabbage. She had put her pretty feet upon the few little flowers he had tried to grow for her. She had let him spend that money. And next winter those oaks in Gore Wood would have to fall.

“Mary,” he thought, “you might have left me my pride.”

3

Mr. Percival Fream brought his royal blue monster of a car to rest outside the gate of “Green Shutters.” Beside him in a little cherry-coloured hat and a biscuit-coloured coat Mary smiled, for smiles were necessary.

“Here we are. The white gate.”

She was sorry to have to feel ashamed of Cinder Town, both sorry and glad, for provided that her grandee was not too much ashamed of it, her own realization of its meanness did not matter. She was a little in awe of Fream, and such a long way from understanding him that she had to set her own moods to the rhythm of his silences. She believed it to be the silence of strength; it was mysterious, and quite as exciting in its way as the windows of a luxury shop with the shutters up on a Sunday. On the way down she had tried to prepare him for Cinder Town. She had talked about the meanness of the War Office. Pensions were so ungraciously inadequate, and after all those Indian frontier campaigns in which Captain Viner had taken part! She had said—“I am very proud of my Daddy,” and Fream, diverting a momentary glance from the road along which they had been traveling at some forty miles an hour, had given her a faint, and glassy smile. “Of course you are.” To him she was also a luxury shop with the blinds down. He was not a little nervous about raising them, or perhaps as to his ability to raise them.

“I think I’ll turn her,—before we get out.”

“Will you? O,—there’s Daddy.”

She waved a hand. She had had glimpses of people in gardens and at windows, of Colonel Sykes’ monocle grimly attentive, and of the melancholy Coode gently disappearing. Her father did not respond to the wave of her hand. He stood there rather stiffly in the middle of the weedy little path, an affectionately rigid figure with eyes of attention. So this was the man who was to marry his daughter, and this was his car! It was a very big car, and its brightness made old Viner feel moved to blink.

Fream was a bad driver, and the cinder track was very narrow. The big car jerked backwards and forwards as he tried to work her round, and at the

third reverse he hit the Vachett's fence with his luggage-grid. Two or three palings cracked, and Mary, with hands clasped together, emitted a faint "O!"

Fream said nothing. He ground his way into bottom gear, lugged at the steering-wheel, let his clutch in with a bump, and stopped his engine.

"It's such a wretched narrow place," said she.

Fream said nothing. He looked stiff and white. She commented to herself upon his silence, and thought it admirable, the silence of self-restraint. But she did wish that he had made "Phœbus" show his paces a little more gracefully. She had christened the blue car "Phœbus."

"Have to pay for that fence. Much damage?"

She turned to look, and became aware of the embittered Vachett staring carefully at the broken palings. He bent forward, and pushing at the fence, made sure that a post had not been broken. Mean, meticulous creature!

"Nothing much."

She slipped out before the process of turning the car was complete, and went and kissed her father. He patted the middle of her back.

"Well,—my dear."

"Have you forgiven me, Daddy?"

She had come back to him as the child, full of an intriguing and irresponsible self-importance, snuggling up as women do, and putting a man's courage out of countenance.

Captain Hesketh kissed her forehead.

"So long as you are happy, my dear——"

She was reproached and she knew it, but success can bear reproaches. Fream was standing in the gateway, and she brought the two men together.

"How d'you do."

"Glad to meet you, sir."

They shook hands, and seemed to be looking about for something else to say to each other, and Mary had to exert herself and carry the conversation for both of them. She showed less confidence when she met her mother and Cousin Nellie, and they were all crowded in that poky little room. Fream's head seemed to be within a foot of the ceiling. "O, mind the lamp, Val." The old life rushed back at her, and got itself tangled up with the new one. She thought of poor Arnold sitting there by the window. O, bother one's past and its implications! Her eyes showed a sudden wetness, and tears blurred the harsh outlines of life. Fream stood stiffly aware of her tears; he liked them, —but he did not know what to do with them, for when a man has kept his

emotions in cold storage they may refuse to thaw, or come out as so much pulp, tasteless—even to himself.

“Your room is all ready,—Mary.”

This was from Cousin Nellie, that most kind and efficient soul, who could not help producing the right key at a crisis even though her prejudices were arrayed against the pretty egoist.

“O,—thank you, Nellie. But I am turning you out.”

“I have a room at the Twists.”

“And my suitcase.”

It was Nellie who fetched it for her and carried it upstairs while Fream and the two old people sat and looked at each other through loopholes, and said quite meaningless things. Mary closed the door of her little room. What a tank it was, hot and stuffy, and yet full of the old perfume of vivid emotions. She went to the window, and the beeches of “Doomsday” assailed like a huge and distant cloud.

She paled a little.

“Oh,—Arnold——!”

She was conscious of terror, a nameless fear. She drew the blind half-down, and sat on the bed, staring at her suitcase.

Did he know?

Supposing he came——? O, she could not see him, she could not possibly see him. One of her panic moods arrived. She went to the head of the stairs and called.

“Daddy—daddy.”

He heard and came up with eyes that still seemed to be avoiding her wet face.

“Daddy,—he won’t come here—will he?”

Old Viner shook his head.

“Well,—I told him, my dear.”

She was voiceless, and he turned and went down the stairs and she into her room to close the door and sit on the bed with her face between her hands.

She was afraid. She had divined a possible fear, but not the strength of the fear, and it paralysed her. She felt that she dared not leave “Green Shutters” or its garden until Fream’s car should carry her away late on the afternoon of Sunday. He had to be in town early on the Monday.

No; she did not want to see any of these people, the Twists or the Perrivales or poor Coode. She wanted to forget them all. And she had felt so triumphant! But she found that her Winged Victory was a little unsteady on its feet.

4

The only incident of note that happened up at Carslake was that “Phœbus” proved too big to be housed in any of the “George” stables. A man had to be sent for from a local garage to take the monster away and dispose of him for the night. Obviously, the “George Inn” should have felt humbled, but that was not so, and the Sussex odd-man-about-the-yard was coarsely ironical.

That short week-end puzzled Fream considerably. Very properly he tried to talk “Mary” to old Viner, and was surprised to meet in Mary’s father an obtuseness, a seeming lack of interest. Mary was to be a rich man’s wife, secure and comfortable, but the old campaigner’s eyes remained dull. Fream got on better with Mrs. Charlotte, perhaps because she did nearly all the talking while he sat there like a pale and beglassed Bhudda. But Mary was the most baffling of the humans, and yet she gave him something that was almost a thrill.

She chose to sit all that day in the garden at the back of “Green Shutters.” He was made to stretch his long, stiff, awkward body in the only deck chair, while she occupied an old basket-thing dragged out of the house. The “George” breakfast had not agreed with him very well; nor had the “George” bed. He felt that he had earned exercise, a little Arcadian seclusion, a field path and a pretty creature near his arm. His! Another possession, and yet not quite possessed as yet. He was not a little afraid of his powers of possession. He was so rusty, so awkward. At the office he always dictated his letters. Had he forgotten how to scribble like a boy?

“We ought to see something of the country——”

He was uneasily facetious.

“Look for mushrooms or blackberries—or something.”

She had a mysterious headache, the malaise that is completely puzzling to the bachelor-minded man.

“I’d much rather sit here with you, Val.”

“Would you?”

Her calling him “Val” brought a smirk to his solemn soul.

“Yes, it’s so restful.”

He appeared to be trying to say something, but the right echo would not come. The surface of him had become so flat that it could not return an echo.

5

For lunch they had blackcurrant pudding, a dream of a pudding made by Cousin Nellie. And there was cream with it, “Doomsday” cream.

Mary would not touch the cream, poor Arnold’s cream. But Fream disposed of a good helping, and thought the pudding excellent. As a pudding it was not unlike his sensuous appreciation of Mary, dark fruit richly juiced, purple hair and a soft and creamy body. She would have the flavour of fruit, with just a twinge of tartness under the cream and the sugar. He accepted a second helping.

Mary had a frightened look. Absurd—to be afraid of a cream jug, though she did not even know that Furze had two cows sick, and was having to spend extra money on feed because the grass was parched, and that he was worried about his “roots.” How should she know of such things, or even imagine them? But the cream was there, and Fream’s cream-cheese of a face looming possessively on the other side of the table.

She was in a fever to get away. She stroked the head of the silver mascot on “Phœbus” radiator where the big blue car stood waiting. She climbed in after the family kisses, flushed and breathing quickly.

“Oh,—I’m glad.”

She sat a little more closely.

“This place makes me sad, Val.”

He found a smile, and a thin elbow that transmitted a nudge of tenderness.

“Well, it needn’t. Take my word for it.”

6

Yet, she was to see her lover, for Fream chose to drive back through Carslake and strike the London road, and as they passed the mouth of the lane where the six pines stood upon the green mound, some impulse made Mary look up.

He was standing there, leaning against one of the trees. Their eyes met, and into hers a little flicker of fear leapt instantly. But Furze’s eyes seemed

to her quite expressionless, two dark circles in a tanned face just glooming at her from under the pines.

She shivered and drew away into her corner. It was as though “Doomsday” itself had looked at her with a fatal and tragic meaning.

XVI

1



IN AUGUST, while Furze was fighting the draught, Mary was preparing her trousseau.

The marriage had been postponed until early in October, for her grandee had some financial affair in the process of flotation, and already she had discovered that when he was pursuing the golden hind it was unwise to come between him and the pursuit. The discovery did not worry her. She was in no hurry. This was no hay-cock affair, tumultuous and poignant. Her great man extended to her a Spanish courtesy, and an air of high financial endeavour. She accepted his kisses; they could not be called disturbing kisses, and she could not quite make up her mind as to their nature. He kissed her as though he were taking a tentative nibble at strange fruit, not feeling sure of its ripeness or of his own capacity to digest it. She added an imagined shyness to her conception of his silent strength, and it did not displease her.

“The best-dressed woman in Weyfleet; that’s the idea.”

He became articulate for the moment, standing very stiff and straight, and holding a new cheque book as a self-conscious man holds an overfull tea-cup.

“Opened an account for you at the local bank. Need not bother your people.”

She kissed him. “Val, you are a dear. But you ought not to do this—before we are married.” He looked pleased. Where was the difference? She was the prettiest thing on the Hills, and she was going to be the smartest. Yes, and her inclinations were in time with his. Five hundred pounds at the bank, and a cheque book, and all sorts of delicious possibilities hanging on the point of a pen. How generous he was! He had given her the most gorgeous ring, and pearls that must have cost him a thousand pounds. She was in heaven, but she had the sense to lean upon her sister, for she knew that Clare had the magic touch in her finger-tips, and that a rose and an orchid are very different flowers. There were expeditions to town. Two very serious women gave all their attention to that most fascinating of arts. Clare

selected her sister's wardrobe, and Mary, accepting domination, was like an excited child out upon Christmas shopping.

"Isn't he generous?"

Clare allowed Fream his generosity, but she was searching for the promptings behind it. It did not satisfy her to explain it too easily, or to see in it mere amorous excitement. Clare knitted her mental brows over the phenomenon. She was inclined to reduce Fream's generosity to a form of self-expression, perhaps his one and only method of self-expression. He was articulate—as a cheque book. Hence—she was cautious. She gave her sister little shrewd nudges, subtle and persuasive touches, pregnant hints.

"Every man has his particular vanity."

"I'm sure Val is not at all vain."

"Every man. I am not being cynical. Cultivate it. It's your business."

"But that sounds so——"

"Not a bit of it. If marriage is worth while, the man is worth while. If he wants you to be smart, obviously—be smart. Your man is ambitious."

"Yes,—I suppose he is."

"Power—you know. Power—and its expression. You may have to express yourself—with things, if you can't write books or paint pictures. Fream paints pictures."

The brown eyes of Mary questioned her.

"Does he? I didn't know——"

"His environment, Hill House, motor-cars, bathrooms, wine,—you."

Mary looked thoughtful, too thoughtful, and Clare had to penetrate the cloud.

"Not quite so—bald—as that. He has paid you a very nice compliment. He has asked you to help him paint the picture. And not a bad game—for a woman to dabble in, with frocks for your paints, and flowers, and the way you sit at the head of his table, and wear your furs, and walk through the lounge of the 'Grand' at Monte Carlo. It's up to you, my dear."

Mary looked a little plaintive.

"But surely—it means more than that?"

"Of course. Don't be a goose. He is very much in love with you."

The pink room at "Caradoc" was full of the "flowers" that Clare had selected; an evening cloak of black chiffon velvet with silver fox collar and lined with rose and silver brocade; three evening dresses of rose chiffon, black georgette, and rose and silver brocade; three day dresses, a black satin

coat and dress lined rose with collar and cuffs of skunk, a flowered ninon of rose, blue, gold and black, a black crêpe de chine. There were tennis frocks of cream crêpe de chine, and two country coats and skirts, and two coat frocks. Also hats, jumpers, lingerie, shoes of brocade and of satin and suède. And silk stockings of black and grey and flesh colour. So Fream's future wife found herself expressed in clothes, just as he wished one of his possessions to express itself. A child among the strawberries.

The grass of Hill House park was as brown as a berry, but it had no cattle to feed, and only once to Mary did it suggest "Doomsday" and the farm. Her consciousness flicked a thought at "poor Arnold," and quickly drew back. Bad weather for cows and the milk pail. But how little she understood, and how little she knew of the sweat and the labour, of the fierce patience, and the tired eyes and the set jaw. She had had her little scuffle with poverty, and had fled from it. She had shrunk from the soiling of her hands with the world's work.

Poor Arnold!

She could not quite forget those eyes of his, and the way they had looked at her. But surely she had done the honest thing? She had run away from him with no ulterior knowledge of grandees and cheque books—and rose-coloured bathrooms. All that had arrived later. Could she be blamed for it?

She did not go again to Cinder Town; she did not want to go; she was afraid of going. She was to be married from "Caradoc." She sent her mother a twenty-five pound cheque, explaining the gift by saying that Val had insisted on advancing her a portion of her dress allowance. "He is so generous." It was her father who returned the cheque. "My dear, you must not send us money." She was a little hurt and distressed, but reminded herself that her father was touchy and eccentric about money.

She had various letters from her mother, and in one of them Mrs. Charlotte mentioned Furze.—"It is still terribly dry here. I'm afraid poor Mr. Furze is having a hard time with his cows. No grass. And he has had three cows sick. The poor man looks quite worn out."

She felt a little stab of self-reproach. Poor Arnold! But—then—why be a farmer? It was a horrid, worrying, lonely life, and she could not understand any man choosing it or loving it. She had not yet realized man's nature, Furze's nature, the inevitable combat, the effort, the strivings, the passion for swimming against the tide. She wanted to drift, and he—the fighting man—had tried to snatch at her and make her swim with him.

Poor Arnold! Why didn't he sell the place and try to do something easier?

She did not know that there are men who do not ask for the easy things.

Nor were things easy for Furze. He went about looking lean and self-absorbed, with his blue eyes sunk deep into his tanned face. His temper was short; he was thinner, and not only in body but in soul, he had no smiles to spare for anybody; and when he spoke to Will or to Will's boy or to his beasts his voice had a rougher note. He was concerned for his farm, and for his pride in it and deep down in his consciousness was a raw-red place, the sore of an inward humiliation.

Things had gone wrong with him before; he had had wet seasons instead of dry ones; but he had pulled through with an indefatigable patience that had somehow contrived to find a smile. But this fight found him smileless. He cursed, and endured. He watched his meadows turn brown, and his stunted root crops starving in the baked fields, and the brook dwindling away, and Rushy Pool becoming a sheet of cracked mud. It looked like a piece of crocodile skin stretched tight across the mouth of a huge round dish. He had two more cows sick with mamitis; the milk yield was falling off; he was having to buy feed.

The nicely balanced internal economy of the farm had been disturbed. The hay crop had been a good one, but the fields from which the crop had been taken had never greened up and given him the expected pasture a month after the taking of the hay crop. Also, if you had planned to grow three and a half tons of roots for the winter keep of each cow, with hay and straw and bean meal, and your whole root crop looked like averaging three tons to the acre instead of twenty-five, you either had to sell some of your beasts or buy in food. Then, there were the sheep and the pigs. He had put down some acres of cabbage for spring feed for his small flock during the lambing season, but a cruciferous crop asks for moisture. Moreover, caterpillars had riddled the leaves, and the whole crop smelt of decay. It was just a bad season, with the balance of chances against you, whatever you might do or say or think. It meant the loss of good money and time; it was bad for your stock and your temper; it might demand an inroad upon your capital, if you had any capital, but other farmers were in like case, and the bad ones more so. It called for the philosophy of the stiff back, and an obstinacy that plods and endures.

This critical season in the life of the farm coincided with one of those grave changes in a man's outlook, and the drought and the heat and the little disasters reinforced the change in Furze's temper. A man who lives much

alone is in danger of developing what may be described as a moral gruffness. As an old Devon farmer had put it one day to Furze at Carslake market—"We farmers are a discontented lot. Grumble. Of course we grumble. We are always in trouble with some cussed thing or other." The soil can martyr a man, or twist him into a gnarled, awkward, stubborn creature, a misanthrope, a complainer, a fanatic. Unfortunate sequences of impersonal phenomena may develop in him a personal cussedness. You may accuse a French peasant of avarice. Furze was not avaricious, but in his darkening and difficult moods he did grudge the money spent upon the house to prepare it for that dream wife of his. He needed money now, and he needed it badly. Gore Wood would have to bear the brunt of the attack; it would stand thinned in the spring like an English square at Waterloo.

He grudged the selling of those trees.

He was having to pump water for his beasts. And how the poor creatures seemed to swill it down.

He had ceased to sweat. His skin felt dry and hot, and he was conscious of an inward dryness, and inevitable and parched discontent. He got up tired, and slogged through the day with savage surliness. His attitude to men and things—and women—had changed, yet he did not realize the change. It was just that he was worried and overworked and unhappy. Other people noticed, it, Will, and Will's boy—who—caught pilfering a few lean apples in the orchard—was given a strapping. "Either you or I'll do it, Will."—Will, staring blue-eyed, had passed the privilege to the master. And Mrs. Sarah had squealed about it for hours,—and threatened a summons and told all her neighbors. "Cut him about cruel—he did, just for a few green apples. What I say is—'Boys will be boys.' And I says to him I says—'My boy be'nt a beast to be lathered,—and don't you forget it, Mister Furze.' Yes,—I gave him the edge of my tongue—I did. 'Don't you touch my boy again,' I says, 'or I'll have the law of you.'" Though—of course—she had said nothing of the kind, being slimy and artful and a thief, and Will had to listen to her scolding until his patience had given out. "Shut yer mouth, y'squealing fool. The boy be mine as much as yours. I gave Furze leave to belt him."

These lesser disharmonies revolved about the central disharmony, for a man and a boar have things in common. Hard work can keep a man's thoughts from women, and till the coming of Mary Viner Furze had lived as he had lived during the war, with mind and body so fully occupied that the sex in him had slept. Going to bed healthily tired and satisfied with the day's work he had been content to sleep. It is the townsman—the sitter upon stools—whose thoughts are always round the corner chasing petticoats. But with the coming of Mary Viner the essential male in Furze had been stirred to

wakefulness. He had desired her cleanly and wholesomely, from the very deeps of him, with a devoted fineness, and a strength that could be very tender. He had been the big, romantic creature seeking a mate. His love had had finality, like his love of his farm.

She had humiliated both his loves. He had tried to put the thought of her away, but all through those weeks of heat and dryness and effort an open wound ran blood. The very bitterness of the drought and his many disappointments seemed to keep it open. He brooded. He would wander about at night, restless and overtired, thinking of her and of the things that she had denied him. She had let him go so far, pressed the fruit to his very mouth before snatching it away. And he was thirsty. The mere sensuous thrilling of body against body, the clasping of hands,—yes, he asked for more than these. He wanted sympathy. How she could have helped him through this difficult time! Had he been able to come back to the house and feel her presence and its meaning; had he been able to talk to her about things, and to feel too that he was fighting them for her! He craved that spiritual and emotional contact that transcends the mere physical relationship. He was very lonely.

His loneliness turned fierce in him. There was that stifling night, when the farmyard pump had refused suction, needing a new leather, and he had had to carry all the water for the beasts from the house. He had worked like a man in a dull and smouldering rage. He had come in to see that pink lustre tea-service neatly arranged on the table in Mrs. Damaris' parlour.

He remembered that he had paid one pound fifteen shillings for that tea service.

A sudden anger had possessed him.

He had taken the pink lustre piece by piece and thrown it through the open window to smash against the garden wall.

And next morning, feeling a fool in the cool hush of the dawn, he had been compelled to go out and pick up the pieces and bury them in one of the flower-beds. There were no flowers in the beds now. They were dead.

During all these weeks Furze never touched that old toy of his—the piano, for music could say things to him that he did not wish to hear; also he was too tired and his need was the sound of a human voice. He asked for two sympathetic ears to listen, and a voice to give back a few words of understanding and encouragement. He was as starved as his fields. He wanted to talk and he had no one to whom he could talk, for he went very

rarely now to “Green Shutters,” and in the other farms men had troubles of their own.

That loneliness should breed restlessness was inevitable. He came up against the mirror in Mrs. Damaris’ parlour and saw himself with a three days’ beard on his face, no collar, an old shirt torn at one shoulder and a pair of braces that lacked one of the leather button loops. He was shocked at his own slovenliness. It was the slovenliness of a man who had become the slave of the soil. And suddenly he rebelled. Why grow like a dull beast?

Will was passing across the Doom Paddock, and Furze hailed him from the window through which he had thrown the pink lustre tea-service.

“Will.”

“Sssir——”

“You might do the milking and the watering. I’m going up to Carslake.”

He went upstairs and shaved himself and put on a clean shirt and collar and a brown tweed suit. He even hunted out a coloured tie and a pair of light blue and grey socks. He dressed his restlessness and his self-esteem, and slipped a pound note and some odd silver into his pockets. He was going up to Carslake, but without any definite idea upon the possibilities of Carslake, and its dozen or so shops and its little stuffy cinema, and its “George Inn.” Anyway he would be among his fellow-humans for an hour or two, clean and decently clothed, and able to look a woman in the face.

It was a hot evening, and in Carslake High Street a thirst asserted itself. He was looking into a tobacconists, with no other solace for his restlessness than the adventure of trying a new tobacco, and reflected in the window he saw the red façade of the “George Inn” with its white window-sashes and green curtains and window-boxes. The “George” was a good old inn well managed. It was kept by the Lavenders, a father and a bevy of pleasant daughters, Rosemary, and Ivy and Violet. Pretty creatures—too. And old Lavender had one of those cheerful English faces.

“Why not go in and dine at the ‘George’?”

My God, how sick he was of salt bacon and corned beef, and plum jam, and flat lettuces, and boiled eggs and tea, and soapy potatoes! And his slovenly, helter-skelter meals, with that chipped white enamel teapot, and tarnished spoon stuck in a jam-pot, and no cloth on the table, and the plates suggesting cold water and smeary haste! His gorge rose. He smelt the flesh pots of the “George,” roast butcher’s meat and good cheese and a glass of ale, and a cup of coffee afterwards.

He crossed the road and went up the three well-whitened steps into the “George.” A broad man, coatless, with a straw hat tilted well back like a

halo about a pleasant pink face, was standing by the lounge door reading an evening paper. It was old Lavender himself.

“Hallo, sir! Haven’t seen you for months.”

“Haven’t seen myself for months.”

“Ah,—you have been having a tough time. Paper says the weather looks like changing.”

“I wish to God it would,” said Furze. “Can I have some dinner here?”

“Sure-ly! Always glad to see you, sir.”

The coffee-room was upstairs on the first floor, and as Furze went up the stairs which were narrow and rather dark a young woman who was coming down in a hurry with an empty tray nearly ran into him.

“Sorry, sir.”

She smiled. She had very white teeth, and very black prettily-bobbed hair, and eyes that looked dark and large in a white and broadish face.

Furze smiled back at her.

“My fault. Can I have some dinner?”

“Of course, sir.”

He drew aside to let her pass, and she went by as though she was quite conscious of the man in him, and so made the man in him conscious of her.

He saw the white tables and the silver, and the flowers in the vases, blue and white asters and crimson gladioli, and the old red houses of the High Street out of one window, and out of the other the green oaks and tawny grass of Carslake park. The girl was back in the room. He had not seen her at the “George” before; she was not one of the Lavenders. Her apron had a lace edge, and looked very clean.

“Where shall I sit?”

“Where would you like to sit, sir?”

She had a pleasant voice that was almost Irish in its leisureliness. It was like a lazy hand drawing its fingers across velvet. She smiled,—but without boldness.

“By that window?”

“Yes.”

There were only three or four people in the room, motorists spending the night, a hot-faced young man with a girl, a bald curate, a hard-bitten woman in tweeds. Furze sat down at his table, and as his fingers touched the starched white napkin he felt a little thrill of pleasure.

“I’ll have a pint of draught ale.”

“Yes, sir.”

She brought him the menu card. She was a big, strong girl with a splendid throat and neck, but she moved lightly, and somehow she made him think of a pleasant, softly breathing, large-eyed heifer.

“Thick soup, sir. And roast beef or cold veal and ham pie?”

Her hands were large and white, with long soft fingers. They were very clean. He noticed that the palms were pink, and that she was wearing a gold signet ring.

“O,—roast beef. And plum tart.”

“And cream, sir?”

“Yes,—please.”

She was a most efficient waitress, quiet in her movements, and with a dark dignity of her own.

“Not quite so hot to-night.”

“No, sir.”

She studied him as she held a vegetable dish. He was one of the brownest men she had ever seen, a comely man, a gentleman farmer—obviously.

“Haven’t been here for a long time.”

“No, sir.”

His suggestion was that he had not seen her before, and she caught it.

“Motoring, sir?”

“No. I farm. ‘Doomsday’; down the Melhurst road.”

“I don’t know much about the country, sir.”

“Not been here long?”

“Two months.”

That was about as far as they got during the dinner, but Furze’s eyes were following her half shyly about the room, and though she met his eyes but once she was very well aware of them. He was a fine, big man, big without being too tall. She liked his eyes and his hands, and the way his hair grew, and the deep brown of his face.

“May I have some coffee?”

“In the lounge, sir?”

“Please.”

She brought him his coffee. There was no one else in the lounge. She poured out the coffee for him.

“Milk, sir?”

“Please.”

“And sugar?”

“One lump.”

She put it in and seemed about to go, but paused for an imperceptible moment. He was about to speak.

“If I come here again—may I have the same table?”

“Sure, sir.”

“My—my name is Furze.—And may I have the bill?”

She brought him the bill, and took his tip in one of her big soft hands, and gave him one intent glance, half smiling, half wise.

“Thank you, sir.”

He did not find out her name that night, for he was a man of reservations and she no trollop.

XVII

1



WEEK before her marriage Mary fell into one of her panic moods. Everything that could be bought had been bought; she was ready to the last tint of nail polish; she was sleek, plump and perfumed. Nothing was left for her to do but to sit down and wait. She realized that she was marrying a stranger. The wheels of her triumphal car wobbled and quivered, and her pretty self came down in

agitation at Clare's feet.

"I feel so responsible."

Her panic was obvious, and her sister's cool and world-wise hands had to comfort her. Mary had made no new discovery; you married a stranger when you married a man, but in Mary's case the adventure was nicely padded against shocks and alarums.

"Your man is kind, my dear. He is not a cub in a hurry."

Mary was ready to agree that her grandee was kind, but she found it difficult to describe his kindness. It was rather like a wet sheet or an ice-pack. He was so completely the correct lover of mature years; he would bend stiffly from the hips and kiss her hand; he seemed better at kissing hands than kissing lips. In fact there were times when she had the feeling that he was afraid of her, though what he could fear in her was beyond her comprehension. Yet his kisses were tentative and self-conscious, as though he were thinking about the quality of his kissing even when he was in the midst of it.

She was a little bewildered. His breath never came more quickly when he was near her. She still thought of him as strong and silent, and Spanish, and she had held her breath and waited for the fire beneath to reveal itself. She had been mesmerized by a mystery, by a little god of her own making, but her deity continued to be grandly inarticulate and benignantly silent. It was a shy and obscure god.

That she had fallen in love with his possessions, his atmosphere, she would not allow. No,—no! Val was dear. He might be a little difficult to understand, but surely all strong, deep men were not easily fathomed? And

she had begun to feel so dependent on him; she was the eternal vine, and he was the post to which it was her fate to cling. A post! Just that. But a post that could not put out arms.

He seemed to have no arms, but two rigid appendages in sleeves. Always she was conscious of his sleeves.

“O, Val,—I do want to make you happy.”

She sought to cling, and he was as stiff as a post, a kind post, a martyr’s stake. For the piece of wood that was Fream yearned to become the young tree, and hoped that the miracle might happen, and was afraid that it would not happen. And the very fear inhibited the transformation, and he continued to be the post.

“Of course—you will—my dear.”

He tried to tell her that it was her happiness that mattered, patting the middle of her back with a hand that was like a stuffed kid glove.

“I hope I can give you everything you want?”

But could he? And what exactly did she want? And how much of it? O, the pomp of the body, that fine flamboyant pride! How little did she know that he was in a greater panic than she was, a shameful panic. She could not see him sitting in his padded swivel chair in the oak-panelled private room in his London offices, his long legs tucked up stiffly, his face as blank as a sheet of unruled foolscap. What an adventure, what a gamble for a man who had become little more than a calculating machine or a prospectus, or a company report! And yet she was a thing that he wanted to possess, a live trophy, a beautiful breathing statue, for all the statues that he had collected were lifeless things. Stone Venuses, marble nymphs. He craved the live possession, and he sat in his chair and was frightened.

How was she to know?

But Fream talked about his honeymoon. He found self-expression when dealing with values. “Phœbus” would take them down to Dover. He had reserved a cabin on the boat, and a sleeper for two, and a suite at the “Cosmopolis” at Monte Carlo. Certainly he could overwhelm her with values, food, clothes, luxurious living. If she wished to shine before other women she could shine. There was not a liqueur, not a dress, not a previous stone that need be denied to her. He talked a great deal about Monte Carlo, —a great deal for him; he clung to that beautiful, bastard town as though it were a wise old procuress who could save him. Yes, of course Mary must have her flutter at the tables. Later,—if it pleased her grace, this Cinderella of the Suburbs, they would go on to Rome and Naples and Sorrento, and back by Florence. If Venice piqued her—well—they would go to Venice.

And Mary would say—"Yes, Val, how lovely, how perfectly lovely!" and would wonder why he was so impersonal and so courteous, for your nymph, pretty creature though she may be, may have the warm blood of a little country wench. Her wound was not quite healed; she still smelt the smell of new-mown hay. Her heart cried out to this other man—"O, love me, Val, love me hard. Make me forget." She wanted arms, not two paralysed appendages in sleeves. She wanted to surrender to the little god of her own contriving, to feel his grand silence opening and enveloping her in a wonderful mastery. Having cheated one man she seemed in a fever to surrender to the other.

So, the great day came, and with it her parents, old Hesketh in a very much ironed and pathetic top-hat and a frock coat that had lived on and off in camphor for the last thirty years. Mrs. Charlotte wore black satin. Mary wept a little, but felt better when she looked into her mirror and saw herself dressed. Blackcurrants and whipped cream! Downstairs that kind soul Leslie had opened a bottle of champagne. He insisted on her drinking two glasses of it, while Clare pulled on her gloves and looked pale and very wise.

Fream—too—went to the church on champagne. He remembered that other occasion when he had gone much more gaily to church to marry a woman. That had been in June, and the month was October, wet and windy, and already the leaves were falling. He felt in a deuce of a funk, this poor desiccated lover, a piece of parchment, Mary's marriage settlement tied up with pink tape.

2

The crossing proved a rough one. Mary was very sick, and lay in her cabin, and did not care how sick she was, or whether her husband witnessed it or not.

He desired to be kind, but unfortunately he was nearly as sick as she was, and was loving his basin, and hating the sea and his own soul.

A bad beginning.

"O, Val, I daren't move."

He looked like chalk tinted with yellow ochre, and about a hundred years old, but Calais harbor had soothed his qualms. He had to take charge. He should have taken it and kept it, and all might have been well had he been the man he wanted to be.

He was very kind to her.

"No hurry, dear. Straight into our wagon-lit. Take my arm."

“O, Val,—you haven’t got a clean handkerchief, have you?”

He hadn’t. He had thought of everything but that.

They survived the dog-fight at the French customs examination, and made for the train with a sweating and jabbering porter all hung about them with hand baggage. Their compartment was found in the wagon-lits. Fream wanted her to come to the buffet and have some hot soup.

The nausea was still upon her.

“I couldn’t, Val. I’d rather lie down. You go.”

But he would not go without her. He tucked her up in a rug and sat down and watched her, though she was praying to be left alone for half an hour. She felt squalid. She was sufficiently recovered to be able to remember her appearance, and she yearned for a wash and a chance to remember those little niceties that mean so much to a woman. He had not the sense to leave her alone, to go to the buffet, or stand in the corridor. He sat and stared, and every five minutes asked her with great kindness how she was feeling.

And would she like some brandy?

“No, Val, thank you.”

She turned her face to the cushions, while over the wide French country—plough-lands and stubble—a grey sheet of rain drifted.

3

This was in October. In August, casting back six weeks, there was other rain, English rain.

The Press weather report had promised a continuance of the drought; a ridge of high pressure was extending northwards from the Azores; the wind would be from the north-west,—the weather fair and warm. So much for the experts. In the afternoon of the same day the wind veered to the west and became strong and gusty; masses of white cloud began to sail the sky,—and mixed with these great galleons were little smudges of smoking vapour. When Furze saw these smudges an excitement stirred in him. He could feel the coming rain; it was there; if only the cloud canopy would form and break.

He was out of bed at five o’clock next morning, and standing at the window. There had been no rain in the night, but the sky was overcast, completely grey and clouded, and the wind had dropped. The stillness was supreme, an expectant stillness.

“It will rain, it—must rain,” he thought.

And yet he doubted. He had seen other skies clear after an hour's miserable and useless drizzle, a little tantalizing moisture that mocked the thirsty land. Yes, this was no heat haze, but a cistern of clouds ready to burst.

All through the morning the sky remained a dense grey sheet, but no rain fell. It was a sky of suspense, and Furze idled about, waiting for the merciful rain, and unable to work. He heard the beasts lowing; that was a good sign; the swallows were flying low; Tibby the cat sat on the doorstep and washed behind her ears.

Will was pumping water into the yard troughs. The yard well was holding out, but the water had fallen fifteen feet.

"It must rain, Will."

"Maybe it will, ssir, maybe it won't. Any or'nary year I'd say it was going to drown us."

Furze was very restless. He wandered about the farm all the morning, gloomily hopeful. Well, if it did not rain he would go up and dine at the "George" and see Rose Hurley. He knew her name very well by now. At noon not a drop had fallen out of that looming, slatey sky, and he went in to his dinner, and ate some bread and cheese, but could touch no meat, a wretched end of cold mutton with a few cold boiled potatoes to garnish it. He left the food and plates lying there, and went out again, and wandered. He kept pulling out an old silver watch. Two o'clock—three o'clock.

He was in the Maid's Croft where the footpath swung a brown loop across the scorched grass when the first raindrops fell. He stood quite still, holding his breath. They came singly, big drops; one struck his hat, others pattered on the scorched grass. And then, suddenly, as though some great hand had torn a rent in the canopy overhead, the rain came down in a grey sheet. The dry grass seemed to crackle and steam, and the cracks in the caked soil bubbled. Furze took off his hat and let the rain run over his face; he exulted; he drew deep breaths; he felt the wetness soaking his shoulders and running down his back.

Someone was coming up the path from Bean Acres, a figure blurred by the rain. The upper part of it was yellow, the lower part black. It was a girl, and Furze watched her, this rain maiden, this virgin of the breaking clouds. What the devil——?

And then he laughed for she came laughing towards him, her yellow jumper drenched, and a fringe of pearls hanging to the brim of her hat. Her black hair was soaked, her face a happy pleasant wetness, and the whole of her looking dewy and fresh, beneficent.

“What on earth are you doing here, Rose?”

“Getting wet.”

“You are——!”

“And you. Aren’t you glad, Mr. Furze?”

“I am.”

“My afternoon off. Thought I would have a ramble. My best hat and jumper have brought down the rain for you.”

And with laughter and more than laughter in their eyes they stood and looked at each other, and to Furze she was the rain goddess, a strong, comely, dark-eyed creature with white teeth and wet hair. He saw a raindrop on her round white chin. She seemed part of the rain, cool and fresh and wholesome, a laughing, good-humoured, warm-hearted thing. The blood stirred in him.

“You’ll have to come in and shelter.”

“I’m wet through.”

“We shall have to dry you. You have brought me good luck, Rose, the first good luck for months.”

Her dark eyes held his for a moment.

“I’m glad.”

4

There was no fire burning in the house, but Furze brought an armful of dry wood in the living-room, and found Rose standing in her stockinged feet, looking at dirty plates and the ragged end of mutton on the table. “Poor man,” she had thought; “no wonder he comes up to us sometimes.” Her wet feet had left marks upon the red tiles.

Furze threw the wood on the hearth.

“I’ll get some logs. Soon have a blaze. You must be soaked.”

“Right through.”

She smiled over it. No word about spoilt clothes and a pulped hat. Her stockinged feet pleased him,—why, he did not know.

“I’ll get those sticks alight while you fetch the logs.”

“Will you. You’ll find paper and matches in that cupboard.”

She was bending over the fire when he returned, her wet jumper clinging to her body. Yes, she was a fine, strong girl, no flat-chested young city wench. He felt too that she was good, if goodness meant warm-heartedness and pleasant common sense.

“Splendid.”

They soon had a blaze, and the shimmer of it was in her eyes and upon her wet black hair.

“Feel cold, Rose?”

“Oh,—a little.”

“Look here, girl,—you must get those wet things off. I can rig you up with something or other while we dry all that.”

“Can you?”

She sat on her heels and considered something.

“Yes. You go in here and lock the door,—and I’ll collect something—and leave it outside.”

She smiled up at him, and he opened the door of Mrs. Damaris’ parlour, and left her, and going upstairs began to search about for clothes. A tweed coat and an old white sweater. Yes, but what the devil——? No,—not breeches. All he could think of was a couple of green linen curtains and a leather belt, and he carried the whole collection down and knocked at the parlour door.

“Rose——”

“Yes.”

“It is a bit of a puzzle,—the skirt,—I mean. See what you can make of all this. I am going to get tea ready.”

From the kitchen he heard the door open and close. There was a silence, and then her voice called him.

“Mr. Furze——”

“Hallo.”

He went to the door.

“Have you any safety-pins?”

“Safety-pins! I don’t know. I’ll have a look.”

He found one safety-pin, and two gold pins that he used with his soft collars.

“All I can find. On the floor.”

He had the tea-tray filled when he heard the parlour door open, and when he entered the living-room she was hanging her clothes on the backs of two chairs in front of the fire. She looked at him with a laughing coyness. She had made quite a nice job of the skirt, looping the two curtains over the belt, and pinning them together.

“You forgot—stockings.”

“Sorry.”

He glanced at her bare feet; they were pretty feet, and few feet are pretty uncovered, and they were very white.

“They look better as they are,” he said, “much better than in a pair of my socks. But you’ll find those tiles cold; I can rig you up with some slippers.”

“Oh,—I’m all right,” she said, and looked at the tea-tray. Had he not anybody to do things for him, no woman about the place?

“Sorry—I’ve no cake. If I’d known.”

“I can do without cake—bought cake. The only cake worth eating is home made.”

He seemed to consider that a very pregnant saying, and stood looking for a moment at her feet, only to discover when he looked at her face that there seemed to be more colour there.

“What about the kettle?” she asked.

“Rose, you are a woman of sense.”

He went for the kettle, while she cleared away the debris of his dinner, and spread the clean cloth he had brought in, and looked both serious and happy.

“Who washes up for you, Mr. Furze?”

“Oh,—I have a woman in twice a week.”

“And the other times?”

“I mess along somehow. Farming’s not all—violets.”

“I know that,” she said arranging the cups and plates.

“You do.”

“My father has a small farm. Shall I cut some bread and butter?”

“Do,” he said, and fell into a sudden stare, and came out of it with a smile of discovery.

“How do you like your tea, Rose? Strong or weak?”

“Strong—I’m afraid.”

“So do I.”

The moist rush of the rain continued. The orchard trees were dripping. The gutters and water-spouts murmured and gurgled. Furze’s face was all smoothed out, and his eyes had softened, and sometimes he would look at the rain and sometimes at the face of the girl. A farmer’s daughter was she! He had been thinking of her a good deal during the last two or three weeks, but now that she was sitting there with her white feet tucked under her chair, and her clothes drying by the fire, and pouring out his tea for him, he felt her

in the same way yet differently. He felt her more deeply, more intimately, not as the incidental woman to be kissed and held for an hour or two, but more like the good rich soil, a comely field.

“It’s a hard life, Rose. Was it too hard for you?”

She looked at him wisely.

“There were three of us, Mr. Furze, and three big girls are not wanted on a forty-acre farm. Oh,—I know.”

“What do you know?”

His seriousness had a touch of fierceness.

“How many pennies go to the pound. How much milk goes to a pound of butter. How many hours it takes to clear a dozen blackcurrant bushes.”

She was not afraid of him. Her frank and handsome face had a half-smiling serenity.

“Soft words won’t bring rain. No lying long in bed. Up early. Scrubbing brushes and milk-cans. That’s one thing about the soil, it does make you honest. You have to face hard facts.”

His eyes became gentle.

“Good girl. I thought all women wanted silk stockings these days.”

“Why shouldn’t they? If they work for them?”

“Ah,—there you are. You have got it. Eve has not quite sneaked back into Paradise.”

They laughed, and there was a mutual desire in their laughter. But he was a man of the soil, and the dreamer in him had had his lesson; there are facts to be faced when a man of the soil is for kissing a woman. Has she a pair of hands as well as a soft mouth, and hands that are willing?

He filled a pipe, deliberately, thoughtfully.

“Milking to do. If my fellow has not been drowned—he has fetched the cows in.”

“You do your own milking, Mr. Furze?”

“Mostly.”

“I can milk,” she said.

He got up, and with a match to the bowl of his pipe, stood half turned to the window.

“I’ll leave you to look after your clothes, Rose. And look over the house—if you like.”

She nodded.

“I’ll wash up. This old place is lovely.”

“Like it?”

“Not like a raw new place. Been lived in—and loved a little.”

He gave her a quick, deep glance.

“Thank you, my dear; you’re wise.”

He walked to the door and paused there.

“Mine— you know. But I am still having a devil of a fight to make ends meet,—and this summer will hit me rather hard.”

“For richer or poorer, Mr. Furze. That’s a farm.”

5

When he came back she had been all over the house with a sleek look on her pleasant face. Her dark eyes had a consenting softness. She had seen things that had stirred the woman in her. “He’s a man and a good one.” She had warmed to the way he had treated her. No innuendoes, no advantages taken. He was a good man who could be gentle and clean with a woman.

Furze found her dressed, her black hair all crisped after its soaking.

“Sure those things are dry, Rose?”

She looked him straight in the eyes.

“Dry enough, Mr. Furze.”

She had cleared the table, and it seemed to him that the room had been tidied up. The clothes and stuff that he had lent her lay folded on the sofa.

“Been over the house?”

“Yes.”

“Like it?”

She nodded.

He looked out of the window. It was still raining hard.

“I haven’t such a thing as an umbrella, dear. But I can rig you up. And I’ll see you as far as—Carslake.”

An old trench coat that he still used in bad weather hung from a peg on the kitchen door. He took it down, and helped her on with it, and buttoned her up.

“What about your hat?”

“I can carry it—under the coat.”

“Clever girl.”

“But what about you?”

“A sack,—my dear—if you’ll allow it.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’d allow you anything—my man,” they said, and he stood and met the light in them.

“Now then——”

But under the dripping hood of the porch the same impulse took them both. They held each other close and kissed, and went up the wet lane hand in hand.

XVIII

1



R. AND MRS. PERCIVAL FREAM arrived at the “Cosmopolis” Hotel in Monte Carlo about half-past three in the afternoon.

Mary was very tired. Moreover, it was raining and the southern sea draped under a grey vein looked strange and unwelcoming. A gilded lift took them up to the second floor, and a polite bureau-clerk in black threw open the door of their suite, and waited attentively upon the Englishman’s face of ice.

“Like it,—dear?”

She said that it was lovely, and felt suddenly and absurdly homesick in the midst of all this pink velvet and white enamel and gilding. The bureau-clerk had departed after assuring Fream that the luggage should be sent up at once, and Mary stood at a window looking at the sea and the harbour of Monaco, while her man remained in the middle of the room austere and awkwardly holding his hat.

“Sorry it’s raining,—my dear.”

She could have wept,—for she was so tired, and with a strange tiredness that she did not understand. And here was Monte Carlo, and he was apologizing to her for the rain. Also, as a woman she knew that much was expected of her, thrills, sighs, ecstasies, all the mysteries of the unveiling, and somehow she felt as flat as that grey sea.

“Do you think I could lie down, Val?”

“Of course, my dear.”

They explored the suite. It consisted of a sitting-room, a bedroom with two beds, a dressing-room and a bathroom, all in white and rose and gold. She wanted to be left alone, and he came and stood beside her in the bedroom and put a flat and expressionless hand between her shoulder blades. He was trying to say something. She wished he would go away.

“Tired,—my dear——?”

“Yes, Val.”

She felt his hand thumping her gently.

“Of course. Luggage coming up. Lie down. I’ll ring for some tea. Lie down till dinner.”

“Yes,—Val.”

“Feel better—after dinner. A little wine—you know.”

Yes, he was very kind, but how was it that she found his kindness so very dreary, rather like a wet handkerchief on your forehead when you had a headache? And life had promised to be so triumphant! O, she was tired; both of them were tired. Tea arrived in a metal teapot, with toast and rolls and butter, and a plate of cakes, chocolate eclairs, and creamy things and sugary things. The tea seemed to be very tasteless, and Fream sat and drank it solemnly as though he had just buried himself. Afterwards she lay down on one of the beds, and two politely detached porters bustled the luggage in and unstrapped it. Fream was smoking a cigar in the sitting-room; she could smell the cigar smoke, and presently she heard him go out. She got up and bolted the door, and lay down again, and tried to sleep, but found herself staring at the ceiling.

About seven o’clock Mary heard him return. She jumped up and unbolted the door. She had duties to perform, and she felt lonely.

“O, Val,—I ought to dress.”

“Yes,” said he with a queer, stiff smile.

“What shall I wear?”

His face expressed inward effort.

“Something pink—rosy——”

She put on her rose and silver brocade, and heard him busy in his dressing-room, but even the sounds he made were restrained and careful and correct. She had a curious wish to hear him whistle, or drop something, and say “Confound it.” She realized, while she was considering herself in her mirror, that she had never seen him in action, walking fast, or playing a game, or laughing, or talking as though he could not help it. She had never seen him let himself go.

The strong and the silent were becoming a little too enigmatic and she felt lonely, and a little conscious of another occasion when a man had loved her to the point of roughness. And yet it had been with a gentle roughness.

She brooded for three minutes, and looked at the two beds. Yes, it took two to make a marriage, and also an impulsive sense of nearness. But—if always—there was a gap, something unexpressed and unfulfilled?

They dined notably, for Fream had rung for a waiter and had had the menu brought up to his suite by the maitre d’hotel, and so they dined à la

carte, with a very polite maitre d'hotel presiding over the little poms and ceremonies of the meal. Dishes were brought and presented; the champagne—Roederer 1914—arrived in a pail of ice. An orchestra played. Fream should have had every cause to be proud of his wife. She was beautifully gowned; she showed a languor that might have enveloped the most admirable and experienced of worldlings; she was quite the prettiest creature in a crowded room. And yet that little pagan love-feast was without a soul.

They were frightened of each other, of that other shadowy, watchful self.

“A little more champagne, dear?”

“No, really,—Val, thank you.”

“It will do you good.”

Certainly it made her a little more talkative, but her vivacity was pantomimic.

2

In the morning she heard Fream moving, but she lay very still, pretending to be asleep, until the door of his dressing-room closed.

She was conscious of a feeling of humiliation, and of pitiful bewilderment. She sat on the edge of the bed, with a vacant face, pondering upon a shameful pity that seemed to well up out of the deeps. Such pity! She could see that the sun was shining, and she went and opened the shutters, and saw the sea as blue as lapis lazuli, and felt the stir of that southern coast. Three old men, bent and black, with guitar, violin, and mandolin, struck up some Italian love-song in the garden below. They looked up at her window. One, the oldest and most bent of the three, began to sing in a harsh and metallic voice, and at the end of each stanza he broke into an absurd little shuffling dance.

What a serenade! Old age cackling and posturing down there in the sunlight.

3

During the days that followed she fell to a level of languid resignation. Never had she felt so tired, inwardly tired. Her bubble mystery had burst.

It could not be helped. She suspected him of being the victim of a humiliation far more final than was hers. He had gone about with the face of a man sick unto death; he had avoided her eyes; yet never had he been so talkative.

And such talking, disjointed, spasmodic, and yet continuous, like blood spurting perpetually from a wound. He looked bleached. Sometimes he broke into a stammer.

She felt desolated, submerged beneath his misery, yet without fully understanding it and its final significance. She was immensely repelled; and also helplessly compassionate. Never had she experienced such loneliness, and crying out in the silence for comfort she was kind to him because she felt that they were lost in the same wilderness.

She did not know that her kindness humiliated him to the deeps. They wandered about together like strangers, she a little bewildered and appealing, he with a sick, bleached face, and a mouth that emitted sounds like the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy. He had discovered his own death, that he was not a live man, but just that which he had suspected himself to be, a manipulator of figures.

4

They went everywhere and did everything. An equal feverishness seemed to possess them both. Yet, all the while, she was seeing him vividly as she had never seen him before, as one seems to see the still and naked soul of a man lying in his coffin. She noticed that when he talked his conversation dealt solely with material things, objects and their value. He was all surface, façade, a human diagram, a piece of arithmetic. He did not seem capable of expressing any sentiment, or of seeing beauty, or of appreciating the innumerable movements of the great shadow-show. Æsthetically he was colour blind,—and in his feelings—such as they were—fatally dumb. He had lost the language of normal manhood.

It shocked her. So did his renewed lavishness. He poured out money, and there was something in her that began to be pitifully offended by this lavishness. Could he not express himself in any other way? He sent her into shops and made her buy things, dresses, hats, jewelry, articles de Luxe, useless things, extravagant superfluities. Once or twice she tried to protest—"Val,—I don't want it," and almost he seemed angry—"Suppose I can give you what I want," but the real anger was against himself.

She touched pathos. She was astonished to find that she was not enjoying the strawberry-bed as she had expected to enjoy it, and that her poor, pretty, fruit-stained fingers hesitated over the fruit. Too much of it! Having worn all her dresses and her pretty-pretties and shown them off before the other women at the "Cosmopolis," before French women and Italians and Central Europeans, and South Americans, yellow women and

brown women, she began to repeat the programme and found it less exciting. Fream never remarked upon her dresses. He had the air of looking at fruit which it was beyond his power to digest.

He hired a car, a most luxurious car. They drove to Sospell and Grasse and Venice, and up to Gourdon, and over the frontier to San Remo. They lunched at the most expensive hotels, and in a little while she thought the food very ordinary.

They went almost nightly to the casino, and it was here that she began to suspect and to know the real Fream. At first he just stood and watched the game, and indulged in an occasional and desultory stake; two days later she slipped into the chair left by a departing player. He spoke to her over his shoulder.

“Care to watch me—— I am going to have a little flutter.”

She stood there an hour. The air of the place made her head ache. She thought that she had never seen such a collection of unwholesome faces, faces that were dead to everything save the one obsession, drugged faces. Fream was winning. She realized suddenly that he had forgotten her.

She slipped away and out into the clean air, and walked a while above the harbour before turning into the “Cosmopolis.” She went to bed. Fream came in about midnight. He looked both apologetic and self-pleased. Almost he suggested a slight swagger, a touch of arrogance.

“Sorry to be late. When did you go?”

She answered brightly.

“Oh,—I just slipped away, Val. You were winning,—so I thought——”

His flat face had a sleek pallor.

“I won—— Ten thousand francs or so. That’s my job, you know. Got a flair for it.”

She had never seen him so animated; he seemed to have recovered some of his self-respect. If blood did not circulate,—money did.

“Rather piques me—you know, doing the bank down with the chances loaded against you.”

Imperceptibly he drifted more and more to the casino, and she let him go, and almost encouraged him to go. It gave her solitude, and she was astonished to find how she craved for solitude, as though being eternally with one voiceless man was like being eternally with a meaningless crowd. She would find him in the sitting-room after breakfast, scribbling figures and smoking a very strong cigar. She noticed that his correspondence increased, that bulky envelopes came out to him registered, and that he

received telegrams. She had a very vivid impression of him sitting stiffly at the table, with his flat white face, the brown cigar projecting from it, and one large white hand jotting down figures. The extreme tension of their mutual discomfort seemed to relax a little. She made one or two acquaintances in the hotel, went for drives alone or picked up a protégé. She even advanced to the self-confidence of giving a luncheon party to three or four people, and Fream attended it, and looked as though he were doing figures in his head.

He went regularly to the casino. Occasionally she went with him. He won more often than he lost. His knack of annexing money rather frightened her; it was uncanny, just a little inhuman,—like himself.

5

At the end of October they reached Rome, and put up at the “Excelsior.” They had agreed to come on to Rome because both of them had begun to suffer from concealed restlessness, and had agreed brightly and like the very best of friends that Rome attracted them. Most certainly it attracted Mary. She wanted to see it and to be able to talk about it, St. Peter’s, the Vatican, the Forum, the Spanish Steps, Keats’ grave, Tivoli, for she had a passion to see things, to efface her rustic insularity. The wife of Mr. Percival Fream needed to be a woman of the world.

It was in Rome that she began to discover her husband’s profound ignorance. That he should have but little French and no Italian was of no moment, and quite English, and “quanto costa” carried him as far as the contents of his pocket-book, but that he should be under the impression that St. Peter’s had been built by a Roman emperor was something of a shock to her. For, standing in the piazza, he had looked with his flat eyes at the mass of stone.

“These Roman chaps could build.”

She was so astonished that she was tempted to believe that Imperial Rome must have produced St. Peter’s. Also, she had been ready to suppose that he would be interested in pictures, since he possessed two or three “old masters,” but he was quite unable to distinguish a Raphael from a Michelangelo. She did know, having read it in the guide book, that the window of Keat’s room had overlooked the Spanish Steps, and pausing to discover it she was questioned by him.

“What are you looking for, my dear?”

He “my deared” her solemnly like a Victorian.

“Keats’ window.”

“No shops here.”

“Keats the poet, Val.”

“O, yes.”

She was made to feel that he had never heard of Keats, and when she took him to the Protestant Cemetery to see Keats’ grave and the resting-place of Shelley’s heart, he wandered with her among the cypresses and looked bored. “No use for these poet chaps.” He did not say so, but she divined it as his opinion. But he had heard of Romulus and Remus and the wolf, and of Garibaldi as a sort of filibustering fellow in a red shirt. They went to see the Coliseum by moonlight, and he stood beside her with an air of meditation.

“Think of the ghosts, Val.”

“Ghosts!”

He lacked both fancifulness and a sense of humour.

“Wonder how much money their box-office took on a full night?”

After that she despaired of his æsthetics. She noticed that he much preferred wandering along the Via Nazionale, and that he wanted to find the “Bourse.” And always he would pause outside a bank, and look it up and down as though estimating its solidity. He allowed that these Italian fellows could build, but he thought that the new Regent Street knocked them endways. He was absurdly interested in the rate of exchange, and played a little daily game of his own with the lira, and wanted her to be interested in it, and if he happened to be five lire on the right side he appeared quite pleased. They hired a car and drove to Tivoli and Frascati, and he asked her—quite solemnly—whether she had ever had a meal at “Frascati’s.” But at the end of ten days she estimated his boredom to be as profound as was his ignorance. She went alone up to S. Pietro in Montorio, and to the terrace of the Pincio, and looked over Rome and wondered and felt sad.

For Mary and her husband had in the course of three or four short weeks agreed—tacitly—to shut the door upon the physical phenomena of marriage. Emotionally it had been a fiasco, a humiliating incident in the lives of both. It was not discussed. They locked it up like a room in which some tragic event had happened. After all—there was all the rest of the house.

The band was playing in the gardens, and she stood and looked towards St. Peter’s. Yes, there was all the rest of the house, many things to enjoy, rooms which had not yet been opened or lived in. Her man might exist for money, but he was not mean about money. He was allowing her a thousand a

year for dress and casual personal expenses; and she was to have a little car of her own.

“It need not be so bad,” she thought, and was shocked at her own acceptance of life’s relativity. How quickly had she come down from her peak to the levels of compromise and compensations! Well,—well! She had not arrived at that degree of emotional persuasion when a woman begins to ask questions, and to wonder whether judgments are formulated and put into action. Her grandee had fallen out of his frame; he was a queer, inarticulate, kind, ignorant, money-hunting man. No, not quite a man.

She felt herself flushing.

“O, no,—I don’t want to think——”

She put a bright face upon her misery, and returning to the “Excelsior” found him in the lounge reading a financial paper. He looked pleased about something. He told her that he had just bought a couple of statues, marble—you know. They would look rather well on the terrace of Hill House.

A little, chilly sensation ran through her. She sat down.

“Wouldn’t you like to go home, Val?”

His glasses glimmered at her over the top of the paper.

“Just as you please, my dear.”

“I think—I—— Won’t it be the wrong time of year for Naples and Sorrento?”

His face had for her the same colour as the paper he had been reading.

“Excellent idea,—personally. Matter of fact—I’m rather badly wanted in town.”

“Let’s go home,” she repeated, but the word “Home” had for her a sound of unimaginable dreariness.

6

Clare Biddulph had her first sight of Mary the day after their return to Hill House.

She came down to “Caradoc” in “Phœbus,” wearing a musquash coat that Fream had bought her in Paris. She looked older, and quite extraordinarily self-contained. She drawled slightly when she spoke.

Clare, unemotional creature that she was, yet felt a numbness.

“Well,—here you are. Had a good time? But of course you have.”

“Perfectly lovely.”

Mary did not look at Clare, but out of the window, and her composure was like a white veil. And she was daring Clare to lift it, defying her to lift it.

“A perfectly lovely time. Val had to come back on business. We had two days in Paris. He bought me these furs.”

XIX

1



IN SEPTEMBER “Doomsday” washed its face in the dew and knew a second greenness. With the last fortnight of August as wet as you please, the resting soil,—refreshed and eager,—seemed to rush into a second growth. Furze had never seen anything quite like it. The Long Meadow that a month ago had been a stretch of cracked brownness, had lushed up into a young hay crop. The country shook off the dust and the heat, and was glad. Old garden flowers took heart of grace and set out to bloom a second time. The blackberries, little hard red points, swelled into a lustrous blackness. September dews were heavy, and the sunlight like yellow wine, and in the dawns Furze saw a world of gold and of silver, with Rushy mist-hung, and the oaks of Gore Wood catching the early sunlight.

“A second spring,—a second summer,” he thought, but the man in him watched and considered.

Up at Carslake, girls, twittering under the old red roof of the “George” before blowing out their candles, spoke of the eternal adventure.

“Rose has a man—a lover.”

Furze of “Doomsday,” a gentleman lover! She was teased and she was envied, and she went about her work with the air of a girl who was wise and who had seen reason to be happy. She was not a great talker. She had a dignity of her own and did not know it, but she did know that fools abound, the men who ask for a whisky or a bottle of beer as though they were asking for other things. “Hallo, Rose dear.” Someone’s arm round your waist on the stairs, the most unexpected of arms! No, she was a girl who had seen a little of life and had remained clean, because she knew that when her heart did let itself go the affair would be serious, and she wanted a man who would be serious. She was a big, gracious, lovable creature. She seemed to grow more silent and more grave when the man came to her in the person of Arnold Furze.

“Hallo, Rosie.”

“Good evening, Mr. So-and-so.”

She put such bright “gentlemen” in their places, and did it quite gently and with good temper, as though they were exuberant small boys who had forgotten their manners. They said to themselves that Rose Hurley had a handsome and swollen head just because a farmer fellow was supposed to be a little sweet on her. Vulgar minds and vulgar language. The vulgarians were not maggots in the heart of the rose. Women have a knack of surprising men, and will always surprise them, for it is good for a man that he should sometimes fall on his knees and look upwards. The Mother of God and of Man is immortal.

Furze came up from Bean Acres where he had left the wheel-plough under a hedge. The two grey horses came with him, following like a couple of dogs, sensible beasts who waited for the man and master to open and shut gates. Meanwhile the man in Furze was opening and shutting gates. He was considering more things than the needs of his body, and the slipshod activities of Mrs. Sarah. Woman, what was she? A broken reed or a distaff, a honey-pot or a cradle?

He stabled the horses, unharnessed, watered, and fed them. It was not yet tea time, and four o’clock on that particular afternoon when a young woman put off her black dress and her laced apron, and became—— Yes, just what did she become? He paused in the stable doorway, and became aware of an unusual sound, a sound as of castigation. And before him at that moment appeared Will, a Will who hid a smile, and looked as solemn as an owl.

“What’s that noise, Will?”

“Couldn’t say, ssir.”

“Your wife’s not at work to-day?”

“She be not, ssir.”

Furze went up to the house and into it. He saw a woman’s hat on the sofa. Also, the table had been laid for tea, and there was a cake on a dish, a real, live home-made plum cake. He caught a glimpse through the open doorway of the floor of Mrs. Damaris’ parlour, and he realized that it was carpetless, and that the boards had been scrubbed. What the devil——!

He walked into the parlour, but there was no spider there. The furniture stood ranged neatly round the walls, and the window was wide open, and through it he had a vision of a young woman, bare-headed and with her sleeves rolled up, folding up a carpet on the grass. A hazel rod lay near at hand. The sound as of castigation was explained.

He stood and watched her for a moment. She picked up the folded carpet as though it was no heavier than a tablecloth, shook her black hair back, saw

him, and stood at gaze. Her smile came slowly. She had not expected him back so soon.

“Do you call this a holiday, Rose?”

He climbed out of the window and jumped, and would have taken the carpet from her, but she stood back, and somehow gave him to understand that it was not to be touched.

“You are back too soon.”

“How’s that?”

“I wanted the floor dry and this carpet down.”

Almost she was austere with him, and he wondered why. Was it that she had not meant him to find her at work? But why should she mind? It was unexpected and gracious of her to give him the labour of her hands when she might have been on Hastings beach in a muslin frock on the look-out for “pick ups.”

“I don’t say my prayers in public,” said she. “You can help me down with this carpet. That woman of yours is a slut.”

He was obedient and thoughtful, but she seemed intent upon her job, not looking at him, as though like a man he had arrived very much at the wrong moment, and had put her in the wrong. She began to rearrange the furniture; he helped her, and she accepted his help, but without acknowledging it.

When the last chair was in its place his right arm slipped round her and found her rigid.

“What is it,—my dear?”

“What?”

“Something has hurt you.”

He held her, but her arms hung stiffly.

“O,—has it?”

“Yes. Tell.”

But she would not tell him. She slipped away from his arm and into the living-room, and said that the kettle should be boiling, and that as she was a bold-faced jig she might as well make his tea. And at that he grew deliberate and gently determined, and got her beside him again, and spoke with his mouth close to her hair.

“You can tell me, Rose.”

“No—I can’t.”

They stood talking, and all that he could think of was that she had not wished him to know that she was working in his house. And why? Did it

look too much like a studied effect, Arabella's dimple that deceived poor Jude?

"I think I know," he said, "and thank you, my dear."

She looked very grave.

"If you do know—well—you are not like most men. What about that kettle?"

He held her.

"Rose, no secrets between man and wife."

"I'm not that—yet," she said.

"You may be. I want you."

Her eyes were as dark as night.

"How much? No, I'm not a nasty, sly little bit of a girl. If I thought——"

"If you thought——?"

"I'd never see you again."

"But you will. Because I know——"

"Oh,—you think you know!"

"I do know."

And he kissed her.

2

At tea he talked like a farmer, but a farmer who was also her lover.

"Things are turning out better than I thought. There will be more keep for the sheep on the ten acre than looked possible three weeks ago."

"I'm glad," she said, and he knew that she was glad.

He went on to talk of the farm, intimately, as to one who was wise and concerned and who understood and sympathized. The attack of mamitis among the cows had died away, and there was only one cow with any induration of the udder. The roots were a thin crop, and he would have to buy winter feed, but things would not be quite as bad as he had feared. He thought of selling half a dozen cows, and buying in again next year, and what did she think about it? He had done fairly well with his big black pigs and sheep. Yes, plenty of stock enriched your land, and saved you from having to spend too much money on artificials.

"Of course—a man can do much more when he has the money. Money and time,—that's what the ordinary man lacks."

“And a fair show,” said she; “the farmer does not get a fair show. He is sacrificed for the cheap people in the towns. They may find it out some day.”

She wanted to know about his chickens and ducks. Did he do much with them? No, he had not the time. She nodded. Of course he hadn’t,—but a woman might have the time.

He smiled at her.

“There would be plenty of work.”

“So there would.”

“By the way—where did the cake come from, Rose?”

“I had it made at home by one of my sisters. The real thing; not your cake-powder stuff.”

“Yes,” said he, “so much of modern life is just cake-powder.”

Will had been left to begin the milking, and when Furze went out to the cow-house she cleared away the tea things and washed up. When the milking was done they were going over the farm together, and having finished her work she went down to the cow-house. There were still two cows to be milked, and she made Furze give her his white milking-coat, and she took the stool and the pail, and showed him that her hands had not lost their cunning. With her dark head pressed against a brown flank she emptied the udder, while Furze smoked a pipe and looked on. She carried two of the pails to the dairy, and in the cool gloom of the brick-floored, whitewashed room, her skin looked as white as the milk.

“You have a separator?”

“Not a very good one. I bought it second-hand. I want a new one. I began with cream-pans.”

She nodded.

“Nothing looked nicer my old grandmother used to say—than a row of cream-pans in a clean dairy,—but machinery saves time. I suppose you have thought of buying a tractor?”

“Yes. Can’t afford it at present.”

“Something to work for. O, lots of things to work for. That makes life good.”

In the cool of the September evening they wandered over the farm together. She was rather silent, but her eyes saw things, including the rabbits feeding under the edge of Gore Wood. They were standing under the old thorn edge of the “Gore,” and Furze’s eyes were on the oaks yellow-domed in the evening sunlight. Many of them would have to fall that winter, and he

was sorry, not only for the loss of the trees, but because it meant more men about the place, the wheel tracks across the Gore, and the lane cut to pieces by the wheels of the heavy timber-tugs.

He told Rose that some of the oaks were marked for the sawmill. She looked grave.

“A pity to sell timber.”

“It’s necessity, my dear. I had a lot of things done to the house,—and the money is needed.”

She stood mute and thoughtful for some moments.

“How much are you counting on?”

“Oh,—I suppose a clear hundred or so would set things straight.”

She said very little as they went down to Gore Wood, and came back by way of the Long Meadow and the Doom paddock as the dusk and the dew came down together. Her face had a comely, dreaming tranquillity; her big and gentle eyes were very wise.

“It’s a sweet farm,” she said as they turned into the orchard where the trees were growing very black, and the roof and chimneys of the house made an equal blackness.

“It’s my life, my dear. Come and share it—for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer.”

She gave herself to the hollow of his arm.

3

Locked away in a drawer in her bedroom at the “George Inn” Rose Hurley kept a little fibre case in which she stored her letters, a few pieces of jewelry, her money, and a gold watch. Rose was eight and twenty, and she had been working for five years, and coming of the country stock she had saved money. Yes, quite a pretty sum thanks to her tips which had not been lessened by a pleasant voice, dark eyes, and clean hands.

In this case she kept her Post Office book, and her Savings Certificates. She knew to a penny what she had, but that night she sat on the edge of her bed, and by candlelight considered her fortune.

Seventy-five pounds in Savings Certificates. Forty-three pounds, seven shillings and ninepence in the Post Office. In all £118 7s. 9d. Not so bad for a working girl! And she sat there in her nightdress and looked happy. She had something to take to “Doomsday” besides herself.

“No need to fell timber.”

It was her next surprise for him, dearly conceived, and carried out on her next visit to the farm. She appeared to him in a pink and white muslin frock, with white shoes and stockings, and a shady hat. Little hats were said to be going out, but the little heads would remain. She sat on Arnold's sofa, and smiled at him. A brocade vanity-bag lay on her lap. And he thought that he had never seen anything more comely and cool and pleasant, with that dark gentleness of hers, and the broad and clear wisdom of her face. She had come between him and his Cinderella love. He had come to love her too, a little differently, with less passion perhaps, but with a more confident tenderness. She would be so good to live and to sleep with, a strong yet restful creature who had some knowledge of what life could and could not be.

She smiled up at him.

“Open your hands and shut your eyes, Jack.”

She had chosen to call him Jack. Arnold was all very well, but Jack came more plainly and gently off the tongue.

“What's this? More cake?”

“Shut your eyes.”

He humoured her. He felt something unexpected placed in his hands.

“Open.”

A blue-grey envelope and a red-brown-covered book surprised him.

“What's this?”

“My savings, Jack. Take them—for both of us. No need to sell those oak trees.”

He was more touched than she knew, though she could tell by his eyes that her surprise had not miscarried.

“Rose,—my dear,—you mustn't——”

“And why not? For richer or poorer, dear man. It's not very much, not quite a hundred and twenty pounds.”

He bent over her.

“You dear thing. Well, it's your farm—anyway—if anything should happen to me.”

She held him fast.



IF TO be happy is to be comfortable Mrs. Mary Fream had nothing to complain of, for Hill House in winter was even more comfortable than Hill House in summer. Yet the winter began with one week of extreme discomfort, an indescribable week when her grandee mounted his horse and made one last charge upon stubborn nature. It proved to be a forlorn hope and a failure, and between them arose a conspiracy of silence, a bargain arranged and sealed without a word being uttered. Tacitly he offered her certain advantages, and she accepted them. It was a silent compact. She was to be the most decorative and live of his possessions, and though they occupied rooms with a door that communicated, who was to know that her grandee was not man enough to command that door.

Self-pity may suggest a more universal pity, and the realization of the human fact that we all of us suffer, and Fream was very kind to his wife, but inarticulately kind. The relationship became rather like that between a self-conscious and awkward father and a spoiled child. After that last and disastrous excursion into romance he seemed to age very rapidly. He tried to redress himself in the habits of the last ten years, and he was at least ten years older. It was a very humiliating experience, and depressing, because he discovered that the destruction of a man's male self-confidence may show its effects elsewhere; in his work. He had gone back to his work as though to hide himself in it, to find a solace and a new self-respect, but his work was not quite the same; nor was he. Undoubtedly he had a *flair* for figures, and the curiously cold and long-sighted eyes of money-maker. He had combined a careful shrewdness with intuition. Always, he had taken great care to reconnoitre the field of action; but the final movement had been guided by that intuitive something within himself. He had had audacity.

Two months after his marriage an enterprising gentleman sold him a pup. In vulgar parlance that was what happened,—but there may be more in such a happening than the mere loss of money. The picking of a pocket is less unpleasant than the feeling that you have been fooled, or that you were not so sharp as you imagined you were. It was the first financial mistake that

Percival Fream had made for a very long time. It shocked him, and possibly it frightened him a little, just as one of those unpleasant sensations about the heart frighten a man and make him wonder whether his body is all that it should be. The loss of two or three thousand pounds was nothing; the first sagging of a man's confidence may be everything, and it may be that the crumbling of Fream's self-confidence began during those days after his marriage. It was a very slow affair, like the natural erosion of a cliff, or the hardening of a man's arteries.

Fatal Cinderella! How was she to know that Furze had thought of her in the end as a woman who brought a man bad luck.

"You want your cushion, my dear, and that's fatal. Cushions should be for the people who have finished with life."

She had her cushion, and a very large and comfortable cushion it was. She did not say to herself now—"Val is a dear"; she said: "Val is so kind." But what a white death of a kindness! Her whole day was a cushion. At eight o'clock she was brought early tea with two frail slices of bread and butter; at half-past eight she put on a dressing-gown, and went to the rose marble bathroom, and came out of it pink and glowing. She was down in time to assist her grandee through his toast and marmalade, and to pour out his second cup of coffee. A fire blazed; chafing dishes kept things hot; there were two picture papers, and all the weekly magazines on their respective weekly birthdays. Her Val went off at 9.30; Phœbus carried him away to catch the 9.43. With meticulous kindness he would kiss the middle of her forehead.

"Enjoy your day, my dear."

She did enjoy it. Her nursery was still full of toys. One Saturday morning early in December a little cerise and black coupe had arrived outside the portico, her toy car.

"O, Val, how lovely!"

She had climbed into it and settled herself in the deeply cushioned seat, and tried the pedals and the gear-lever, and examined the many gadgets. It was a beautiful little car, as exquisitely finished as an enamel trinket box. You pressed a button on the dash-board, and a little cabinet opened, and offered you face-powder and a mirror, and orange sticks, and nail-cream, and a choice of scents. Another minute cupboard held a little brocade-covered blotter, postcards, note-paper, a fountain-pen and pencils, a notebook bound in blue vellum. You had your clock, calendar, a letter-box. She had insisted on her husband getting into the car with her, and she had driven carefully up and down the drive.

“I shall call her ‘Cherry,’—Val.”

And she had kissed him on one flat white cheek.

“You are a dear to me.”

Yes, she could enjoy her day. It was pleasant to drive down to Weyfleet in “Cherry” and to know that no other woman in the place had quite so exquisite a car. She liked shopping. It was pleasant to go into the grocer’s and the butcher’s, and to know by the quick politeness of the trades-people that she was Mrs. Fream of Hill House. Buying things still thrilled her, especially the little luxuries that are only for the few,—the best grapes, the best peaches, perfumes that other women could not afford, flowers, sweets. She had joined the Weyfleet Golf Club and was taking lessons from the local professional. Two or three times a week she went up to town, and “Cherry” was parked in St. James’s Square, while my lady took a dancing lesson and shopped and had tea at the “Ermine Club.” Weyfleet played much “bridge,” but Mary found herself such a brown bunny at the game and lost so much fur to the old soldiers that she had to ask Clare to coach her. Clare lost very little to anyone. Then there was the weekly dance at the Hills Club. You could be as smart as your husband pleased, and thanks to Clare’s taste Mary was very smart. Val did not dance, but the buoyant Leslie was an expert,—and there were other experts, young stockbrokers and business men. Mrs. Fream became a partner to be desired. Other women began to say carefully unkind things about her.

What did it matter? She did not hear what was said. She held her cake in both hands. Her husband came to the dances, and sat or stood with a perfectly expressionless face, and paid for champagne, and retreated at times to the card-room. The youth of the young men jostled him. He would stand stiffly in corners, and try to smile at Mary’s partners, and appear the complaisant fellow. He could not express himself even to himself. Anyway, no other woman was more exquisitely gowned than his woman. He liked to collect a supper party and order the most expensive champagne. He wished there were other ways in which his money could be made to express itself. Yes, to dominate the world, and dazzle a poor little Cinderella who was more of a Delilah than she knew. Her inarticulate Samson had not much hair to lose.

At dinner one evening he made a suggestion.

“We ought to give a dance.”

“Val,—I’d love it.”

“A really swagger dance. Show these people something. What!”

“Here, or at the club.”

“O,—here. More scope—you know. Something original. What about New Year’s Eve?”

“Splendid. Couldn’t we make it a bal masque?”

“What’s that?”

“We all wear masks, you know.”

They were wearing them already, and did not know it.

2

Meanwhile, Clare Biddulph kept three cool fingers on the pulse of her sister’s marriage. That the marriage was not an emotional success seemed to her fairly obvious. Mary was a warm-hearted creature, and not a little impulsive, but too warm a heart may prove disastrous. Moreover it is not wise to deliver homilies to a young woman who happens to be very much in love with herself, and very full of her house and her wardrobe and her jewelry and her car. Mary had a very pretty swollen head; she was Mrs. Fream of Hill House; her smartness was growing.

Clare touched the relationship coolly. There were certain things that she wished to say to Mary, but she doubted the ripeness of the soil. Platitudes are truths that are always being rediscovered, but there are certain platitudes with which a married woman of experience is familiar, but which cannot be breathed over to dear friends. A woman may write of such things in her diary, but she will keep that diary under lock and key.

Clare wanted to say to Mary—“When you are very young—my dear—you may suffer from that zygotic disease called idealism. You think that butterflies’ wings matter, and kisses, and moonlight, and Tennyson—and all that; but the one thing that matters is money. Materialism, my dear, intelligent materialism. For unless you happen to be one of those curious creatures called artists there is no beauty for you without money. It is the lining of your nest, the fire in your life’s house, the nice perfume in your wardrobe. Without money life is a sweaty business; it does not smell nice; it loses its figure; its breasts flop and its tummy protrudes; its feet are flat; it is apt to run to red noses and to little twists of hair stuck on like a blob at the back of your head. Its ankles thicken. It travels third class, and is always in a crowd; and it carries pulpy vegetables home in a basket, and drinks too much tea, and sits in the sixpenny seats at the picture-house. A frowsy baggage, my dear, good and hard-working—and all that—but—ye gods—how ugly. Without money—no space—no pleasant aloofness—neither room nor leisure to be yourself. Don’t be a sentimentalist. Cherish your money—my dear—and the man who makes it.”

It was her husband—however—who suggested sisterly intervention.

“She ought to be told not to dance quite so much—”

“With young Pagan?”

“O, Pagan and other chaps.”

Clare knew that it was young Dick Pagan who had sinned against Leslie’s kindly code. Pagan was a good-looking but wooden-faced young man with a rather insolent blue eye, a very erect head and neatly squared shoulders. His unpopularity with most of the older men was quite extraordinary.

“A pup—you know,—but with the cheek of the devil. A young cad too. Been talking in the train.”

“O?”

“Sanders told me. O,—well never mind what he said. Perhaps you can guess.”

Clare could guess. She knew the Pagan type. It was good at games; it was full of fleshly assurance, and quite ruthless in taking what it wanted. Clare divided the adventurous males into two classes; she called them the silk-merchants and the butchers. Leslie was a silk-merchant, a kindly, good-natured trader who would never push a bargain to its inevitable conclusion. The butchers were different, though your complete and consistent butcher was not often met with, the young man who cut the throat of a woman’s desire, dabbled his hands in the blood of it, and left the carcass lying derelict.

She agreed with Leslie. Mary ought to be warned against young butchers.

“You could imagine the chap in a blue coat, cutting up joints with a cleaver. Even his face—.”

“Hard and brown—and rather red. No playee—with the butcherly boyee —.”

She set about it delicately. Her lamb was a very holy lamb, and it carried a little flag. You had to remember the flag and the inscription upon it—“I am Mrs. Percival Fream of Hill House.” Yes, Mary was taking herself very seriously, and this very seriousness could be starched against all young Pagans.

Clare knew that it is not wise to tell another woman to snub a particular man. The result may be obtained more nicely by snubbing him yourself in her presence. She may ask you the question “Why did you snub the poor boy like that?” Then the wise woman can get in her bodkin thrust, and these

thrusts may save souls. "O,—that—young cat's-meat merchant!" You drawled the words with casual serenity. "No, my dear, that sort of young man bores me."

Perhaps you wrapped it up a little more delicately in silver paper. The important thing was that you should show no animus, but only show up the butcher.

So, it happened just as Clare had intended it should happen at one of the Hills Club dances a week or so before Christmas. And after it had happened, young Pagan, with a nasty look in his blue eyes, and his wooden face in the air like the face of a ship's figure-head, supposed to Mary when she danced with him that Mrs. Biddulph did not like him.

"Told me off, didn't she."

Mary looked sympathetic.

"Perhaps your steps don't match."

"She doesn't like me."

He was quite truculent about it, and then grew rather sulky and silent, and came up half an hour later with the obvious purpose of extracting the lamb from under Mrs. Clare's protecting petticoats. Yes, and be damned to her!

But the lamb proved shy. There had been an adjournment to the ladies' room and a powdering of noses. "Why did you snub Mr. Pagan?" Clare had aimed at a quick impression. She had smiled at herself in the glass. "Me no dancee with butcher-boyee."—"My dear!"—"Well it bores me. Pups are boring enough—but bad pups!—No—thankee." An impression swiftly conveyed from woman to woman, and registered for future use.

Hence Mrs. Fream had a dignified headache, and young Pagan went off, damning Mrs. Clare for a jealous cat. Of course Pompous Percival's wife was fair game. She had married the chap for his money. If he—Pagan—did not get her into his meat-tray some other butcher-boy would.

Mary's headache was productive. It flowed in the card-room where her husband was losing money at "bridge," and wondering at the abominable hands he held.

"Val—I have such a headache—."

"My dear, would you like to go home?"

"Please."

"I'll have the car sent round."

Mrs. Fream went out on her husband's arm.

The Hill House dance was to be a very swagger affair. Black silk masks were to be worn, but Mrs. Fream would supply the masks. There would be boxes of them in the cloak-room, and you took a mask just as you took a programme. It was suggested that each lady and gentleman should choose a letter, Mr. A,—or Miss Z.

“But of course,” said Clare; “half the men will want to be Mr. X. Still, let it go.”

Dick Danvers’ Jazz Band was coming down from town. Bunter’s were to do the supper. The billiard-room and the hall were to be cleared for dancing.

Mr. Fream was full of ideas.

At midnight a huge bowl of rum-punch would be placed in the middle of the dancing floor, and Mary, dressed as the new year, would with a ladle of silver fill the guests’ glasses. He suggested that the old year should be represented by a couple of stout lads functioning as the fore-legs and hind-legs of an ass, and that the ass should draw a coster’s barrow full of presents for the ladies. “Real turnips and carrots and cabbages, you know, with presents inside them.” Mary thought it a lovely idea. And who would distribute the presents? Fream smirked. He would. Twenty years ago he had fancied himself as a coster; he had the clothes; he had gone to fancy dress dances in them. Pearly buttons—you know. But he had another idea which he kept to himself. Among other things he had collected coins; he had a couple of dozen English sovereigns of various dates; these should be sewn on his coat in place of the pearly buttons.

Mary was full of her dance. She and Val would show Weyfleet just what Hill House could do. She invited about a hundred people, and when Clare pointed out that the letters of the alphabet would not go round, Mary said that some of her guests could wear numbers, those who came late.

“As though they had escaped from the cloak-room!”

During the supper-dance there was to be a joyous rag, with toy balloons and serpentine and flowers and confetti. Then the champagne would flow.

“What are you going to wear, my dear?”

Mary told him that she had a special frock coming down from “Isabeaus.”

“Afraid I’ve been a bit extravagant, Val.”

“Make the other chaps wives look shabby,” said he, “that’s the spice and the pepper.”

Mary sent Christmas presents to “Green Shutters,” a box of cigars for her father, a fur wrap for Mrs. Charlotte, and a pink jumper for Cousin Nellie.

Her mother’s Christmas letter contained a piece of news that affected her unpleasantly. Almost it destroyed her appetite for her New Year’s fiesta.

“Mr. Furze has married a girl who was a waitress at ‘The George’ at Carlslake. We all think it rather a pity.”

Just that! And Mary was angry and contemptuous and peeved. Poor Arnold! A common waitress, a girl with red hands, who would giggle and say “Oo-er!” How very sordid of him!

And yet—perhaps—she herself was a little to blame.—No doubt he had married his waitress out of pique.

She felt sorry and she felt insulted.

Also, she could still smell that hay-cock in spite of Rimmell and Coty.

On that New Year’s Eve, from the warm firelit hollow of the Hill House library Mary saw the sun set over the park. It vanished as a redness in a mass of amethyst cloud, outlining for a space the figure of the dancing faun, and giving a golden bloom to the grass. A bluish gloom flowed in, and the figure of the faun grew dim. She sat in front of the fire and felt regal. Even the sunset had coloured the day for her, and added to the distinction of the scenery. A pleasant activity made itself felt in the house. Val was coming down by the five o’clock train. In an hour or so she would go up to dress.

Yes, that is how she would have described her mood of the moment; she felt regal. Success shone upon her forehead. She saw herself the centre of a gay crowd, exquisitely gowned, receiving homage, conscious of envy. She alone among all the women would wear no mask, for a hostess could not be masked when she ascended her little social throne and looked brightly round. In the mirror of her own self-consciousness she was essentially Mrs. Percival Fream of Hill House. The night and the occasion were hers; she was a little dazzled by herself, in love with herself.

Meanwhile, she rang for Jessup. It was very pleasant to exercise authority.

“O,—Jessup,—I want to see Burner’s man.”

“Yes, madam.”

She saw him. He came and stood deferentially before her, big and flabby and fair. She questioned him closely. She hoped that he understood that there was to be no sparing of the champagne. He assured her that the arrangements were perfect; there would be no hitch,—there could be no hitch. His bland deference made her feel still more regal.

Half an hour later Jessup came to say that Mr. Danvers had arrived with his band, and that he wished to see the lady of the house. Certainly; she wished to see Mr. Danvers. Fream had returned, and had gone up to dress so that he should be ready to inspect all the arrangements. He and Mary were dining in the library.

Mr. Danvers was introduced, a little, dark, alert man, rather too well dressed, and with too much silk handkerchief protruding from his sleeve.

“I understand that you are using both the billiard-room and the hall.”

He did not address her as madam, and she took to herself some of Clare’s manner.

“Certainly. We are having fifty couples. You will place your band where the music can be heard in both rooms.”

He bowed very stiffly.

“About the programme—you are to cut out a waltz in each half. I expect there will be a number of extras.”

“There usually are.”

She allowed him to see a cool profile.

“By the way—there are five—performers——.”

“Musicians, madam.”

“How many saxophones?”

“Two saxophones, a piano, a violin, a cello.”

“Cut out one of the saxophones. Can he play anything else?”

“A violin.”

“Let him play a violin. The saxophone is overdone.”

She felt still more regal when she had disposed of Mr. Richard Danvers.

At six o’clock she went up to dress, assisted by Pollock her maid. She looked a pretty creature, but it was her ambition to be more than pretty. She sat in front of the glass while Pollock, who was a trained coiffeuse, attended to her hair. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought of poor Furze. She rather wished that Arnold could see her to-night before going back to his waitress. He would be able to appreciate differences. She would like to picture him looking in at a window and watching her dancing or playing the

charming hostess. Poor Arnold! But how very sordid of him! To give his broken heart into a pair of red hands. Did his waitress giggle and say “Oo-er” when he kissed her?

Impossible people, rustics!

Pollock was asking her what scent she would use.

“O, Jasmin de Corse—I think, Pollock.”

“Yes, madam.”

6

Even the fastidious Clare allowed that the Fream dance was very well done. The Freams and the Biddulphs were allies, and the shine of the one was the shine of the other. Leslie, that Sun in Taurus, was joyous and emphatic. “Top-hole show. Good floor, good band, rattling good supper, plenty of first-class fizz. And atmosphere, old thing, atmosphere.”

He was right. The Hill House dance had an atmosphere. It glowed pleasantly from the first fox-trot, and when it reached the supper-dance it radiated a gentle brilliancy that suffused itself into the champagne. People warmed to each other. “Really, what a charming crowd! And a charming house, and a charming hostess. And—by Jove—some frock on her.” Fream’s donkey and coster’s cart set the world rolling; the donkey frisked; Fream distributed carrots and cabbages and turnips from which were extracted pretty powder-boxes, and bottles of choice scent, and jade and amber pendants. Even Fream’s gold buttons were forgiven him. He wore his sovereigns, and his wife felt more and more regal. The dutiful ass provided a climax. When Mary had served rum-punch to everybody, and they had made a circle about her and sung Auld Lang Syne, the ass made an effort to kneel before her, but becoming unbalanced in its interior, rolled over and lay as though expiring.

The men cheered. Masks had been taken off long ago, but there continued to be about ten Mr. X’s who insisted on remaining vizored. The ass was assisted to its feet. Its hinder portion contained a certain lad who should not have been of the party, but who had been smuggled in the place of a disappointing husband. Fream, calling for two volunteers in the cloak-room, had in his egregious innocence had this young spark fastened upon him. It was Mr. Richard Pagan who went into the hind-quarters of the ass.

Later, he provided a climax of his own, a purely personal climax. Still masked, despite champagne and his adventures in donkeydom, he danced

twice with his hostess. The lad had had his hair dyed black. Even Clare did not detect him.

“Done you, Mrs. Biddulph!”

Irresponsible butcher-boy!

“I say, Mrs. Fream,—this show of yours is it. And you don’t know me from Adam.”

She did not. No Pagan had been invited; no such young barbarian.

“I say, let’s sit out this one. Sure you must be tired. Don’t look it—of course.”

“I can’t sit out with a Mr. X.”

“O, yes, you can; come along.”

She was feeling a little less consciously regal, and wholly triumphant. She allowed him to take her to a corner of the conservatory that was dimly lit by red Japanese lanterns. He found a sofa for two behind palms and a young mimosa. And there, with a sort of insolent and appreciative deliberation, he put a sudden arm round her—and kissed her neck.

He was surprised at her fury.

“You cad——! Who are you?”

He took off his mask.

“It’s me. Don’t cut up so rough—and pretend—.”

She stood up, trembling, outraged, she the great young Lady of Hill House, his hostess, Mrs. Percival Fream, perhaps Lady Fream, caught and mouthed on a sofa by a blackguard boy! And her neck too!

“You will leave the house. At once please——.”

Her breath came quickly.

He stood up, sulky and savage.

“Humbug. Everybody knows—my dear. If a woman marries a cheque book in trousers.”

“Leave the house,” she said; “how dare you say such things.”

The night’s triumph was tarnished. She went to bed at some impossible hour in the morning, very tired, yet not too tired to be conscious of a horrible feeling of insecurity.

That a man should have dared to treat her like that in her own house and on such a night, and to blurt out the exact truth! Young beast that he was,

and yet so brutally right, and more honest in the face of his lust than she was in the face of her pride.

But how absurd to be made to feel so insecure by such an incident! And why? And ought she to tell her husband, or Claire? No, insults were best kept hidden.

She got to sleep after an hour of agitation, and of weariness, and she did not wake till Pollock brought her her morning tea.

“A happy new year, madam.”

She was half awake and a little bewildered. The new year? O, yes. And of course it was going to be happy. Her dance had been a delightful success, but why had that blackguard boy kissed her?

PART III
DOOMSDAY

XXI

1



T was a September night, and a moon was shining, and Arnold Furze went out into the orchard, though why he went there he did not know. Perhaps he went because the shadows drew him, and the obscure solitudes under the old trees, and perhaps because he would be so very much alone there with his own terrible loneliness.

It was seven days since her death, seven days of a numb sort of bewilderment and of an inexpressible anguish, of things dimly realized in the midst of the day's inevitable work. Beasts have to be looked to and cows milked even when a woman is lying dead. He had gone dully through the familiar routine, and yet finding in it a poignant strangeness, an almost meaningless futility. And only a week ago she had helped him to milk those cows.

After supper on this September night the full realization of all that her death meant to him seemed to break like that rain cloud on the day when she had come to him wet and laughing through Bean Acres. And what a death, so wanton and so preventible! A half-intoxicated road-hog week-ending along the Hastings road on a Saturday evening, and Rose, cycling back from Carslake and caught where the Melhurst and Rotherbridge roads met. She had died the same night, died in her man's arms, after two years or so of happy comradeship. And Furze! Furze had looked at her lying dead, and then—with a perfectly white face—had hunted out his old service-revolver and loaded it. He had gone out of the house and half-way up the road to Carslake with the intention of shooting the drunken swine who had killed his wife. The fellow, who had put up at "The George," and was drinking hard, had assured everybody that the smash had been no fault of his—But half-way up the road Furze had faltered and turned back. It was as though his dead wife had called him—"Don't touch the poor sot, Jack; life is not worth it." He had sat down in a dry ditch and had played with the pistol—no,—not that! No cowardliness of that sort. She had never shown any cowardice.

Now—he was alone. He found himself leaning against an old apple tree whose trunk forked about four feet from the ground, and in this fork his body came to rest. He hung there, staring at the moon through the foliage.

He faced his loneliness as he faced the moon. It came to him in splintered patches like the light through the foliage, little—broken spasms of consciousness, separate yet part of the same aliveness. The presence of her had passed. When he went back to the house there would be no one to whom he could cry “Girl.” And if he called there would be no answer. One of his shirts that she had been mending still lay neatly folded on the sofa, and he had left it there. And gone were all these other intimate breathings, the warmth and the softness and the sweet smell of her, and the way she would draw his head down on to her shoulder.

Damn it,—he could not sleep.

And when he did sleep he woke up like a little, lonely, boy crying for his mother. O, and more than that. Like a man whose body had been torn open. The heart of him had gone, or had turned to water.

He felt desolate, bitter, rather helpless.

In those two years they had gone through so much together. She had saved his pride in his job, his good temper, those trees in Gore Wood. He had re-christened it “Rose Wood,” and Rose Wood it would remain. Moreover she had saved his money, those precious pounds wrung from the soil, and had cheered him and worked with him through a bad year. Brave, gracious, practical Rose. He felt now that she had gone—that he could not sow his winter corn. Let the seed stay in the bin. And it hurt him to milk the cows whose udders had been emptied by her hands.

But what a tragedy,—his tragedy!

The year had been a good one; they had bought a new bedroom carpet, a new seed drill and other machinery; the living-room and Mrs. Damaris’s parlour had been papered and painted. And they had decided to have a child. Their child had been conceived two months ago. The sot in the car had killed that also.

Furze felt bitter, though bitterness salves no wound, and he knew it. But he wanted to feel bitter, because—somehow—he wanted to get back at fate, at the thing—whatever it was—behind the phenomenon of consciousness—that had struck at him. He wanted to strike back, to throw his bomb back at circumstance or God or the Devil, just as in the war he had thrown his shells at the Germans. Childish—perhaps, but at times there is a relief in childishness. Without it a man may go mad or become religious.

Cinderella a pale dream, Bobbo dead, Rose dead! What had he left but the farm, “Doomsday”? By God, “Doomsday” was a good name for it. Why not make it his doom, a battlefield upon which to fight the god of all cussedness and interference? Man’s eternal fight. To succeed, to get goods

and money, to be able to toss a bad halfpenny in Nature's face, and cock his head and mock at her. "Ha—you She-dog, back to your kennel. I'm master; the man is master."

It seemed to him that it was necessary for a tiller of the soil to be hard. He knew that he was going to be very lonely. While Rose was with him he had never felt hard.

"O,—my dear," he thought, and hung in the fork of the apple tree like a man on a cross.

Christ's cross. And Christ had forgiven. Yes, but Golgotha had been something of a stage. Old Peter—now! Ready to strike with a sword. And circumstance had sent a lying, swinish sot in the chariot of progress to drive over his love and his happiness. Ha, in the old British days he would have driven a spear through the charioteer's belly. But these were not the old British days, but days of sensibility and formal snivellings.

Furze felt weary. Grief may be a gentle weariness, but bitterness exhausts like a scorching sun.

He raised himself from the fork of the tree. He would go to bed.

But that bed,—her bed.

He slept on the sofa, with the shirt, that she had mended, under his head.

2

The work on a farm goes on. Beasts have to be fed and watered, cows milked, the fields ploughed, roots pulled and clamped. The orchard was full of apples, and Rose had had her eyes upon those apples. She had meant to gather most of them herself and to store the best keepers in one of the attics so that they should fetch a better price towards Christmas. So Furze got up before dawn, and added apple gathering to the sorrowful heaviness of the day, for Rose would have picked those apples, and he would pick them for her.

In the dusk—at the end of a long day—he would hear apples falling in the orchard, with an occasional soft thud upon the grass. It was like a blow struck upon his heart. He would go on gathering fruit until he could not see. What did it matter? He could not sleep as he had slept beside his wife.

The ragwort was all gold; the bracken stood shoulder high, and in the hedges the brambles were studded with black fruit. O, these September days, and the early days of October, still and golden, with mist in the mornings and the grass and hedgerows all grey with dew. Beautiful sweet moisture,—and in his heart was a sound of wailing. And Will's wife came up to the

house wearing that same old cap, with her sly eyes and her red-tipped nose. Her activities mocked him. He felt that he could not touch the food that her nasty little shiny red hands had fingered; nor could he bear her to touch what Rose had touched. He sent her away. He would go back to the old days of three years ago, and rub along like a backwoodsman, eating any sort of food, sleeping between blankets, shaving twice a week. What did it matter? The sweetness had gone out of his life. He was nothing but a fighter, sweaty and hot and grim, with his hand on Nature's throat while her claws tore at his belly.

There were happenings that made him laugh strange laughter. To him one day when he was up an apple tree came a precise and snuffy little old man in a grey suit. The little man stood under the apple trees, and looked up at Furze with eyes as blue and as cold as a seagull's.

Furze listened to him, an apple in his hand.

The road-hog had been censured at the inquest. Yes, certainly. The police should have taken up the case. Manslaughter—obviously. But had not Mr. Furze considered the question of a civil action.

“How so?” asked the man in the tree.

“I presume, sir,—that your wife—the wife of a working farmer——.”

“You mean—she was of use to me?”

“Quite so. You have been deprived—most cruelly deprived of the services of your wife.”

“True. She helped with the milking, and made butter, and did the housework.”

“Obviously a case for damages, most ample compensation. A certainty, sir.”

“You mean—that I am to get damages from a drunken cad—for the death of my wife?”

The little man tilted his head and looked prim.

“Sentiment apart, a most gross case. The fellow is a man of some substance. In fact—we might not have to take the matter into court. A little pressure——.”

The man in the tree was silent. His silence lasted a quarter of a minute. Then the apple in his hand smashed itself on the ground at the little man's feet.

Sometimes in the evening Furze would open his piano and try to play it, but there were some of Rose's songs on the top of the piano, and he would end by sitting hunched up and silent on the chair. Music,—sweet sounds,—

her voice! A night came—when in a moment of savage pain—he brought a fist down upon the keys, and things broke. Music and rhythm indeed, and a voice that sang in his dreams! He went out into Mrs. Damaris’s garden and wept.

People talked about him. Mrs. Sarah started the gossip, because he had turned her out of the house.

“I wouldn’t go nigh the place,—no, not if he were to go down on his knees to me. It’s my belief he’s gone queer in his head.”

Other people noticed the change in him, though Will spoke up for his master.

“Powerful fond of her he was. And she were a good wife. No terrifyin’ tongue. Maybe a man may be allowed to grieve——.”

He shut his wife up.

“You ain’t no sense. Mrs. Furze was a woman as a man would miss. You shut that b——y mouth o’ yourn.”

Tradesmen at Carslake would see Furze come into their shops on Saturday evenings, carrying an old haversack, and looking as though he had lost something and would thank no one for trying to find it for him. He had lost his smartness. It was obvious that he did not bother because he did not care. What the use of a new clean collar when there was no one to see it, at least no one who mattered?

Now and again old Hesketh Viner came to the farm. He was growing very feeble, and Furze was gentle to old Viner. They had not much to say to each other, but would sit in a couple of chairs before the fire—if there was a fire—and smoke and drop occasional remarks to each other. Their silences were pregnant.

“Life’s a funny business, my dear fellow.”

Furze’s face suggested that it was a very grim one.

“It seems a damned silly business at times, sir. One wonders why it was in the war one was afraid of dying.”

Now and again he gathered little fragments of news of Cinderella. She came once or twice a year to Cinder Town, drove her car down, but stopped only two or three days. It appeared that Mrs. Fream was a very busy young woman, though what she was busy about Arnold could not imagine. No, she had no children, but a house full of servants. Wealthy—yes—very. Old Hesketh supposed that Mary had many social duties; both his daughters appeared to have many social duties. Leslie Biddulph, one of his sons-in-law, was nursing a suburban constituency, and Clare was assisting with the

bottle. Yes, he and Mrs. Charlotte had been to stay with the Freams, but had not enjoyed the visit. Old Viner did not say so, but Furze gathered that the Fream household had not suited Mary's father. It had been altogether too busy and big for him! too full of meaningless activities.

But it seemed that Mary had everything that should make her happy.

Furze thought of her sometimes, especially if he happened to be near Rose Wood. And he would think of her just a little scornfully, and bow his head in memory of the other woman.

Strangely enough Furze was more in Mary's thoughts than she was in his. She had a curious grudge against him, a little—sore—tender spot under her new smart serenity. She had heard that poor Arnold had lost his waitress. What an unlucky fellow he was! Or should she consider it fortunate? And there had been no children.

She would allow herself to wonder what the man of the hay-cock was making of life. Did he still love the farm, and that deplorably picturesque old house?

For it had a picturesqueness, something that haunted her, something that was a little frightening. It sat there among its woods and fields, and watched and waited, like a blind-eyed old woman who could cast a spell.

3

Then the winter came, and Furze seemed to grow thinner and more hard. He went about his work with a deliberate and silent sombreness, like a beast coming out and going in, shaggy looking, austere, stodging through the mud and the muck of the byres, with rain upon his face, and the north wind in his eyes.

When the darkness shut him in, and the beasts had been milked and fed, and there was nothing more for him to do, he sat and thought many thoughts before the fire. Too much loneliness may mean too much thinking. Also,—his working bench had come back into the living-room, and he would patch boots and mend harness, and sharpen tools, and do some desultory carpentering. Or he would go out into the wood lodge and hang up a lantern and saw wood, laying log after log upon the sawing-stool, his head bent, his moving arm opening and shutting a patch of light upon the lodge wall. Sometimes a restlessness would possess him, and he would wander along the wet dark roads,—but there were motors here, rushing past in the darkness, splashing up mud, with the blinding arrogance of their great eyes. Once, when one of these cars drove him nearly into a ditch, he picked up a

stone from a heap of road metal and threw it. He could not hear a car without feeling a dull anger glowing in him.

Every day was much like every other day, save that one was more wet than another, or more windy, or there seemed more mud about. It was a wet winter, with one short spell of frost before Christmas, and the sun invisible for days on end. A grey sky, pressing low, seemed to rest on the tops of the beeches of Beech Ho. The farm tracks were ruddy quagmires; the brook overflowed the Long Meadow, and in the marshes below Rotherbridge the floods were out.

Furze's heavy boots were caked with clay. He dried them in front of the fire at night, and cleaned and greased them once a week. Days passed without his getting out of his working clothes into one of the suits that his wife used to fold and put away in the camphored chest of drawers. He went about the farm in the wet weather with a sack over his shoulders. The house seemed likely to become the house of a sloven, or rather—the home of a man who had cared too much and who now could not bother to care at all, save that Mrs. Damaris's parlour was left to the dust, and that the big bedroom above it was never used by him. He kept it locked. It remained just as she had left it, with the same sheets on the bed, and her clothes hanging in the cupboard, and her shoes ranged under the dressing-table. A lace cap hung on the mirror; her ebony hairbrushes and comb lay on the table, and hanging from a hook on the door—and half hidden by a rose-coloured dressing-jacket was the yellow jumper she had worn that day when she had come to him through the rain. Pathetic patch of colour, a little faded now, and frayed at the cuffs, for she had used it at her work, but vivid as ever as a piece of emotional colour.

Furze entered this room once a week,—on a Sunday, and using an old silk handkerchief, brushed the dust from her shoes, and from the brushes and mirror, and looked at her clothes, and laid a hand gently upon her pillow. There was no doubt about his being in danger of becoming an eccentric sort of person, a man of one idea, and of one set mood that was like the winter sky, and of the same quality of sombre greyness. He had nothing in his life but work, and he asked for nothing else but work. Occasionally he attended Carslake market, or drove a wagon to the station. He smoked many pipes, but drank no liquor. The labour of the farm sufficed him, the daily round, the stodging through the mud, the carting out of muck and the carting in of fuel, contact with his beasts. He did not raise his eyes above the level of his work, for there seemed nothing else to which he could raise them. He asked to come in tired at night and to be able to sleep.

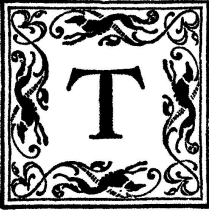
Sometimes when he was shaving he would look at himself a little curiously in the mirror. Was this the man who had hoped so much, and who had been so happy? Yes, and without realizing the full and pleasant flavour of his happiness. He had a few grey hairs over his temples; he looked shaggy; the barber up at Carslake saw him perhaps once in two months. And there were times when his face seemed to be the face of another man, of a stranger.

How old was he? How long was life going on? But why ask such a question? His life was the farm, and farms went on for ever and ever, and like Time with a scythe, man bent to the toil till his teeth fell from him, and his back became bowed and rigid. Years hence he might be an old man, mumping through the mud, and pushing a hoe in the same field, and looking at trees and grass that had not changed.

Life, the life of the soil went on, and man was carried with it like a piece of clay on a wheel.

XXII

1



THE GARDEN was full of moths, and the uses of moths are various. They provide men with nice similes; they lay eggs in his clothes, and breed caterpillars for his fruit trees, and they flutter at night in at his windows, or dance in the glare of his headlights.

Mrs. Fream had ordained a moth-party. It happened on a warm night in September. Electricians had run wires about the Hill House garden, and little lights glowed among the bushes and the trees, and outlined the paths, so that the lawns were dark spaces where the human moths fluttered up and down. The dancing faun had a silver star on his forehead. The fountain playing above the lily pool had lights ingeniously arranged about it, so that it threw drops of liquid silver and gold. Between the dances people wandered out, the men strangely dim and part of the darkness, the women like ghosts, moths, or moving flowers, just as it pleased your fancy.

Said someone to a friend—"These shows must cost Fream a pretty penny."

"His wife—you know. Charming extravagance."

"And poor Percival pays."

"My dear, he likes it. It is that sort of man's only hobby."

Chairs placed à deux gave rise to many conversations, but the darkness was elusive and might be treacherous. Clare Biddulph had a venerable young person in tow, one of those men of affairs who could be of great use to Leslie, and she intended to use him, and the venerable person—having a quick understanding and a nice sense of humour—knew that he was to be used. When a pretty woman dances with you twice, and you are sixty-five! Well,—why not? Politics was a great game; he had manipulated people, and had suffered manipulation.

"I dare say that I can get Newbury to speak for your husband——."

"Really delightful of you."

"O, not at all. I shall see Newbury to-morrow. By the way,—there is a certain little phenomenon that piques me. Wonder if you have noticed it?"

Clare's alert and graceful head showed against a hanging light.

"Physical or otherwise?"

"Up there, in a line with that cypress. If we go straight on we shall pass close to it."

Below the terrace wall ran a broad herbaceous border and a grass path, and as the two approached the end of the path the Venerable extended a shadowy hand.

"Up there." She saw a little red dot in the darkness, slightly to one side of the black spire of a cypress, and glowing in the centre of a something that was more substantial than the September sky. They surveyed it, and turned and walked a little way in silence.

"What children! But what did you make of it, dear lady?"

"The red end of a cigar."

"Exactly. With the ash knocked off it. Isn't there some sort of pepper-pot or garden house——?"

"A brick belvedere with a window. One each end of the terrace, you know."

The venerable person looked at the stars.

"A man—all alone—smoking a cigar—and leaning out of the window of a brick pepper-pot. I have taken this walk with three different partners, and each time I have seen that red dot up there. Once—not quite so bright; half an inch of ash on the cigar. Now—why should one be curious?"

"Mischievously curious?"

"Exactly. In one's old age—my dear lady—one grows more cunning, and also more mischievous. A phase of second childhood,—what?"

"It means that you will always be young."

"Very charming of you. But—curiosity——."

"Asks to be satisfied——."

"But I hear the band."

"My next partner can remain unsatisfied."

"Is that fair?"

"It is—my husband."

"O,—well——! So we go up to the terrace?"

"And along it to the belvedere."

"All—to discover—who a man is—all alone—smoking cigars—for quite two hours. It may be a chauffeur."

“Do chauffeurs smoke cigars? Even in these days——!”

“Everything is possible to progress.”

They went, ascending a flight of steps and moving over the velvet pile of a grass path, they came to the little brick pepper-pot, and paused, with the scent of a cigar drifting to them. The doorway of the belvidere was opposite the narrow window, and something obscured the grey panel.

“I suppose,” said the venerable person with a voice that addressed both Mrs. Biddulph and the September night, “there must be a fine view from there. The park—and the Surrey hills in the distance.”

“Yes, the view is really quite good—on a clear day.”

“Nice idea—that—framing a view in a window. So that one does not see too much.”

“Life—consists—of not seeing too much.”

“Shall we say—seeing what you want to see. That gazebo,—and the stars over the park trees. It intrigues me.”

He made a mischievous movement towards the doorway of the belvidere, and a man came out. The height and the narrowness of him were distinctive. A little red dot glowed in the lower third of the dim flatness of his face.

“Sorry, sir,” said the venerable person.

The darkness hid a little pucker of speculation on Clare’s forehead.

“It’s you, Val!”

He stood there in silence, half turned towards the venerable person.

“Lots of stars to-night.”

“The celestial electricians. It is my host—I think?”

“That’s so,” said Fream in a voice that was curiously dead.

The lady of Hill House danced, but she took care to see that all her guests had partners. She was an admirable hostess, beautifully gowned, moving with an air of languid serenity, pleasantly sure of herself. She had grown more like her sister, and it is possible that she had found in Clare social features that were of value and worthy of imitation. But she was dusky and a little mysterious where Clare was all pale gold and calmly vivid. Even when she employed sarcasm—and she had learnt to employ it—it suggested a red damask rose exuding a cold drop of dew from its petals. Her air of languor gave her time to set herself in a proper aspect to meet all

happenings, yet a part of her languor was physical as well as mental. She had grown a little bored with life, but would not allow it, and to prove the fallaciousness of the feeling she created new extravagances.

Yet competition in Weyfleet had ceased, the kind of competition that the Freams provoked. Easily they were supreme in the matter of motor-cars and parties, and in all the pleasant pomps of the dinner-table, and the ballroom. Mary wore more dresses than any other woman in the place, and wore them more convincingly. All her details were worthy of consideration. When she went to Ranelagh, or Epsom, or Goodwood, other women gave her those quick, instant glances, and any enmity that was in them fell back baffled. Even at Ascot she was a noticeable woman. She had done her duty to her grandee.

Naturally she had inspired tenderness. A succession of men had made love to her, but had found Mrs. Fream disappointingly careful. Almost she behaved like a prude. She had put the woman in herself to sleep, and was at great pains to make sure that the obstreperous infant should not wake up and squeal for the moon. A comfortable cushion on the earth was worth many moons. She cherished her security, and wore it as a girdle of chastity. Her grandee—poor fellow—had nothing to complain of. She looked the male world in the face, and did not blink an eyelid.

Clare praised her.

“She has nous. She is not going to be fooled off her perch.”

Leslie—the sentimentalist—wondered what Fream got out of it. A rose without a perfume—what!

“Silly. She transmutes his money into Cody. He pours in the crude stuff and she is like Grasse. Is there any other place that smells like Grasse?”

Leslie, with a stare at the butter dish, remarked that Fream was not making quite so much money these days.

“Touched one or two slippery things.”

“He can afford it. The pile is there.”

Biddulph glanced at the clock.

“Damn them, they are always messing these trains about. O, the pile—yes. May be made of cannon-balls. All right if you don’t start picking balls out of the bottom of the pile. Financial stability is rather like that. Ta-ta, old thing; I must scoot.”

That night Mrs. Fream wore rose and silver brocade; she carried a fan—a white plummy thing—and used it, which was remembered against her as a piece of affectation. The days of fans were dead. Your emancipated woman

has no need of fans and their tricksies. But Mrs. Fream made play with her fan, and did it very prettily, and the languor of its movements made one young man angry and another adoring.

“Look at her——! You’d think——.”

“Not a bit of it. With such a woman you don’t think,—you feel.”

“Try it—my dear chap. She looks like a rose—and isn’t.”

The adoring one was an artist. He was overjoyed with the way she had posed herself in the hall, with an old oak armoire for a background, and that clouding fan moving with a white languor against the rose and silver of her dress.

“I’d like to paint her—just there,” he thought.

He waited until he could go and tell her so, and she smiled, and looked at him with a dark and virginal tranquillity.

“Really.”

Her voice ran slowly like honey. She was the finished product, and many worker bees had made her what she was.

“I’m serious,” said he. “You would go into the Academy like a conqueress. Of course it is a conventional show.”

“I love conventional shows. They soothe me.”

“Well—may I paint you?”

Her brown eyes seemed to be searching for somebody.

“I should love it. I will ask my husband.”

“Damn your husband,” was the painter man’s inward response.

3

Mr. Percival Fream and his affairs were talked of in the train. It was said by those who claimed the superior knowledge of secret authority that Fream and Gaiter had joined forces. Everybody in the city knew Samuel Gaiter with his face like the face of a sandy-coloured cat, and his smile and his reputation, and his daily lunch at a particular hotel with a fair young woman on Mondays and Wednesdays, and a dark one on Tuesdays and Thursdays. With these two financial luminaries combining to form a double star new exploitations were to be expected. Gaiter was one of the little gods of oil, though he would exploit anything from a new typewriter to asphalt, and flutter country parsonages and credulous maiden ladies. But his reputation was very sound, as far as it went. He served on hospital boards, and financed a convalescent home for children.

Fream financed a wife. Mary was as ignorant of his affairs as he was of anything outside the money market; she drew cheques and she could do that very nicely. Val's ignorance had ceased to astonish her, as had his various ineptitudes. They were part of the man; they threw the positive part of him into high relief; there was not a single game that he could play without looking awkward. His dancing was impossible. Imagine a lamp post fox-trotting! So long as he remained still, and did nothing and said nothing he had a rigid impressiveness. He drove a car very badly; he had a library full of books and never looked inside them; his garden had exquisite features and he thought that standard roses just grew like that. Sometimes he would wander round his rock garden and look at the alpiners and read the labels, but he found many of the names quite unpronounceable. He knew an oak and elm when he saw them but he called poplars willows—and willows poplars. His head-gardener had the most extraordinary contempt for him. There were men who allowed themselves to play golf with Fream because they were very sure of winning a five-pound note.

In his big office they called him the Sphinx. He was very punctual. The lift carried him up to the first floor at much the same hour each morning; he walked along the spacious corridor with its mosaic floor and its marble veneered walls, and entered his private room and found his secretary waiting. Tyson was a bright lad, very polite to Fream in his presence, but wholly irreverent behind his back. He called Fream "sir," and was careful to take his hat and coat, and to behave like a lackey, but like a lackey's his loyalty ceased on the other side of the door.

Fream may have suspected this. He was a more intelligent creature when he breathed in that big and solidly furnished room, and sat in his padded chair; and for the last three months he had been opening his own letters. Tyson was a little annoyed about it. "The boss is getting fussy." At all events there were many letters the interior of which remained unknown to Harold Tyson. Also he was allowed to be less vicariously conversational over the telephone, and Fream wrote some of his own letters without dictating them to his secretary.

Always inarticulate and monosyllabic he grew more so. He smoked incessantly; his room reeked of stale cigar-smoke. Also, there were days when he showed a funny temper. Tyson was both peeved and anxious. You may dislike a man, and miswish his financial schemes, and at the same time have no desire to lose a comfortable billet. Fream's irritability worried his secretary. It was not a reassuring symptom.

In the evening he appeared at dinner, all black and white, and meticulously starched. Even his manner appeared to be more stiffly

starched. He and Mary had reduced the carrying of long silences to a fine art, and his silences grew longer. He could talk interestedly of nothing but money, and the things that his money provided, and even a woman cannot talk for ever of her purchases. She noticed that he spent more of the evening alone in the library; he smoked there, and she supposed that he read his papers, while she sat in the drawing-room with a novel and the illustrated magazines. She was a woman who never had a needle in her hand, and why should she when she had Pollock to do everything. She yawned a good deal, and went to bed at ten, unless she had a bridge party or was going out to one.

But one night she surprised herself in surprising him. She had come in late after an evening with the Biddulphs, and thinking that Fream had gone to bed she turned into the library to get a book. The lights were off, but the fire was burning. She saw him sitting all hunched up before the fire with his hands over his face.

A sudden, vague compunction stirred in her. Also she was surprised that he had not heard her open the door. Perhaps he was asleep?

“Val, is anything the matter?”

He gave a sort of jerk and dropped his hands.

“Hallo——”

“You are not ill——?”

He seemed to straighten himself up from the waist.

“No,—just doing a bit of thinking. Enjoyed yourself?”

She stood beside him for a moment.

“Val, you would tell me if you were ill?”

“Of course, my dear——”

She had the feeling that he was waiting for her to go, and that she had interrupted some complex piece of cerebration connected with the mysteries of finance.

“Clare has had a letter from ‘Green Shutters.’ ”

“O.”

“Father is not very well. Bronchitis or something.”

“Sorry. Perhaps you will want to go down there. Take ‘Phœbus’ and the man.”

“I might. Thank you, Val. Good night.”

“Good night.”

She had a last glimpse of him sitting stiffly there before the fire.

How was she to guess that she had put the shears to the head of her poor Samson?

Or—rather—it was he who had put the shears into the hands of her youth. He was blind, though this blindness had come slowly like a creeping paralysis, and gradually he had been made to realize that he could not see things as he had been accustomed to see them. Simply because a little artery had burst, and the oozing blood had forced its way among the fibres of his self-confidence and was destroying it, the confidence that had enabled him to take risks successfully. He had lost his intuitive touch.

That—to him—had been the beginning of it, moods of vacillation, an inability to make up his mind, a desire to play for safety. Yet vanity urges a man on. He had made himself take risks, rush into speculative industrial schemes, and had found himself floundering. He had been frightened.

Fear is humiliating. He had reacted against it. Moreover, the making of money was his life, his one method of self-expression, and for him to allow that the craft and the cunning had gone from him was to accept dumbness. He had a dread of being completely despised by his wife, and the trophies won in the stadium of finance had—it seemed to him—saved him from complete contempt. He was fond of Mary, and was unable to express his fondness; he could not let himself go, because of his fatal incapacity and its shame. He was stiff and self-conscious with her. But to surrender his place in the money market? That would mean that the last shred of his vanity had fallen from him.

His passion to acquire and to possess was as strong as ever though the vision that had guided it was failing. It had made him generous to his wife, and yet curiously grudging as to the larger issue. He had made no settlement in her favour, and did not wish to make one, for by retaining everything in his own name he retained a feeling of control. The ship was his, and she sailed in it luxuriously.

Each quarter he drew a cheque and paid it into her private account. He gave her presents, but he was careful not to give her financial independence. There was no need for it. He wished to remain the emperor, the god on Olympus showering gold, though he had not the power to appear before his Leda as a man.

His association with the venerable yet sandy-headed Gaiter was his campaign of Athens against Syracuse, but like the Athenians he did not foresee the fatal quarries. Or to put it in Elizabethan language, he was fitting out his Armada, and packing into it the last of his self-confidence. It was to

be the greatest of his expeditions. Afraid of taking risks? Not he. He had set sail to conquer or to reconquer his faith in himself, a sombre grandee, an admiral of Spain driving his galleons into the grey northern seas.

XXIII

1



LD HESKETH VINER lay dying.

Like Charles II he had been an unconscionable time about it, and had said as much to the little old comrade who sat beside his bed and kept alight the very small fire in the very small grate.

“Sorry to give you all this trouble, my dear.”

“Trouble—Hesketh!”

Mrs. Charlotte loved him as she had never loved him before, the poor grey stubble on his poor old chin, his hands with their blue and swollen veins, his grey and untidy head, his panting mouth. She was not an emotional woman. She sat there in that little stuffy and overheated room, while the waters of death mounted slowly to her comrade’s chin, and his breathing grew more tragic and ineffectual. The end was inevitable and she knew it, and she knew that so far as she was concerned it was the end of everything.

The lamp was turned low and she sat in the shadowland like a little old child on the edge of unknown darkneses. How strangely things happened! What did life mean? Children; years of quiet dullness and of self denial; that long, thin figure propped against the pillows? She had moments of bewilderment. It was the figure on the bed that mattered. Children might hurt you, desert you, fail you at critical moments,—but that was life, and this was death.

She leaned forward and laid a hand on one of his.

“They promised to be back to-morrow.”

His hurried and shallow breathing ceased for a moment.

“Would you like me to send a telegram?”

His fingers closed on hers.

“Don’t bother. Won’t spoil pleasure.—Just you and I—Carrie—you know.”

So they sat, holding hands, she content that it should be so, and that no one should matter to him as she did. She felt an exultation that overflowed

all bitterness and sorrow; he was going and very soon she would follow after him; he had been very kind to her—always.

His fingers were moving. He had her wedding ring between his thumb and first finger; it was worn very thin now.

“Same ring. What a long time—— Remember——?”

She bent her head.

“Yes, nearly fifty years, Hesketh.”

“All in white—— You looked lovely, my dear. See it all again. Remember—the white satin slipper old John tied to the handle of the carriage?”

“I remember.”

“Great days,” he said—and sighed. “Been very happy.”

Somewhere in the house below them a bell burred softly. She drew her hand from his with a slow and caressing movement, and rose.

“It must be—— I’ll go.”

She went to the head of the stairs and called.

“Nellie,—is that—the children?”

A voice answered her.

“No,—dear, Mr. Furze.”

She returned to the room and to her chair, and placed her hand again in his, and felt mortified and proud and jealous for him.

“Mr. Furze came to inquire.”

“A good fellow. Pity—Mary—hadn’t the heart, my dear. Still—still——”

“Youth goes its way,” said she. “One doesn’t understand—what one was—till one grows old,—Hesketh.”

He drew a deeper breath.

“No consequence—— You here—— Always strangers—everybody—but one or two.”

Below, under the porch, Furze and Cousin Nellie were talking. He had brought up a can of the evening’s milk. “Thought he might need it.” The night was frosty, and there was rime on the grass, and behind and above Furze’s head the sky was full of stars. To the little woman looking up at him he seemed surrounded by stars.

“It won’t be long now.”

He was turning away.

“They are here—I suppose.”

“No. Went back for two nights,—a dance. Just time to crowd it in, you know.”

She spoke without bitterness, as though she neither accused nor explained, but stated facts; or as though she were playing “patience” and taking cards from the pack of life and laying them upon the table.

“A dance——!”

“He wanted them to go. Things seemed different with him yesterday. You know how wood ashes glow and grow grey.—The wind up the chimney. He began to grow very grey when they had gone.”

“He did not think they would go.”

“Perhaps.”

“Children——!” said he, and she saw his big shoulders make a movement of scorn.

“But they come back to-morrow——”

“O,—yes—to-morrow! With some people it is always to-morrow. And to-morrow can only be what you have made to-day.—Good night, Miss Nellie.”

“Good night.”

2

When the Freams’ car pulled up outside “Green Shutters” the curtains were drawn, for Captain Viner had been dead some hours. The two women in the saloon, wrapped up in furs, and each with a foot-warmer under her feet, waited for the chauffeur to open the door. The man’s ears were blue.

Clare looked steadily at the curtained windows, but Mary, having glanced at them once, did not look again.

“It must have happened——”

“O,—my dear——!”

“But the doctor man was so positive.”

Their mother was waiting for them in the sitting-room. She sat in front of the fire, wearing the black dress that she wore on Sundays; she did not rise. Her face was both triumphant and austere; the little figure had a dignity; she received these two women who were her daughters and made them feel that they had never known what their mother knew, and that in some way she greatly despised them.

Clare said nothing, but sat down and unfastened her fur coat. It was Mary who faltered, and who would have kissed Mrs. Charlotte.

“O,—mother——”

But she did not kiss her, for Mrs. Viner remained sitting very straight, with her hands in her lap, and her eyes very bright in her birdlike face. She suggested immense serenity, and little old lady enthroned, very wise, very sad, and yet very happy. These unwise virgins were at her feet; she was without envy or anger.

“Your father died very peacefully in the night. I was with him. It was as it should be.”

She looked at them both.

“You had better take off your coats.”

They took them off like a couple of children.

“Perhaps—you would like to go upstairs. He looks so very peaceful. I will ask Cousin Nellie to send your car and the luggage up to the ‘George’ at Carslake. They will have rooms there.”

Clare and Mary went up to look at Captain Viner lying dead in his bed, while their mother remained by the fire. Old Viner had a faint smile on his thin face. His chin was all grey stubble.

Clare stood at the foot of the bed.

“I suppose they will shave him.”

Mary gave a queer cry, and was on her knees, with her face against the sheet that covered her father.

“O—don’t——!”

“My dear, it looked rather selfish of us.—I’m sorry.—But that fool of a doctor——”

“It was selfish.—Beastly selfish.—Let’s be honest.”

Furze had a load of logs to deliver at “Simla.” Oak, and ash and chestnut. He sawed them at night during the long winter evenings; it gave him something to do; it helped him to sleep; it earned him a little money. If Rose had been alive he would not have been sawing wood at ten o’clock after a long day’s work, but he seemed to have no heart in him to grow tired. It went on beating with the same dogged, deliberate, sombre rhythm; it had nothing to quicken it, or to bid it pause. He was made of iron. His head and face were the colour of old plough chains. He felt stronger than he had ever

been, fatally and tragically strong with the dull strength of a man who is lonely, and who hopes for nothing. His day was like the day of a slow and plodding beast.

He had one of the grey horses between the shafts. Even before starting the wheels of the cart had been caked with dry and yellow mud, and in the farm lane they gathered more mud, for the ground was rotten after a sudden thaw. Furze's boots were all mud, wet below, dry and hard above. He walked beside the grey horse, lacking a collar, wearing an old army jerkin over his coat, his worn breeches spotted with clay and grease, his leggings much the same colour as his boots. He walked heavily, but with a suggestion of power. When he came to the turning into the main road he checked the grey horse to let a car go by.

The car slowed up two hundred yards down the road, and swung to the right up the black ramp of the cinder track. It was waiting outside "Green Shutters" when Furze came along with his cart. He knew to whom the car belonged, and why it was there. It had brought Mrs. Fream down from Carslake. She had been over half the country in search of white flowers, those posthumous tributes to her father for which her husband paid. She had gone into "Green Shutters" with an armful of lilies and narcissi and white carnations and had laid them on the table by the window, and the smell of them had filled the overheated little room.

Mrs. Charlotte was mending a pair of black gloves. She saw Mrs. Fream sit down at the table, and begin to sort out the flowers on a spread newspaper. Mary's whim was to arrange them herself. Captain Viner was to be buried in Carslake cemetery on the afternoon of to-morrow. Clare Biddulph had returned to Weyfleet by train, but she was coming down with Leslie for the funeral.

Mrs. Charlotte noticed that Mary had paused in her arranging of the flowers. She was looking out of the window, holding five white carnations in her left hand, and a single flower in her right. Furze and his wood-cart were passing on their way to Colonel Sykes; she saw the familiar figure walking at the horse's head; she thought that it looked shabbier and shaggier, but much the same as she remembered it. She went on with the arranging of her flowers, but the man and his cart had come between her and her work, and her glances kept wandering in the direction of Colonel Sykes' fence. Furze had opened the gate, and was preparing to back the cart into the entry and to shoot the logs into the drive. Colonel Sykes objected to the tearing up of his gravel, and a handy man with a wheelbarrow would clear the pile of logs into the shed at the back of the bungalow.

Mary put down her spray of flowers.

“May I stay to tea, mother?”

“Of course, my dear.”

“There is no need to keep Randall waiting. I will send him back; he can bring the car down later.”

She rose, and at the back of the impulse that moved her lay a whole shadow-world of impending self-consciousness. She said to herself that it was quite unnecessary to keep the chauffeur waiting out there in the cold. The rawness of the day made it allowable for her to put on her musquash coat even to go as far as the gate and give Randall his orders. The coincidence was not fortuitous. Her self-love was in control, though had she been challenged with it she would have denied it hotly. She was Mrs. Fream of Hill House, very much a young woman of the world in a two hundred guinea coat. Your great lady has every right to appear magnanimous.

The big car moved off just as Furze was righting his cart. He drew clear of the gate, went to shut it, and returning to his horse's head, saw Mary standing at that other gate. Her difference was as apparent to him as a coat of new paint on a wagon.

He had to pass her. It was not that he minded the passing of her, but there was a part of him that resented her being there. He had a flair for the significance of that nice posture of hers. Loneliness and suffering may dull a man, but they may also make him amazingly sensitive and quick to sense an atmosphere. He felt fierce. He divined the self-love waiting at that other gate.

But all calculated situations are relative and apt to be altered by the incalculable human factor. She did speak to him, but her voice was not the voice she had expected to hear.

“Mr. Furze——”

He stopped his horse, and came across to her. He did not take off his hat. His eyes looked very steady and dark under the brim of it. They watched her.

“You have been so good to my father——”

He had nothing to say. He looked at her and was silent. Then his eyes went to the upper window where the curtains were drawn. He took off his hat deliberately, and just as deliberately replaced it.

And she? She was trembling. All that nice and expensive worldliness, the perfect sheath of her material smartness was no better than an apron of beads. She felt the quivering of them about her loins. Mrs. Fream of Hill House, with her Weyfleet voice and her experienced languor and her furs and her shingled head! She was most poignantly conscious of him the man,

the very elemental rudeness of him, that tanned throat, the mouth that had grown harder, the fierce strangeness of the eyes, the two new furrows between the eyebrows. He looked rougher. He had not shaved; his older leather jerkin lacked a button; his breeches were stained, his boots filthy.

“I’m sorry,” was all that he said.

He went back to his horse and cart as though she did not matter to him, because it was quite impossible for him to matter to her. The peasant and the fine lady! He had given her a glance of sombre insolence. The muddy wheels revolved. His figure looked stubborn and large beside the grey horse. They disappeared down the cinder track.

“How he hates me!” she thought.

She went in and took off her fur coat, and stood in the little hall for a moment, with her dark eyes in a stare. She understood that his hatred could not hurt her. He might hate her as much as he pleased, for hatred is homage, but to be despised by him would be different. It would be impertinent and stupid of him to despise her, Mrs. Fream of Hill House, a very complete young woman of the world.

She rejoined her mother.

“I saw Mr. Furze for a moment.”

Her voice had recovered its drawling leisureliness. Mrs. Charlotte said nothing.

“I thanked him for his kindness to father.”

“Your father and he—had something in common.”

Mary picked up a white carnation and held it to her nostrils.

“Looks—rather—as though he had gone to seed. I don’t like to see a man such a sloven—— I suppose that marriage of his——”

“It was a very happy marriage,” said her mother. “I suppose that is why he doesn’t care.”

The provocation of Mrs. Fream’s delicate voluptuousness went with Furze down the muddy lane. Its effect astonished him. It had folded itself in the sumptuous suggestiveness of that fur coat of hers. The barbarian, the man in a bear skin, that was Arnold Furze, the tall Teuton or the Gaul lounging long-limbed in a decadent, southern town, and seeing some dusky and scented Voluptas with reddened lips and sleepy and insolent eyes carried by in a litter by four slaves.

This sleek, shingled, befurred city madam with her soft white face and casual eyes! This complete and pretty trifler! This delicate, scented thing all wrapped up in lace and silk!

By God——!

The impetus in him was barbaric. It was to pick her up and carry her off, —voluptuous spoil, Greek plunder. Yes, and to throw her down in the mud of the lane. To tear that fur coat from her. To gather her up, shocked and screaming and scared, and carry her where he pleased, up the “Doomsday” stairs, and to throw her on a bed and have his will of her. Yes, just that! And then to let her go, subdued, possessed, with frightened yet voluptuous eyes, pulling her clothes over her bosom, shamed yet secretly satisfied, this dark-flowered parasite——.

He was aware of the grey horse stopping, and of the cart wheels squelching in the mud.

They had reached the farm gate at the end of the lane while the heart of him had been full of other things.

5

But Furze was seen next day at Captain Viner’s funeral. He had shaved; he had put on a black tie and a dark blue suit. A raw wind was blowing, but having no overcoat that was fit for such a function he went without one. He was accustomed to the wind, and hardly noticed it, though Fream and Biddulph, coming warm from a big lunch at the “George” and wearing heavy coats, looked pinched and anxious.

“Reg’lar death traps—these cemeteries.”

“Yes, you’d think they meant to keep their corpses in cold storage.”

Such flippances crop up at funerals, human nature being what it is and wishing not to appear too serious. Carslake cemetery was on the slope of Windmill Hill, facing north-east, a bleak spot where the trees huddled themselves with their backs to the wind. The soil was clay. You saw a sample of it beside the grave, a pile of sticky, yellow cubes lying as it had left the spade. Everybody looked morose and cold and unhappy, and the only happy face was that of Mrs. Charlotte. She stood there looking like a little bright-eyed bird, a patch of bright colour on each cheek, for she had nothing to regret. Mary wept a little and carried a handkerchief, and Furze, who kept very much in the background, would not let himself look at her. But he looked at her husband, and wondered what marriage meant to him and what he got out of it. Of course the occasion was not a festive one, and

it was a beast of a day, and everything was grey, but Furze thought that Fream looked a very miserable man, cold through and through. Yes,—and frightened. But of what? Of the suggestiveness of that slit in the clay into which old Viner had to be lowered, and beside which Mrs. Charlotte stood proud and undaunted?

When the ceremony was over Furze put on his hat and moved away. He had a last glimpse of Mrs. Charlotte standing looking down into the grave with a bright-eyed and birdlike tenderness. Mrs. Fream was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Poor old Viner! These posthumous manifestations of regret! And sighs of relief, and little hot drinks at the “George,” and then —“Home—my dear,—and dinner.”

Furze passed out under the two yews at the gate.

“I don’t suppose the little old lady will last long without him,” he thought; “I don’t suppose she wants to.”

XXIV

1



AL,—do you think we can help my mother?”

She had come to the library after dinner, and had found her husband writing letters.

“Of course.”

Drawing a chair to the fire she sat and spread her hands to the blaze, and the light ran up her bare arms into her bosom.

“Father had his pension. They are only allowing mother seventy-five pounds a year. She has the house, and a little money from investments.”

“How much?”

“O,—about twenty pounds—I think.”

“Would a hundred a year do?”

“O, yes,—I think so. It is very good of you, Val.”

But she did not turn to thank him, or even look at him, and sitting there with his elbows on the desk he observed her unseeing back and her imperturbable white shoulders. A lamp with a red shade stood on the desk, and the rest of the room was shadowing, lined with those dim books that were never read. It had become a very silent room; its very toys had grown mute; the pianola had not been touched for weeks, and LO might call and no one cared to listen.

“Glad to be of use.”

His face seemed to have grown flatter and more colourless. He took off his glasses, and pressed a finger and thumb over closed eyelids, and then looked at her again with short-sighted wistfulness. He smiled faintly, and the smile gave to his face an expression of futile vacancy, like a white wall cracking. He picked up his glasses, and tapped gently with them on the blotting-pad.

“Glad to be of use,” he repeated.

Her white shoulders warmed themselves unmoved. They did not feel the breath of a dumb appeal. He sat there behind her in silence, and she took his silence for granted. She took everything for granted—now, and he did not

blame her, for he had come to know himself as a money-machine, a sort of patient automaton that sat in chairs and signed its name. There were times now when he felt rather ghastly about it, and she might have seen that ghastliness on his face. But she did not see it. He was the same long white inarticulate post of a man, like a signpost on a familiar road along which she passed every day. She simply was not conscious of him as a live man, as a frightened man, or a lonely one about whom a fog of worry was thickening. He might sit there muffled in his own fog, self-paralysed, dumbly bitter, vaguely aware of immense irony.

“Money’s useful,” he said, with a grin that was both futile and sardonic.

“Yes, Val, very.”

He replaced his glasses. She was staring at the fire. What did she see in the fire? Did it never occur to her that some day there might be no fuel for the fire? No, why should it occur to her? He had wrapped her up in cotton-wool. He was a mere machine, as unfamiliar to her as a text-book on Political Economy by Ricardo or Mill or Jevons. She did not appear to suspect that a machine might get out of order or break down. She expected him to go on in the same relentlessly efficient way, day in, day out, like a perfect automobile. She rode in it, wrapped in her furs, serenely careless, going to her dances and her parties and her theatres and her shoppings. She would be surprised at a mere puncture, or at half a minute’s mechanical trouble. “Dear me, Val, what is the matter?” Yes, just a flicker of languid and dark-eyed surprise, and perhaps a touch of annoyance.

Should he tell her? What would be the use? She would be shocked, terribly frightened; and it might not be necessary to frighten her. She had evolved such a nice air of social self-sufficiency; she was so sleek and casual.

He resumed his letter writing, and presently she rose, and patted back a yawn and went towards the door.

“Thanks so much, Val.”

She did not look at him.

“Glad to be of use.”

She opened the door, went out, and closed it softly after her.

He finished his letter and sat staring. How damnably worrying things were, and then she just came and asked him for money! Worries, problems, the Tanooga Railway, the Universal Insurance Co.; hypothetical oil in Mexico, the sandy cat-like face of Mr. Samuel Gaiter, other faces vaguely hostile and suspicious, that last general meeting of “Crust and Co.” when he had stood up as chairman and tried to make a speech and had made a

stuttering fool of himself. Strange how his luck had been out since his marriage! But was it luck? Had he not felt that the Midas touch had left him? A cut-throat game! He had cut other men's throats, and he had never thought about their wives. It was possible that someone would cut his throat, and Mary's hands were not the hands to hold a basin.

Poor little Mary! She had been his last and most expensive purchase, a live doll, a mannequin. Well,—well——! She would be in the soup with him if the soup it was to be. Swimming about like a couple of flies!

A year ago he could have settled a considerable sum on his wife, but he had been prejudiced against surrendering the one key that life had left him. Now, it was too late. He was too tied up, all in—as the saying goes. And that phrase of Gaiter's.—“My dear chap, either we are great men or scoundrels. We are going to be great men.” Gaiter had the coolness of a cat. Was it that he had lost his nerve, left it behind him in that Monte Carlo hotel?

But in the matter of the supplementing of Mrs. Charlotte's income Fream was not called upon to be of use. Cheerfully, and with a certain air of triumph she developed pneumonia a month after her husband's death, and sat propped up in bed with a flushed face and eyes that seemed to see over the edge of the world.

“I shall be with my dear love in a week, Nellie.”

Cousin Nellie was shocked, for she spoke the voice of conviction.

“I'll wire to Weyfleet.”

“O, the girls! They are always so very busy. We will wait a day or two. Poor Hesketh's trouble and then mine. We will wait a day or two, Nellie.”

Cousin Nellie waylaid the doctor.

“She says she is going to die.”

“Does she?”

“She wants to die. She's quite excited about it.”

“Then—she will die. Yes, you had better wire, unless—of course——”

Cousin Nellie wired, and the telegram went to Mary, for in Cousin Nellie's estimation Mary had chances of salvation if someone would take the trouble to hang her on a cross. Clare was beyond hope of redemption. No one would ever get Clare suspended upon so crude a piece of timber.

Said Mrs. Charlotte, propped up and panting, but with eyes of triumphant eagerness—“I want to see Mr. Furze.”

Cousin Nellie was troubled, for she had been expecting the Fream car, and it was six o'clock and no car had arrived.

"Yes, my dear.—You must not tire yourself."

She spoke soothingly, but Mrs. Charlotte was not needing a linctus.

"No consequence. I want to see Mr. Furze."

"You want me to send for him?"

Mrs. Charlotte nodded.

So the good Coode was called to his door and sent to "Doomsday." He came back with Furze under the February stars, and stood at his gate and felt that life was a sad business, while Furze went up to Mrs. Charlotte's room. Furze wondered what she could have to say to him, but when he heard what she had to say, his face grew soft and sombre. He looked at the fire.

"You have nothing to regret, Mrs. Viner. O, yes, I promise."

The engine of a car made itself heard as he rose and took leave of her, and at the top of the stairs he paused. A door opened; a current of cold air and voices came up to him.

"How is she?"

"Expecting you, Mary."

"I came by train; that's why I am so late. I'm staying. Here's my purse; will you see to the taxi? I'm going up."

"Mr. Furze is with your mother."

"Mr. Furze——!"

"She asked for him."

The only light came from the lamp in the hall, and it left the upper half of the flight of stairs in darkness. Furze was part of that darkness. And she was looking up; she had taken the first three steps before she had heard that he was with her mother, and she had paused as though dismayed. He saw her white face close to the wall as she leaned against it—hesitating. He spoke; he had to speak.

"I have just left your mother. Please come up."

For some seconds she remained quite motionless, and then she came up and past him with a little rush, and a suggestion of breathlessness. He caught a sidelong gleam of her eyes. She smelt of some perfume. He was aware of her as a soft, dusky sweet-scented thing with a pale face, passing him quickly like a swift bird eluding a hand. She went into her mother's room and closed the door, and Furze descended the stairs.

Cousin Nellie was paying the taxi driver who had brought Mary from Carslake station. Furze met her at the gate.

“I am glad she has come.”

“O—yes——”

She slipped some coins back into Mary’s purse, and looked vaguely past Furze at a lighted window.

“The new and the old, the new and the old. Good night, Mr. Arnold,” and snapping the catch of the purse she went back to the house.

Coode was leaning over his gate like a man in pain; he let Furze go by and then spoke after him in the darkness.

“She’s come.”

“Yes.”

Furze turned back a step. Here was another man who had been a lover, and who could still hang over a gate and imagine the presence of her as a soft breathing and a perfume in the cold bosom of a raw February night.

“Mrs. Viner is going to die,” said Furze.

Coode’s head jerked upwards, but he said nothing.

He left Coode hanging on the gate like a dead crow in a gamekeeper’s larder, and went back to his farm, but he did not enter the house. A great restlessness was upon him. He stood by the pond and looked at the cold spread of the dark water, and it put words into his head. “Stoop down, stoop down to the water, Melisande.”—And then he heard a little bleating sound coming to him out of the night, the voice of one of his ewes big with lamb, and penned under the shelter of Rose’s Wood. A strange pity stirred in him. How pitiful life was and how strange! He climbed over the gate and went slowly down across the “Gore,” and the moisture from the fodder crop of winter greens soaked his boots. A poor beast—big with child—crying in the night! Was it an allegory, a prophetic cry? A woman without a child, a woman who had shirked the bearing of children, and yet whose sleek, soft, sweet-smelling body provoked the embrace that begets children! He felt a fierce and fanatical urge in him. A clinging, dark-eyed parasite! She should be made to cling for other reasons, and to feel a babe biting at her breast. Pain, travail, labour, such was life; and life would overtake her and bring her down in order that she might rise again and grapple with life. Men brought to women pain and childbirth and all that was inevitable and deep.

He leaned upon one of the hurdles of the pen, and from a dark shelter came that whimpering, plaintive cry.

“Patience,” he said, “that ram does God’s work, old lady. And the lamb shall nose your belly.”

He smiled in the darkness.

“The people who would escape——! She——! Drawing a nice skin of furs about her, and daintily shirking.—Life’s so coarse. Be careful. I will not be soiled.”

He laughed aloud.

“Ah,—my lady! Perhaps life will catch you. It will take its revenge. I wonder?”

He looked at the stars and thought of Rose; and his heart felt big again.

“Ah, beloved, you had courage. You were big and strong and comely and good. You gave, and in the giving won what you desired. Something for nothing? No, not on the land. These people who are shy of life should learn from the soil. By the sweat of the brow and the bloody sweat of the soul.”

3

Mrs. Charlotte lay beside her man in Carslake cemetery, and Cousin Nellie had gone back to her old lady, and “Green Shutters” was empty, and Furze was in the thick of the lambing season. March days. And Mary wore black, and looked very well in it, rather like a dark pansy. “Poor Mrs. Fream, her father and mother dead within five weeks of each other.” Poor Mrs. Fream indeed! No one spoke of Clare as “Poor Mrs. Biddulph.” People grow old and pass, elections come and go, and skirts are lengthened a little, and you wear your hat a little less like an inverted flower-pot perched on a dahlia stalk to catch earwigs.

But something had happened to Mary. She was two selves in one body, and looking more like she used to look, poignant and vaguely plaintive, all swimming dark eyes and clotted cream. A chiffon overskirt—the superficial smartness—and the more solid and emotional underskirt beneath! Yes, suddenly she had rediscovered her emotions, and emotions are problematical possessions when you are mated to a signpost that points you nowhere, not even towards maternity. Mary was having a little religious revival of her own, and was going down on her silk-hosed knees and feeling reproached by all manner of reflections. She had become full of sentimental contritions and self-confessions. She had not been a good daughter; she had made men suffer.—Poor dear things! For the last year she had been feeling very empty, and this emotional mood was quite pleasantly filling. It made her feel a serious person, and rather mysterious and romantic, a sort of little Diana of

the Crossways—you know. A wistful look in your mirror, and an air of tristful languor in public, and a sense of being deeper than you thought you were, if you ever thought about it at all. A woman may grow chocolate-sick, and take to drinking vinegar for the sake of her figure. Diet, emotional and otherwise, has a distinct reaction upon the inward attitude toward the ordinary phenomena of life. Yet, did she confess to herself that behind the pale shades of her dead parents loomed that brown-throated, shaggy sloven of a farmer? “Doomsday”!

One day in March, it was a Sunday and she had been to Weyfleet church in the morning, she broke a sentimental whim under the eyes of her grandee.

“Val,—I want to speak to you about ‘Green Shutters.’ ”

That his pallor had a tinge of green in it these days had not been observed by her.

“Yes, my dear.”

He looked at her a little anxiously, with inward self-depreciation.

“You know—the house was left to Clare and me. Of course Leslie suggested that it should be sold. I don’t want it to be sold.”

“No.”

He did not ask for her reasons.

“I wondered if you could buy me—Clare’s share. I should like to own the house—feel it mine.”

He took off his pince-nez and polished them, and then replaced them with both hands—elbows raised—a pose that always made him look a little fatuous.

“Might be managed. Your property—you mean?”

“Yes, Val. Sentimental reasons.”

“You would let it,—I suppose?”

She looked vague and poignant.

“I might.—But only to—certain people. Associations are queer. I might like to go down there—now and again——”

He examined his finger-nails with an air of solemn intentness. How was she to divine what was passing in his mind? Yes, he would buy her Clare’s share of the house. In case of shipwreck she would have a little rock upon which she could find a foothold.

“I’ll see Biddulph about it.”

She looked pleased, touched.

“Val, you are good to me.”

And she kissed him.

For the sum of six hundred pounds Clare parted with her half-share of "Green Shutters" and the furniture therein and when Mr. Biddulph had obtained probate and produced his statement of accounts, Mary found herself the mistress of "Green Shutters" and its furniture, and of £23 0s. 0d. invested in 5 per cent. War Loan—1929-47. The title deed was sent to her husband and he handed it over to her one morning at breakfast.

"There you are,—woman of property."

"What do I do with it, Val?"

"Deposit it with your lawyers or at your bank,—the bank for choice—— By the way I have to go down to Gaiter's place in the country for the week-end; business—you know; not a house party."

So her opportunity came to her, and with it the inspiration of an April morning. She felt adventurous, and the blue of the sky was without a cloud. Should she take Pollock with her? No, she would go alone, with a luncheon basket, and a suitcase and a box of flowers in the dickey of her cherry-coloured car. Yes, it was quite an adventure, a sentimental pilgrimage, a setting to music of the little laments that her conscience had been uttering.



MARY came to the old country by way of Melhurst village, and she drove through Melhurst Park. Her cherry-coloured car overtook the memory of the blue wagon and the two grey horses moving slowly over the green billows of the park. The same trees were there, the same deer, the same brown beech leaves of another year flickering hither and thither as the wind stirred them. She pulled up and got out, and sat on the grass verge, with the hood-cover between her and the damp turf, and in renewing a memory she opened an inward door. How that man hated her! And did he also despise her? And if so—why should she mind? What did it matter to Mrs. Fream of Hill House, the admirably appointed Mrs. Fream who was showing a nice sentiment in the matter of “Green Shutters?” She had presented to herself the house of her parents as a public memorial to her conscience. She was about to visit it, and spend an hour or two in it with a dutiful duster, and an appreciation of her own sensibilities. She would drive up to Carslake cemetery and place flowers on the graves.

She was a woman of the world. For the space of nearly three years she had been insisting upon herself as a woman of the world, and she believed herself as Mrs. Fream of Hill House. She had developed tact. She had distinguished herself as a hostess. She knew exactly how things should be done, how servants should be treated, the right voice in which to give orders to a chauffeur, how to cast a pleasant atmosphere over a tea-table on the terrace of the Hills Club. Her personal appointments were exquisite. She came soft and rosy from her bath each morning. Pollock dressed her hair and her person, and manicured her finger-nails. She was very complete, and was convinced of her own completeness. If she gave way to sensibility—well—a woman of the world might be allowed to know how to feel.

She re-entered her car, pressed the toe of a black glacé shoe on the button of the self-starter, and working neatly through her gears, took the undulations of the park road at a swinging speed. She drove well, as a woman of the world might be expected to drive, but half-way up the long hill before the junction with the Carslake road “Cherry’s” engine developed

a sudden and rather fearsome “knock.” Mary slowed up, and glanced at the oil dial on the dash-board. It was registering what she had been taught to regard as the proper pressure.

Most unfortunate of complications, and yet in sympathy with that suitcase packed in the dickey. “Have it put in, Pollock. I might have to stay the night at the ‘George.’” Gently she brought the complaining “Cherry” into the Carslake road, and fifty yards before she reached the cinder track she sighted an A.A. scout on his bicycle.

She pulled up and moved to the man, and he dismounted, and saluting her, stood beside the car.

“There is something wrong with my engine. I am going to the Sandihurst Estate. I wonder if you could have a man sent down from one of the Carslake garages.”

“Certainly, madam.”

“The engine is knocking badly. The car may have to go up to Carslake.”

“I expect so,—madam——”

“Oh,—and the house is ‘Green Shutters.’ But the Andrews people know me—Mrs. Fream.”

“Very good, madam.”

He saluted, mounted, and rode off, and she coaxed “Cherry” up the cinder track, and pulled up in front of “Green Shutters.” Someone—a girl—waved to her, but she did not wave back. She had come to see things, not people she did not feel friendly to—all the Vachetts and the Twists and the Perrivales. The horrible Jamiesons had left, but poor Coode still starved among his hens.

She got out of the car and went quickly up the path. It was sprouting grass and weeds, and the curtains drawn across the windows made the little house look more deserted. She was conscious of a feeling of breathlessness. She had a duplicate key with her, and she unlocked the door and hastily closing it after her, relocked it. What a queer feeling of guilt, of hiding from something! She stood there in the passage, with the hands hanging limply, her eyes fixed on the stairs. Everything was just the same. Her father’s old sun-browed panama hat on a peg! But the silence, a suggestion of dampness, deadness, pathos? She was conscious of a thickness in her throat. Poor little flimsy house, hers, full of memories, voices, restlessness, disharmonies, kindnesses. It reproached her, and she had not expected to be reproached.

But why?

Surely she ought to know! And suddenly the purpose of her pilgrimage ceased to be whimsical, and became real. This was the first real thing that she had done for the best part of three years. Vaguely she was aware of herself as bringing succour to something that was more than mere tile and brick and timber. She was touching the hands of her old self, that distressed, rebellious, bewildered self, crying for escape and freedom. She had escaped. She was back here as a woman of the world, a woman of affairs.

She went into the sitting-room and sat down. What a queer feeling! No one in the house, and the furniture just the same, and the identical darn in the identical hearth-rug, and her mother's chair, and one of her father's pipes on the mantelpiece! O,—heavens! And dust, weeks of dust, though she had arranged for a woman to come in. They had passed away—those old people—a little less than two months ago; years seemed to have passed,—and hours. What strange stirrings in her! Tears! How very sentimental!

She stood up.

A voice in her was saying—"No, I'll not go to the 'George.' I'll stay here—and picnic. I wonder if there is any coal."

She passed through the familiar kitchen, and in the little brick coal-hole off the scullery she found both coal and wood. She took off her hat, and then heard someone knocking.

"Bother.—One of the—people."

But it was a mechanic from the Carslake garage. He and a mate had come down in a car.

She stared at him and found her voice.

"Oh,—I think you had better take my car up to Carslake. I think there is something very wrong with the engine. I shall want it to-morrow—if possible."

"To-morrow's Sunday, Miss," said the man.

She agreed that to-morrow was Sunday.

"Do the best you can. And would you mind carrying in my suitcase and the luncheon basket—and a box. They are in the dickey."

They were carried in; "Cherry" was taken away; she relocked the door.

Mary found an old apron hanging behind the kitchen door, and she put it on over her black dress and got to work. She laid a fire in the kitchen range, and having persuaded it to burn after a second supply of wood and paper, she brought down blankets and sheets from the linen cupboard on the

landing, and hung them to air on the backs of chairs. She was very busy, and all the while she was conscious of a queer secret feeling; she left the curtains drawn; she wanted to be undisturbed.

People came and knocked. She let them knock. One of the visitors was poor Coode; she was sure of it, divining his identity by the self-effacing and deprecating little rat-tat that he gave. She could imagine him saying very earnestly—"Can I be of any use,—Mrs. Fream?" About four o'clock she heard a voice calling—"Mrs. Fream, Mrs. Fream!" It was the voice of Phyllis Perrivale, and she left it unanswered.

She felt full of mystery, a creature of fanciful elvishness. She changed her mind as to the flowers that were to have been laid upon the grave, and she chose instead to place them in vases about the house as flowers of memory. She dusted the rooms, resuming her recollections of those days when she had cooked and cleaned and washed, and had loathed it all, but on this April day she was Mrs. Fream playing a little mysterious and sacramental game, and playing it rather like a child. She unpacked her luncheon basket. She had given very complete orders as to its contents, and very complete it was, a tea basket as well as a luncheon basket. She had chicken and bread and pastries, and some galantine, and butter, and a little cream-cheese, and tea and sugar, and a bottle of milk, and two half-bottles of white wine, and some fancy cakes. She arranged her provisions in the larder, and made herself tea.

Afterwards she lit a cigarette and dreamed a little. She was feeling life as she had not felt it for a very long while; it had a freshness, a sensitiveness, a newness. Yes, undoubtedly she had been very bored, and stagnant as to her emotions. She took old Hesketh's pipe down from the mantelpiece and held it in her soft hands, and looked poignant, and almost like a woman discovering the mystery of herself. The quickness and the fluidity of her emotions surprised her; she felt touched to tears by the most commonplace objects.

Again someone knocked and she left the knock unanswered. Why did people bother her when she was like a child deep in a mysterious game? Curiosity—kindness?

Of course anyone could see the chimney smoking. A certain person did see it, and from a considerable distance, Arnold Furze walking at the head of a horse that was pulling a roller to and fro across the Ridge Fields. He stopped the horse and stood at gaze for quite half a minute, watching the trail of smoke from that particular chimney. To him it had become a dead house, but obviously it was alive again.

“Let—I suppose.”

And he went on rolling his field, with the westering sun striking under the brim of his hat and giving to his eyes a hollow intentness. His face had hardened a good deal; it had a sombreness, a suggestion of lean fanaticism in the stern lines of the jaw and mouth. He rolled his field, and the iron crushed the clods as he went to and fro, horse and man lonely and inevitable against the sky-line.

At “Green Shutters” a woman had drawn a curtain gently to one side, and she saw April, an evening of plaintive blueness, and hills ready to darken against a sky of pale gold. There lay the garden, old Hesketh’s garden neglected and strange, with last year’s pea-sticks still in the ground, the grass shaggy and yellow, the soil puddled by the winter’s rains. It seemed to cry to her for help, but what could she do to help it? Her hands were soft and unwilling.

“I must arrange for a man to see to it,” she thought.

But April drew her, the sky, and the blue green glooms, and the singing of a bird. She desired to wander, but not to be seen, and putting on her hat and locking the door after her she walked down the garden to the fence on the top of the bank above the road. She was able to make an unconventional escape, after peering over the top of the fence to make sure that the road was empty. The same loose pale was there in the fence, and she had the same slimness, and could slip through. She swoped diagonally down the grass bank and found herself in the road.

It was a mile to Carslake cemetery, and she reached it by a side-road that skirted the old abbey wall. Windmill Hill rose like a great bald forehead above the landscape, and its wind-blown trees were like ragged tufts of hair. She did not stay long in the cemetery, for the sun was setting, and the place chilled her, for though she was near to reality she did not yet react to it as such. Sentiment had thrown a spangled cloak over reality; she was at play; her emotions amused themselves; her feet were too near the yellow clay in Carslake cemetery, and she preferred to sentimentalize over the sunset. For escape was still her privilege. She could play her game, knowing that a little pleasure-car would carry her back to Hill House and its marble bathroom, and Pollock, and dances, and lawns and shops.

She had brought two white roses with her, and she left them with her dead. That was her attitude towards reality. Her sentiments were feeling sleekly satisfied, and if her dead were dead—what more was there for her to do than to leave flowers with them? She eschewed the clay, the essential

grimness of things that flowers hide, muck and worms, and bacteria, and toil. She still played on the surface of life.

She entered Carslake, and Carslake was busy with its Saturday evening shopping. Turning into Andrew's garage, she found "Cherry" very much in deshabelle, and an oily man and a boy busy removing gudgeon pins. A bearing had gone.

"Monday at the earliest, madam."

"Can you promise to have her ready by twelve o'clock on Monday?"

Mr. Andrews thought that he could.

"If you will have her driven down to 'Green Shutters.' And let me have the bill at Weyfleet.—Hill House, Weyfleet."

She remembered that she had only three cigarettes left in her case, and she bought a box of fifty at the tobacconist's opposite the "George" Inn. She was walking out of the shop when Furze appeared in the doorway, a haversack slung over one shoulder, and his eyes expecting no figure such as hers.

She was startled, but she did not show it. In fact to Furze she appeared very much mistress of herself. She gave him a slight smile.

"I am down here—for a few hours."

"Are you?"

She thought that he looked very tired. He—too—was part of her sentimental evening, a man moving on the surface of life. She waited outside the shop; she wanted him to know where she had been and what she had been doing. She owed that to herself.

When he came out she was there in her black dress and hat, an anomalous figure, and yet with eyes that were smooth and casual.

"I have been to the graves. Yes,—I am staying for the week-end."

He glanced at the "George."

"Over there?"

"No, at 'Green Shutters.' It belongs to me now. I feel—responsible for it."

He stared at her, and the quality of his gaze was beyond her. She had no understanding of his intensity, of the real man who stood in the footwalk and stared at her. She kept her poise.

"I had trouble with my car. I had to leave it at Andrews. Oh,—I must not forget to buy a few candles. No lights down there."

"Are you walking?"

“Yes.”

Had she known what lay behind that casual question she might have avoided her old lover.

3

But avoidance was not part of the play. She was like a spoilt child in a menagerie coquetting with a lion that was safely caged. All her animals were caged, and you could throw buns to them, and say—“Pretty, pretty,” and remark to your nurse that the lion looked cross. It did not occur to her that she might be an offence and provocation to some wild beast behind the bars, and that man may be a very dangerous wild beast, more especially so when he has been teased and thwarted by fate, and has in him the makings of a fanatic. And man is a reasoning animal, a creature with ideals that may have stern eyes, and a fantastic frown on its forehead.

They took the Melhurst road together under the frayed gold of the afterglow. He was rather silent, not looking at her, but listening to all she said as though he were weighing every word of it and estimating its sincerity. He moved with long strides, shoulders slightly bowed, while she went boyishly with her shingled head, and her slim legs swinging under her short black skirt.

“A counterfeit,” he thought.

His silences disturbed her a little, though his reserve might be considered natural, a closed door. The opening of doors may prove an interesting amusement, but she was not conscious of amusing herself. All this could be considered to be a part of her sentimental adventure. She felt sorry for poor Arnold, a surly dog, sombre and shaggy. She was quite ready to allow her sympathy to stroke his head.

His silence made her chatter. She had explained her sentimental journey, but had won no response from him, no murmur of approval. It was as though he did not take her seriously and that in spite of his own seriousness. She passed through frivolous moments, without desiring them, just as one may feel driven to giggles at a funeral, and then she caught herself up. She felt herself lacking in dignity, and in the twilight she seemed to become aware of a deepening dignity in him. Yes, a strangeness, a something that was impressive and a little frightening, as though the lion had escaped from his cage and was walking beside her, live and real and ominous.

She felt afraid. She offered him little fragments of appeal.

“One talks great nonsense—sometimes—just when one is feeling most serious. I miss—them—you know.”

Gravely—but with an air of caution—he supposed that she did.

“Your father—was a man—whom I greatly respected. He had such—simplicity.”

“An old soldier. They were dears. One regrets some things.”

His impression of her was that she regretted nothing, and that she had forgotten how to feel things acutely. But had she ever felt things acutely?

“One regrets one’s mistakes,” he said.

“Yes,—especially when one’s mistakes—hurt—other people.”

In the dusk she gave him a quick side glance, and he seemed unaware of it. How sombre and sad he looked! She supposed that it must have been difficult for him to understand her wild flight after those hayfield embraces. And then her marriage three months afterwards! But—he—too had married quickly. They had been opportunists—both of them, and neither could pretend to a romantic faithfulness. She began to blunder rather badly from the moment she assumed him to be an opportunist.

“I suppose you are as fond of the farm——?”

“As fond—as it will let me be.”

She gave a little sentimental tilt of the head.

“And Gore Wood,—full of primroses? I should like to take some primroses up to the graves——”

He looked black.

“Primroses.—O—yes—but not in Gore Wood.”

“Oh? Yes,—I remember.—And those trees! O, Mr. Arnold—I was so sorry about those trees.”

“No need. The wood is called Rose Wood—these days.”

“What a pretty name.”

He gave her a look of scorn.

“After my wife. She managed to save those trees for me——”

“Ah,—your wife——”

And she thought—“The waitress,” and he seemed to know that the word lay unspoken under tongue. They had reached the opening of the lane under Six Firs, and he paused and she with him. He had something that had to be said, but he did not hurry, and his silence was like a hook holding her.

“Some women help a man. My wife helped me. I was very happy with her. She was worth all the love a man could give.—I don’t care much for

anything—now that she's gone.—If you want to pick primroses—you can. You know the way. Good night.”

He swung round, paused for a moment to look up at the tall firs, and then went off up the lane.

“Would she dare!” he wondered; “to run about over our farm,—and into Rose's Wood? Would she dare?”

4

That Arnold Furze should pretend to be inconsolable for the loss of his “waitress” roused in Mary a vague dis-satisfaction. She took the feeling back with her to “Green Shutters,” and tried to light one of her candles—in the porch, with the door open and a draught blowing in. Three successive flames hesitated and died in the darkness. She closed the door, and tried again, and the match and the candle came to terms.

What coarse creatures men were! She carried her candle into the kitchen, and before she could find a candlestick the hot grease was running down her fingers. She let out a little—“O!” and put the candle down abruptly on the kitchen table where it consented to stand while she found the candlestick. But she gave up the quest for the moment, and stood with one hand placed against a cheek and chin, her eyes mirroring the candle flame.

What manner of woman had she been, this common girl whom Furze had married? Had she been good to look at, and pleasant to kiss? Mary supposed that the woman must have had some power to move him. He had spoken movingly, but here her self-love edged in and whispered of pique, and she was ready to nod her head consentingly. The candle flame, swaying gently to and fro, repeated its movement in the blackness of her pupils. Had the woman been dark or fair, big or little, silent or merry? And so he had renamed Gore Wood after her, or said that he had. Moreover, the love between these two had been complete.

The thought stung her, and she turned peevishly to find the candlestick, and when she had found it—and steadied the candle in the socket with two wedged match-ends, she fell into more musings. She moved to and fro collecting things on a tray for her supper, but the subjective part of her held the stage. A waitress, perhaps a florid and rather fleshly young woman in a white apron, with black hair all fluffed out under a cheeky cap! Such women appealed!

She mishandled a cup and saucer, and the cup slipped and broke on the floor. “Damn!” But where was her sentiment? She left the broken cup lying and took another from a hook on the dresser. The content of her inward

consciousness was as narrow as the flame of the candle, far too narrow to include the nobler poignancies of life, its tendernesses and surrenders and great little heroisms, the courage of a woman who faces and conquers a seeming monotony. Monotony is the evil genius of the pale and feebly beating heart. She had given herself to material things, and to a cowardly and sensuous softness, and materialism straightened her emotions. She had no vision. She thought of Furze's wife as a woman with a body but not with a soul. Her envying of the dead woman was physical; she was jealous of what a dead woman had felt and made Furze feel. She could not raise her mood to other imaginings, or divine the richness of Rose's love, its brave and simple directness, its practical tendernesses, its motherliness, its strength. Poor little suburban madam! She had the great inspiration in her, and was blind to it as yet. She stood there looking at a flickering candle, feeling distraught and peeved and resentful, and also vaguely defiant. Mrs. Fream of Hill House——

5

Furze had finished his milking and his tea. He was standing by the west window of the living-room, filling a pipe, and the window commanded the end of the lane and the field gate of the "Gore."

He saw her come down the lane, lift the catch of the gate, open it, pass into the field, and close the gate after her. She had a deliberate air. She did not glance in the direction of the house.

So she had dared! He was holding a lighted match, and the flame burnt its way towards thumb and finger. He dropped the match-end on the tiles, and took another, struck it, and holding the flame to the bowl of his pipe, sucked steadily. Two little hollows showed in his cheeks, and his forehead was ominous.

He picked up his hat and went to the door, but his impulse was stayed there by some other emotion, and he stood holding the handle and biting hard on the pipe-stem. She had dared, and her very daring to do this thing was an affront to him and to the woman who was dead. That was how it touched him, and in touching him roused him to anger. Yes, and to more than anger. Vain, meddlesome, ineffectual little fool! Or was he to think of her more seriously as the city madam deliberately trespassing, wilfully provocative, and not caring how she provoked? To pick primroses? Indeed! Among those oak trees that would have fallen before her whimsies but for Rose! Monied insolence, with her casual air, and her mannerisms, and her

nice clothes, and her little useless hands, and those eyes that could appear so soft and innocent!

For a moment there was an anger in him that transformed itself into a considered purpose. The impulse carried as far as the gate at the end of the yew hedge, but there he shook it off. He trembled with sudden pity, but the urge was still so fierce in him that it had to be countered. His eyes had a bleakness. He turned back and into the orchard, and went through it and up across the Sea Field to Beech Ho wood, and so in deeply among the trees until the horizon showed as an occasional strip of blueness between the crowded trunks. He sat down between two old roots, with his back to a tree, and there he remained for two whole hours, holding himself chained while something tore at his vitals. Two thrushes were singing in the tree-tops, and save for their singing a vast silence reigned.

When he went back to the farm he saw something yellow attached to the gate at the end of the yew hedge. Going to look he found a little bunch of primroses tucked between two of the slats, and resting on the bar. She had fastened the stalks of the flowers with a twisted rush.

He stared at the knot of yellow. What was the meaning of it? Another of her meddlesome little tricksies? Sentiment? Yes, her sentiment could hang on a gate, but it would grow no crops. Or was it saucy magnanimity, a superior gesture, a token of malapert forgiveness?

Good God, what had she to forgive?

He took the bunch of flowers and threw it into the pond.

XXVI

1



F FREAM was dumb those days, his wife was blind. There were many little changes in him that should have been noticed by her and were not seen, for neither her eyes nor her thoughts were turned towards him, and her poor white guide-post stood as before with an arm pointing stiffly towards prosperity.

The pathetic part of it was that he tried to attract her attention. He might have gone about banging doors, and displaying all the symptoms of a worried and irritable man in need of his wife's sympathy, but his appeal was more negative. He took to his bed for three days, and his Weyfleet doctor was sent for. Her grandee's indisposition quite failed to attract Mary's attention. Her thoughts were elsewhere, and her activities fluttering around the preparations for a hospital fête that was to be held in the Hill House grounds in June. She was the chairwoman of the Amusements Sub-committee, a *quid pro quo* for the use of Hill House.

Even financiers develop "livers" and migraine, and if Mary had a serious cloud in her sky it lay far south of Weyfleet. Their doctor told her that her husband had been overworking himself, which seemed to her absurd. Surely, a man with so much money need not spend himself beyond the limits of his strength?

She said as much to her grandee. She wandered into his room between a tennis party and a dinner, and sat on a chair by the window, and was casually kind.

"Dr. Harper says you have been doing too much, Val. Surely it isn't necessary?"

He lay and looked at her rather like a sick dog. His eyes had a curious glassiness.

"O, not at all. Don't worry, my dear."

Obviously she was not worrying.

"Why don't you use your car more, drive up to your office——?"

"Yes,—I might do that."

He had always been not a little shy of her, and now his shyness had become complete. He lay there and watched her, and thought what a very charming thing she looked with her soft white skin and her duskiness. He wanted to tell her the truth and yet he could not do it. He was dumb with an almost ridiculous dumbness, or like a man roped to his bed. Yet he had only to blurt out a few words.

“Why don’t you have a week’s fishing, Val?”

It was a perfunctory suggestion.

“Might do.”

“Take the car.”

He had closed his eyes, but she did not notice his closed eyes. Which dress should she wear? The primrose-coloured chiffon? That colour! Like the pale afterglow on that April evening, and the flowers in Gore Wood!

He said, with eyes still closed,—“I suppose you are very busy, dear.”

“Oh,—I am. The fête——”

“Couldn’t manage a week?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t, Val. We are having committee meetings three times a week——”

He lay very still, and stiff as a corpse. He understood now in a vague way why he could not tell her. He was like a man paralysed with fear, and unable to speak, but had she moved a finger, uttered one quick kind word, something in him would have been loosened, and he would have been able to tell her. He knew that he ought to tell her, but some emotion seemed necessary, and there was no show of emotion between them. He felt like a dead man, and calmly she had covered his face with a sheet, and made ready to go to her dinner party.

“What a fool!” he thought, “what a strange—voiceless fool! She is just as amazingly blind as I am amazingly dumb. It’s because I don’t matter _____”

From that moment he ceased to make any effort to tell her. It is possible that he ceased to have the wish to tell her. If he went over the cliff, well, she would be left on the ragged edge of it, horribly shocked no doubt—and frightened, and a little bewildered. But emotionally and physically she would be unharmed, though stripped of her luxuries. She would not be anywhere near starvation. She would be a whole woman, young, comely, desirable, childless, with a little house, a hundred or two a year, and her personal possessions. She would have more than when he married her.

So, he got up out of his bed next day, and sent off three or four telegrams, and had some luggage packed and the chauffeur given his orders. Mary saw him off, standing on the steps of the portico, with a garden and the green park spreading securely at her feet.

“Enjoy yourself, Val.”

“Of course,” said he.

And he was carried off like a wax-work figure in a stage-property coach.

2

But if Fream had no tongue, and his wife no eyes, their world could supply both deficiencies. The irresponsibly wise and the wisely irresponsible gossiped in the train and in the gardens. What was Fream doing, associating himself with Gaiter? There were funny rumours circulating about the name and the reputation of Samuel Gaiter, and Fream was becoming involved in these rumours. Were these two lions or jackals, or was one of them a lion and the other a jackal? Yes, someone knew a clerk in the office of Fream’s brokers,—and the clerk had hinted—— Had he! Then the fellow was a disloyal skunk with too much silly vanity, an underling who chattered, the very worst sort of underling. A cheap little beast who wanted to show off. But the Freams seemed to have plenty of ready cash. He had sent a cheque for £500 to the local hospital. Bluff? O, perhaps! Financial rouge when your face was chalky. But certainly there was something queer about the fellow. He looked ill, more of a corpse than ever. You rarely saw him on the train now; went up in his car.

Leslie spoke seriously to Clare.

“What’s the position up there? Fream has always been such a close chap.”

“You mean—Mary?”

“I suppose he has settled something on her?”

“I don’t think so.”

Leslie said—“Damn! We ought to have made sure of that. But the fellow seemed so safe.” He took a bigger whisky than usual, and looked at the toes of his wife’s shoes. He confessed that he felt rather responsible. There were nasty rumours going about, but to Biddulph Mr. Gaiter was a fact more offensive than any rumour.

“Can’t think why Fream went in with him. No need for it. If you can cut your own ice you don’t get another chap to help you.—And Fream was cutting plenty of ice.”

Clare pondered.

“He’s different,” she said.

“Different! How?”

“I can’t explain it. Something,—since their marriage. Not a complete success—in some ways——”

“O, not so bad, old thing. He has given Mary a jolly fair show. But this difference——? Besides,—what difference could a marriage make to a chap’s money-sense?”

She could not explain it to him, though she had divined a difference.

“Supposing a man’s self-confidence—goes?”

“But why should it? You mean the marriage,—that he was disappointed——?”

She nodded.

“Might be.”

“O,—come, old thing, Marykin as Delilah! That’s a bit far fetched. She has done everything a man like Fream could want her to do. Charming little figure-head up at Hill House, regular de luxe wife.”

“Yes, Mary has done very well,” said her sister. “And she is not worrying. She ought to be wise.”

Leslie opened his mouth to say that a man did not necessarily tell his wife everything, but thought better of it; and Clare knew it as well as he did.

“I might see Fream. But I don’t cotton to the idea. Like asking a chap if his cheque is all right. Better if you sounded Mary.”

“Present her with a few rumours?”

“Well, well,—I leave it to you. Personally I can’t imagine old Percival figuring in a city sensation. Of course—Gaiter may be all right, but he smells of fox.”

And being a sanguine soul he left the matter there.

With her sick grandee away fishing in Hampshire, Mary set out on her second pilgrimage into Sussex, with a hamper packed, and carrying an assurance from the foreman at the “Weyfleet Garage” that “Cherry” was in perfect condition. So was my lady. She felt sleek with an unconfessed curiosity. Her slim legs quivered. This would not be primrose time, but bluebell time. He had taken those primroses from the gate, for she had gone down the lane after dark to find the flowers had gone, and how was she to know that her bunch of primroses had played Ophelia in the “Doomsday” pond. Bluebell time in Gore Wood! She refused to think of it as Rose Wood. Not that she thought of working havoc among the bluebells like those

beastly people who swarm up to Newlands Corner on Sundays, and tear up the flowers and leave their garbage upon the landscape. Bluebells amid the young green would be sufficient. They offered you their perfume. In Gore Wood greedy hands did not commit murder.

Yet “Doomsday” was no more than a great cloud floating over the Sussex hills. She did not pretend to give it her conscious attention; she was to stay a few hours at “Green Shutters,” her country cottage in Sussex, and assure herself that the charwoman was doing her duty, and that old Hesketh’s garden had been put in order. Nice sentiment. She proposed to have the garden kept just as her father had kept it, with the sweet peas in the same place, and the dahlias screening the winter greens.

She was so very modern, still so very young. Life was a game, a round of play; you worked hard at your little amusements in order to escape boredom, and you did not escape it. Like a flying nymph Mary had eluded the pursuit of the faun, but ennui was hard upon her heels, and gaining. She did not realize that her little paradise was full of other bored people.

So, with this incipient plumpness of the soul she brought her sentimental playfulness to “Green Shutters,” and feeling more sociably conventional—or more careful—than on her previous pilgrimage, she floated in upon the Perrivales and the Twists and invited them to tea with her. The charwoman, previously warned, had attended to lighting fires and preparing a bed, and washing up china. “Cherry” was taken up to Andrews’ garage. Milk was delivered from “Doomsday” by young Blossom. It was yellow with cream. In the presence of her visitors she maintained an air of bright melancholy. She showed them the garden.

“It is my idea to keep it just as it was.”

Mrs. Perrivale, a good and simple soul, thought Mary greatly improved. “Quite a dear woman, so much kinder—you know.” Old Perrivale, who had the face of an old and cynical tom-cat, preferred to see in Mrs. Fream’s sleekness the effect of a changed environment. “More milk and more cream on it. Learnt to lap it.” He smiled tolerantly over his wife’s enthusiasms, and loved her for them, knowing that but for her he would have been a completely acid creature. But what was this sleek little city cat doing in Sussex? Haunting field mice? Straying cats may get their heads into rabbit snares.

A thunderstorm on an afternoon in May! Surely it was as unusual as it was unexpected?

She had dared Gore Wood a second time, and was sitting on the ash-grey stump of a felled oak in the midst of a pool of blueness. Wild violets looked at her from the dead oak leaves, scentless flowers, but the bluebells gave all the scent that was needed. A still, close air, and the perfume of the bells suffusing it. The leaf buds of the oaks were bronzing, and the hazels showed a yellowish green, and as the sky grew murky all these colours grew more vivid.

She looked up at the sky. There were great breaks of blue and piled-up cumulus cloud in the east, but the blue-black gloom was behind her. She was not aware of its menace, or of the suddenness with which the ragged grey fringe overhead would spread and thicken. The storm came with a bewildering abruptness; the sun had been shining into the wood a moment ago, and she was stooping to pick a few violets when the first peal of thunder rumbled. She looked up, and a few heavy raindrops pattered on the dry leaves; the flash had been very close, on the hill behind her.

She hesitated, with a protesting look at the sky. She was afraid of thunderstorms, always had been as a child; they roused an unreasoning panic in her. But trees were dangerous; she had neither umbrella nor raincoat, and her rose-coloured jumper and crêpe skirt would keep out no rain, so she picked herself up and climbed over the locked gate into the Gore field. If the storm broke badly before she reached the lane she could shelter in one of the farm buildings.

It did break. The black canopy seemed to rend itself just above her head. A wind came souging through the oaks behind her. She looked up and round,—and ran. Rain pursued her flying feet as she climbed the long slope towards the farm. She was frightened before the storm had finished with her, for half-way up the field a flash seemed to strike into the hedge skirting the lane. The glare made her close her eyes for a moment, and into that brief darkness the thunder crashed as though the sky was falling about her.

After that she ran like a wild thing, mouth open, eyes dark and brittle. She reached the field gate, panting, just as another flash came, and with the crackle of it a sheet of rain dropped as from a rent cistern of lead. She was over the gate like a frightened cat clawing her way over a fence with a dog at her tail. Farm—buildings, no! She ran straight for the house through a rattle of rain, pushed through the gate, and made for the hood of the porch. Her panic was in no by-your-leave mood either. She put a hand to the latch and burst in, dripping, huge-eyed, her mouth a pale crevice sucking air.

Through the doorway of the living-room she saw a man bending over a wood fire, and in the act of lifting a kettle from the hook of the chain. He

turned and looked at her. His face seemed to catch some of the darkness of the sky.

And suddenly the quality of her fear changed. She knew that she was afraid of him, and of the house, but the fear was different, and human. It was less urgent than her fear of the storm. It contained curiosity, a tremor of excitement.

“I’m so sorry—— But may I shelter?”

He looked at her intently. How was she to know that she came dressed in another memory, with her wet hair and face, and the moist rush of the rain for a leit motif. So, Rose had come to him; but how different had been her coming. A pang of pain went through him. How he had missed his wife’s succouring hands! And this useless creature, fluttering in out of the storm, and looking scared and wild-eyed and plaintive!

“I suppose so. Better shut the door.”

She shut it, and seemed to straighten herself, and to shrug herself back into her dignity.

“So sudden.—I was looking at your bluebells.—It will soon be over ——”

His back was half turned; he replaced the kettle on the hook, and watched the fire for a moment, while her eyes were throwing quick glances about the room. It was as she had first remembered it, with its working bench and its litter and its rude maleness. His wife had not changed his habits, or was it that he had gone back to them? And why did he not ask her to sit down?

He straightened. He did not look at her, but out of the west window. And his face puzzled her with its sternness.

“Sit down.”

It was an order, and she obeyed it, moving delicately to the old sofa under the window.

“Please—don’t let me interfere——”

He gave her a quick hard stare which seemed to say—“My lady,—you won’t. If you have come here to play with me—be careful. You played with me before—— I have not forgotten.” He had moved across the room, and was leaning against the table, and when he had given her that wise, hard glance, he raised his eyes to the west window, and watched the rain coming

down. His silence was like the silence of a sky before thunder, but Mary had lived with a silent man. She thought that Furze was shy of her.

“Afraid you will have to wait till it is over.”

She flinched to a flash that seemed very near the house, but though he was aware of her flinching his face showed her no sympathy.

“I have always been such a coward—in a storm.”

Again that hard wise stare of his. “In other situations—as well as storms,” it said. “You should be afraid now—and of other things besides the lightning.” He was thinking too that she had audacity, and that her tremblings and flinchings were part of the play. Provocative——? He seemed to gather himself up; he went deliberately to the door of Mrs. Damaris’ parlour and opened it. He disappeared from her view. She wondered what he was going to do in there; she remembered the breaking of the pink lustre milk-jug; perhaps there was a window to be shut. And then she heard three chords struck heavily upon the piano. He had dragged up a chair, and had opened the lid of the keyboard. He sat down and played Schumann, while pipes and gutters gurgled, and the sky trembled.

Extraordinary man! The piano had not been tuned for a year; its wires were rusty, and so were his fingers, but there was a fierceness in his playing. She sat there, not knowing what to make of it. Was she to regard it as a serenade or as a part of the storm? But she was most strangely affected by it, as though some primal wildness in her responded to both curiosity and fear. It seemed to her to be both a serenade and a storm and that she had escaped from the passion of the elements to the strings of a more mysterious struggle.

Once she rose, either to go into the other room or out of the house. A double storm! She hesitated and resumed her seat, and Schumann went on. So did the storm. She was very wet, and beginning to feel the chill of it, and presently she slipped across to the fire and knelt down and opened her arms to it. A moist vapouriness rose from her figure. And suddenly a great beam of sunlight slanted into the room and its light centered upon her. She glowed.

Schumann had ceased. Furze was standing in the doorway, looking at her.

“It is clearing,” he said.

She rose from her knees. Her eyes went to his and then wavered aside towards the window. What did he want? What was his inward attitude towards her? He seemed to be waiting, menacing and silent, as though he

held her fate in his hands, but was offering her a last chance to escape from it.

“Better go—while it is fine.”

She smiled faintly. He was watching her,—and wondering——. Didn't she understand? Was this mere tricksey wilfulness——? Did she not realize that it was dangerous to play with a man such as he was, a man who felt that there would be a primitive rightness in the overwhelming of her? She had better go while she had the chance.

He went and opened the door.

“It's over.”

She crossed the room and slipped past him, and as she went by him her downward, dark eyes both hid and betrayed her Eve's knowledge.

“Thank you, Arnold.—I'm sorry——”

He watched her go down the path.

“Twice,” he said to himself. “Three would be a fatal number. The chance is in your knees—my dear. Think well.”

XXVII

1



ER EVE'S knowledge remained with her, and she carried it back with her to Hill House, and suffered it to have its way with her and to ferment like sweet wine. Her curiosity had remained unsatisfied. She had her own emotional picture of the man who had been her lover, yet not so wholly her lover as he might have been, or could be—— No, not that, not utterly that! She divined a closed door, and behind it a resolute hostility. But what sort of hostility? She did not think that he hated her; she had never thought so even when she was exclaiming over his hatred, and counting it as homage. He was refusing to be her friend, just a sentimental friend—of course, for though she went nicely shod upon the adventure she wore the shoes of convention. That she was loitering irresponsibly outside a closed door and daring herself to open it she would have strenuously denied. She was Mrs. Fream of Hill House, a conspicuous and responsible young woman; she had a husband and a hospital fête on her hands; she was neither bold-faced nor sly. But like many excellent women she thought that she might allow herself to be sentimental, and to throw the flower of her sentiment at an old lover, and avert her head nicely, and perhaps allow him to touch her hand. “Poor Arnold; I’m so sorry.” And she was to be sorrier than she knew, disastrously sorry, and to be smothered in reality instead of in a little syrupy mess of make-believe.

Her grandee came back from his fishing, and she gave him but little attention. “Much better, my dear, thanks”—and she accepted the statement without scrutiny. Life was proving somewhat pleasant. She presided over the Amusements Sub-committee, and agreed with the decision of the full committee that the fête should be held on June 18 when the grass in the park might be expected to have become hay. O, yes, that could be arranged. Hill House had no need of hay; the grass could be cut and carted away any time in June. Some small man might be glad of it. But—hay? If there was a hay harvest in Surrey, there would be a hay harvest in Sussex! Suggestive thought! She allowed it to penetrate her, to possess her, to perfume her magnanimity; it became a germinating sentiment, a sensitive provocation. Poor Arnold had been her father’s friend. He should be hers. Forgive and

forget. But do not forget completely. Let there be a swift, secret backward glance; a little secure and romantic remembering. Charming Mrs. Fream! She wished to appear charming to her farmer.

Yes, leave it to impulse, let the very adventure itself seem a matter of impulse.

“I am going down again to ‘Green Shutters,’ Val, next week-end—or the week-end after that.”

She made the announcement during dinner, and he looked across at her and yet not at her.

“Just as you please.”

“Before the fête. One can’t leave things to other people,—and I want to see the garden——”

“Quite so.”

He went off into a stare, and when he came out of it he had the look of a man whose doctor had given him grievous news.

“Might go fishing again,” he said.

“Yes, do, Val. It did you so much good.”

He was very silent for the rest of the meal, more silent than usual, but she was accustomed to these mute meals, and his distant gloom cast no shadow over her.

2

June was hot and dry, following upon a wet winter and a showery spring, and in the Long Meadow and in Rushy Bottom and the Gore Furze had never seen a heavier crop of all these spearing grasses, the Ryes, Fescues, Poas, Sweet Vernalis, Foxtails, with white clover to give bottom and richness. They were a wonderful sight these hay fields, especially when the evening sun shone among the grasses, and the silver of their ripeness became gold, and the wild sorrel was turned to flame. Or when a wind blew and the whole field seemed to flow. Each evening, after the heat of the day, Furze would wander down into these fields and look at the ripening flower-spikes. Never had he seen a year so proud of its growth; the foxgloves in Gore Wood stood seven feet high. And the good weather looked like holding.

“We’ll cut to-morrow, Will.”

On the Saturday Mary left her baggage at “Green Shutters,” and drove “Cherry” to the Carslake garage, and walking back in the June heat, heard a reaper at work. It droned like some great insect, and pausing at the end of

the Doomsday lane she climbed the mound of the Six Firs and looked down into the valley. She could see the Long Meadow with the grey swathes running like broad ribbons across the pallor of the shorn grass, and in the centre a square of hay still standing, and the reaper working round it. The two grey horses drew the machine, and Furze guided it. His shirt was a speck of whiteness. Down by Gore Wood Will was scything the dead corner just as he had scythed it three years ago. Everything was the same, the men, the beasts, the fields, the drone of the reaper, the June heat, the smell of the firs. The eternal and beautiful sameness of the soil, seed sowing and harvest, sunlight and shadow!

She felt the spell of it, a drowsy languor, the magic of an old memory, and perhaps she realized that there is repetition in memories and emotions. Nothing is new, but upon the soil everything is renewed, and returns with a happy freshness. Brocades and velvets grow old and dim, but the turf puts on a new gloss each year, and with the soil the soul of man renews itself. It touches the earth and is reborn. Toil and sweat pass, and by the fruits of the earth the soul of man is comforted. In cities it is otherwise. Men chatter, and are never still, reaping a fruitless restlessness.

She turned from that landscape with a curious and deep drawing of the breath. A sigh! Her adventure felt the June heat and the droning rattle of the reaper. She went languidly down to Cinder Town, and made tea, and carried a deck chair into the garden to find a little patch of shade under one of the apple trees. She sat and dreamed herself into a drifting, languid purpose; she was June, a memory, a scent of fragrant grasses. She let herself drift. Hay harvest, the fruits of the soil, pollen and seed vessels, a sinking sun, woods all green and gold, the gradual and subtle sloth of the evening.

Did she call the adventure fate, or guess whither it tended? Perhaps she did not think of it at all, but stole down and away with the lengthening sun shafts, and smelt the honeysuckle in a hedge, and saw the flush of a wild rose. A bat fluttered back from hedge to hedge, coming and going over the old thorns. She passed through a gate, and through a second gate. The smell of the hay smote her. Yes, everything was the same with a disastrous and sweet sameness. The pale swathes had been drawn together. Even the haystack was there close under the secret gloom of the oak trees. The hills were on fire. In the valley the twilight and the dew were falling.

He stood looking down at her, and his face was strange. She saw the tan of his throat and chest where the unbuttoned shirt lay open.

“Why did you come?”

She twisted a strand of hay, and her eyes fell before his.

“I’m trespassing; I know.”

“Twice,” he said; “twice was dangerous. Three times is too much. Life isn’t a game.”

He came nearer and stood over her as she sat in the hay, with the dusk gathering and her face growing white in it. She looked at her knees. She had a sudden sense of her danger, and neither knew whether to be glad or afraid, and yet even when the wave was breaking over her she could not realize the crisis. Serious? O,—a little—. But then—of course— she would speak softly to him, and remain secure, throned upon a memory.

“You haven’t forgiven me.”

His silence seemed to gather like the dusk. It hung over her like suspense, or a question that had to be answered. She tried to put reproach into her eyes.

“Yes,—you didn’t understand.”

He answered her with fierce curtness.

“I understood. You hadn’t the courage to be serious. You wanted to play at life. To me—it wasn’t a game. Life is serious on a farm.”

She seemed to cower a little, to crouch like a bird. And he kept so still, —but it was the stillness of the hunter ready to seize and to hold.

“I was afraid, Arnold.”

“Good God—” he said, and seemed to shake, and she saw his right hand gripping his coat.

“Aren’t you afraid—now?”

“No.”

Her eyes betrayed the lie.

“You cheated me, my dear. I let it pass; I got over it. And you—? What gave you the cheek to come here—and try to play——”

“Arnold!”

“It’s true. You—shirker—. But not this time. Do you understand me ——?”

She seemed all eyes.

“O,—no.—I——”

“We’ll play the game through—to the end.”

She rose, fluttering like a bird, but the flutter did not carry her far, nor had she expected to escape. Had she hoped to escape? She struggled a little.

“O, Arnold—. I can’t,—I’m married——” He held her and was silent, but his silence was like his arms, implacable; he was a man, fanatical, inflamed, conscious of working a primitive justice.

“I’ve known what love is—. But you——”

He lifted her up, held her hard against him, and carried her to the hay-cock,—and there—in a little while she was clinging to him and giving him kisses.

4

It was the words that he spoke to her afterwards, when they were climbing the dark slope of the Gore field, that were scattered like the thorns of a penance under her feet. She had tried to hold to his arm, as though they had come through some shipwreck together, but he had put her aside and walked apart.

“I’m sorry, my dear, and I’m not sorry. Now, everything is finished between us. You have paid for the heartache you gave me.”

And suddenly the slope of the hill seemed to her very black and steep. She faltered; she drooped.

“Oh, Arnold——!”

Her breathing pleaded, and her eyes were as big as the night. She felt broken, unable to bear alone the secret of the thing that had happened to her, or to suffer so exultantly under the shadow of his triumphant aloofness. “Cruel,” she cried—“O, cruel”—, and saw the rim of the moon lifting itself above a hedge, and the hillside growing grey. She put an arm over her face, and sobbed a little, but her emotion was dry.

It was then that he began to speak to her in a deliberate and relentless voice. He seemed to be speaking to himself as well as to her.

“I’m a hard man—my dear—now. I didn’t use to be hard,—but then—life—the way it has treated me.—They tell you that life—and all that it makes you suffer—should not make you hard. I don’t know—. In these days doesn’t everybody hold a knife at life’s throat and growl—‘Pay up,—or I’ll slit you.’ O, yes—. Look at the way the country is being held up and bled.—Hard—yes; you have to be hard. And now—you and I—! Well, what of it—? You dared the hardness in me. We are quits.”

Her face was as white as the moon’s.

“O,—man—” she said, “are you as hard to your beasts?”

They had reached the field gate, and she leaned upon it, covering her face with her arms. There was silence. He stood staring at the moon.

She began to sob, and he looked at her curiously.

“No use—that. Besides—what is there to weep about? We shall never see each other again.”

Her sobbing ceased, and gave place to a little wailing cry.

“Oh,—Arnold! Is it fair—? It wasn’t that that shamed me,—but the reason for it—your reason—. I could have forgiven——”

“There was nothing to forgive.—I’ve made you touch reality—my dear _____”

“O, cruel,” she said.

She hung there, her face between her hands, her eyes on the moon.

“Is that why men—stab women—? Those horrible cases—one reads of. To teach them reality? Oh,—I know I have been a coward—. But need you have made me—this?”

He was silent, standing in the shadow of the hedge. She was shivering; he could feel the quivering of the gate.

“I live on the soil. The soil gives nothing for nothing. No escape—from that.—You should not have come back here, Mary. The soil took its toll _____”

But his voice was gentle. His “Mary” was almost like his “Mary” of the old days, and yet his gentler tone filled her with an indescribable anguish. It was as though his kindness would hurt her more than his hardness. It would utter accusations, accusations that she could not meet.

“I—I think I’ll go home—now.”

He touched her lightly on the shoulder.

“Yes, go home. That other life is yours, my dear. Perhaps I’m not so hard _____”

He opened the gate for her.

“Shall I come along the lane——?”

Again—a little stifled cry.

“Oh—I’m afraid—. I’m such a coward. What have you done to me _____?”

He took her arm.

“Nothing.—And everything. Somehow—we shall have to forgive each other—this. Your coming was wrong, mad. My retort to it—well—savage. I ought to have—thought—perhaps.—But who thinks—always.—Life isn’t thinking—. It is being born—and being made to feel—and being dead. Come,—my dear——”

He led her down the lane, under the shadow of the hedge, and there was silence between them, a silence that had moments of resignation and pity and consent.

Under the Six Firs she put up her face to his.

“Kiss me—just once—Arnold—as you might have kissed me—if I had been brave——”

“My dear,” he said,—and kissed her very gently on the forehead.

And when she had gone from him—alone—into the night—he felt that his hardness had gone with her. Something in him felt humbled and rather hopeless.

XXVIII

1



MARY was close to the gate of "Green Shutters" before she saw the car. She stood still. The bulk and the blackness of the thing were familiar, and the moonlight touched the silver mascot on the radiator of "Phœbus Apollo." His car!

She shook at the knees, for already life had shaken her sufficiently, and she shrank from the thought of meeting him as she had not shrunk before. Something had happened to her; she had been held in the arms of reality, she was a different woman. But that black chariot and its implications had to be faced. She pulled herself together; she felt hot from head to heel; she was a bird beating itself against conjectures.

She saw a dim figure at the wheel, and the peak of a chauffeur's cap.

"Is that you, Sandys?"

The man moved uneasily, and spoke in a hurry.

"Yes, madam.—Mrs. Biddulph—and Mr. Biddulph—. In the house."

She felt a rush of relief. O, only Clare and Leslie springing a surprise upon her! But why had they come in "Phœbus," and at this hour? Her anxiety returned, and in another guise. She opened the gate, and found a figure waiting for her by the porch.

"Mary——"

It was Clare.

"I have been out rambling—. Why?—Is anything——?"

She was aware of a hand; it took her by the arm. She went into the house with her sister, and the house had nothing to light it but the light of the moon. Through an open doorway she had a glimpse of a man standing by the window with his hands in his pockets.

"We could not find anything to light."

With her burden of suspense growing heavier she said that there were candles in the kitchen. But why——?

"Tell her, darling," said the man by the window.

She clung suddenly to Clare.

“What is it,—what——?”

“Something has happened to Val.—You must come back at once. Get your things——”

She asked no more questions. She showed no emotion, but went into the kitchen and lit a candle, and reappeared with a strangely still white face. Her muteness surprised them, the consenting and silent fatalism that seemed to possess her. Did she suspect? Had she known more than they had imagined? Had she been prepared—? The candle flame was mirrored in the large and dusky eyes; it did not tremble; she looked at them strangely, as though she were half asleep.

“You are going back—at once——”

A nod from Clare.

“I’ll get my things.—I’ll not be a minute.”

They heard her ascend the stairs, and they stood by the window and looked at each other in the moonlight.

“She can’t know.—Too calm. An emotional creature——”

Clare was biting a lip. It was a bad business, a deplorable business, and the worst might yet be to come. That is to say the worst as it would appear to Clare.

“She may——”

“Anyhow, she will have to be told. I’ll sit in front with the chauffeur.—He won’t hear——”

“It’s my affair, I suppose.”

“Better from you, old thing.—But she must come to our place—to-night. Can’t take her up there——”

“Yes, she had better come to us.”

They heard Mary upon the stairs. She appeared with a suitcase and the candle, and Biddulph hurried to take the suitcase from her. He appeared more disturbed than either of the women. His voice was kind.

“All right, Mary. Got a warm coat? I’ll lock up. Key’s in the door, isn’t it? You go along with Clare. Right; I’ll take the candle.”

He watched her go out calmly, buttoning up her motoring coat. She had not troubled to put on a hat, and her shingled head looked boyish and sleek and most strangely secure on its slim neck. So must many a beauty have looked, unconscious of the axe, blind to the mischances and the incredible ficklenesses of men and things.

“By George, she can’t know,” he thought; “but—then—women are queer.”

The car was swinging into the main road when Mary asked her question. She did not look at Clare, but seemed to watch the beams of the car’s headlights sweeping the hedge. Black changed to green and green to black.

“What has happened to Val?”

A hand touched her knee.

“An accident.”

“He is dead.”

She spoke as though she knew. She ignored the hand on her knee, and sat stiffly in her corner, watching the road sliding under the bonnet of the swift car. The silver Phœbus glistened.

“How did it happen——?”

“An accident,—at least—we hope so. A pistol,—cleaning it, or playing with it.”

“When——?”

“Some time this afternoon. They sent down to us. We thought it best to come for you.”

And that was all. Mary asked no more questions; she seemed to withdraw into a corner of silence, a silence that was defensive and incomprehensible, and Clare left her undisturbed. She remembered that as a child Mary had always been for secret corners when there had been storms or chastisements. Besides, the affair was too deplorable. You might exercise your tact for ever and do no good. You might smuggle away some unpleasant details. Fream had shot himself deliberately. They had found him in the library huddled up in a chair, the pistol still in his hand.

And Mary! She sat there, wrapped up in silence, looking round-eyed at reality. Such happenings in a few short hours; first, a wound, and pain that was half ecstasy, and then—clapped upon it suddenly—this ice! Something in her still throbbed beneath the cold pressure of the news. She was bewildered. She had felt so much and so poignantly that she had ceased to feel. She sat and stared at a road that seemed to be drawn out of a slit of darkness, and to wind itself into the body of the speeding car.

Reality!

Yet her feeling of bewilderment increased. She let herself sink into a sick-bed of silence; she seemed unable to make an effort, and so to rise to meet reality. She lay and stared with wide eyes at a meaningless white surface. It was past midnight, and she was in bed at “Caradoc,” the occupant

of that familiar pink room from which she had emerged three years ago to become Mrs. Percival Fream. And Val was dead! The signpost had fallen. She seemed unable to realize it.

2

The days that followed were days of mute bewilderment. It was like a fog muffling her world, with all the familiar outlines growing dim. Things seemed to happen in the midst of a befogged silence; they concerned her and yet they seemed to be happening outside herself; life moved in a mist; faces were misty; voices came to her very small and strange. She could not feel. There would be brief troublings of the fog; she would feel a cold wind, some new strange chilliness, and the fog would return. She went about softly and sedately, with frightened eyes, wearing her black with an air of wistful consent. Sometimes she would wonder a little at her own deadness.

She had shock upon shock.

There was the inquest. She had come away from it still more chilled and bewildered. She had answered questions; her voice and her answers had been negative. The room and the faces had seemed all grey.

But Val had shot himself. It had been suicide.

A little whimper of pity had come to her, but it had died like the cry of a new-born child that has not the strength to live. Something stifled it. The fog continued.

There was a funeral, a strange, dry-eyed ceremony, a creeping into carriages and a creeping out of them, black clothes, and still grey faces, a voice. The whole world seemed very still. She glided about in it on soft, shuffling feet.

Then—those other happenings, Leslie's solemn face, his kind and laboured hints.

Hill House was hers no longer.

Nor the furniture, nor "Phœbus," nor Pollock, nor the flowers.

Some strange, dim, official person was in control. There had been public clamour. The very newspapers were smuggled away from her. Clare had a face of still austerity; Leslie's shone like a kind sun through the fog.

A wave was engulfing her world. It was disappearing. Round-eyed, mute, she watched it and wondered.

But at last her silence broke.

"Leslie,—I want you to tell me——"

“Yes,—my dear.”

“What it all means.”

He told her as gently as he could, sitting beside her in the “Caradoc” garden under a lime tree that was full of the music of bees. There had been a crash,—O—yes—a very disastrous crash. A man named Gaiter,—thorough scoundrel. Poor Val had been dropped over a financial precipice. Yes, he—Leslie—was quite convinced that her husband had been a victim. But the results—rather calamitous. People making a fuss, liquidator in charge, Gaiter being looked for by the Continental police, everything sealed up. Poor Val’s will? Well, so much waste paper. Hill House and everything in it, and the money at the bank, and the cars—and the very wine in the cellar earmarked for the creditors.

She listened very quietly.

“Haven’t I anything, Leslie?”

“O, yes, my dear. Your clothes—and jewellery, and all that, personal possessions. And ‘Green Shutters’ is all right, and any money your people left you, and the cash in your private account.”

“Just that.”

“Well, it is something,” he said, “something.”

Her mouth quivered.

“Poor Val,” she said, “O—poor Val. How he must have——”

The fog broke. She floated out into reality, into an April of sudden tears. She was out of her self in a world of pity and reproach, of shadows and sunlight and young greenness, of yearnings and of plaintive memories. O, poor Val, poor voiceless—ineffectual Val! Poor, blind, playful selfish self! Poor Arnold! Poor world!

3

Afterwards a short season of serenity came to her, and she sat and looked calmly at the wreckage, and wondered at it and at herself. She was surprised at her own calmness. She discovered in herself a new and questioning attitude towards the immediate past, and since past, present, and future are all part of the same skein, this questioning mood of hers had the significance of life. Had she been happy? What was happiness? What were the things she had lost? Did she regret the loss of them?

That was one of her discoveries. She did not regret the wreckage, but the manner of the wrecking, her share in it, her participation, the human memory tangled up in it. Poor grandee! He had left her a letter, a pathetic

letter, about the only articulate utterance she had had from him. A dead man's message, piteous, apologetic, gentle. "My nerve went. I could not handle things—or see them.—A sort of blindness. Try and forgive me the mess——"

So, two men had touched her bosom with the hot iron of reality. Women are generous. She forgave them both, but did not forgive herself, and as in the pangs of childbirth there came to her a new day and a new consciousness. The humility of the eternal mother. Women forgive men many things, the passion to possess, the hardness of the striver, the arrogance, their work obsessions, the taking of their toil for granted. But had she not taken things for granted? She knew now that she had. She had moments when she spurned and rent and destroyed. Something was loose in her, a creature that had torn off mere sensibility, and become more finely alive. She understood passion, its cruelties and ravagings, its ultimate sanctity, if any sacred thing is to come out of life.

She had had—as it were—a double annunciation. She had given birth both to death and to life.

"Poor little Mrs. Fream."

There were those who thought that she could be safely pitied, and most of them would have prophesied that she would be an adept at self-pity. She wasn't. Faced with defeat she found that there was more of her father in her than she knew. In the words of the kind and platitudinous Leslie—"Women are queer." But her queerness was sacramental. She might have become a sentimental whimperer, or a wide-eyed widow brushing like a cat against the legs of fortune, or a mere complaining young busybody. She stayed at "Caradoc" for three weeks, and then went quietly into rooms in Weyfleet village. She was a bird of passage, resting on a bough or the rigging of a ship, and she knew it. Whither? The instinct at the back of her mind, the poise before the impulse of the second flight? Perhaps she was aware of its tendency, more aware than she would allow. She had a sense of direction.

It pointed towards compassion. Not to self-pity, for self-pity flutters in a circle. It began as perception. Life had hurt her; she had cried out. Life hurt other people,—and their cries——! Yes the perception grew towards feeling, echoing, understanding.

Who was it that had said to her that life was serious,—and not a game?



ESKETH VINER had been very fond of a row of Michaelmas daisies that screened one side of the vegetable garden. Tall sheaves of green, and bursting into a shower of rose and white and purple stars, a September gale had been among them, breaking the perfunctory bands that Mary's casual man had drawn tight about them like apron strings. Waving every way, or dragging their colours in the soil, they had called for succour, and they had not called in vain. Poor Coode, that leaner upon fences, had come in with a handful of bass and a bundle of bean rods, and had set to work upon the flowers.

He was discovered there, a strand of bass in his mouth, and his arms about the waist of one of the tall clumps. She stood and watched him for a moment. She had wandered down through the garden before entering the house. It had been raining, and a black mackintosh hung over one arm; her shoes were muddy.

"That's neighbourly," she said.

He was startled. He pulled the bass out of his mouth, and went red, and looked at her with one dead blue eye and one very live one.

"I didn't know——"

"No one did. Why should they? My things are coming down in the carrier's van."

His one eye grew bright.

"Things——! Then—you are staying——?"

"Yes,—staying—for good."

She looked around her at the garden, while Coode fingered a piece of bass, and did nothing with it, and devotedly gazed at her. It seemed to him that she was different, but then—of course—she would be different after such a tragedy and so stark a reverse of fortune. She was wearing black, and had let her hair grow. Her eyes looked to him very large and soft, her face very firm and white, but it was the way she stood and spoke and gazed at things that made him aware of her difference. She was very self-composed, more sure of herself, more silent, more deliberate.

“Weeds,” she said, “plenty of them.”

“That chap of yours,” he began, and realized that he was telling tales.

He saw her smile, and her very smile seemed different.

“Who likes work—really? Does anybody?”

“Depends on whom you work for, yourself——”

She moved aside, and looked beyond the garden, and becoming more conscious of the direction of her gaze, turned quickly, and renewed her talk with him. He—too—had resumed his work upon the flowers. Too much gazing was not good for one forlorn eye, and though she was so near he had a feeling that she was farther from him than she had ever been.

“I shan’t need a man now.”

“No?”

“Do things for myself. Besides—economy——”

So she was poor again. How wrong, and yet how right! Poverty set a halo about her, though no one knew better than poor Coode that it is shameful to be poor, for the creed of St. Francis is as dead as the saint. If you are poor you can save your pride by pretending to have no appetite. He drew a length of bass about the green sheaf, and contemplated in her what appeared to him to be an adorable dignity, a high courage. To stoop to weeds!

He was aware of her turning towards the house.

“I wonder—if you would help me—when my luggage comes? There is rather a lot of it,—and one or two packing cases.”

“Of course——”

He glowed.

“Anything I can do,—delighted——”

“Thank you so much——Oh,—and could you spare me a little milk? I did some shopping in the village on my way down,—but milk——”

“Plenty. I’ll get it now—— You’ll want tea.”

He thought of asking her to let him make tea for her,—but he was subdued by the new dignity of hers. Somehow he divined the veil about her, a veil that was not to be touched or lifted. He was one of those sensitive creatures, with a long, round-browed head, and an occiput that bulged out over a thin neck, a self-effacing creature full of “Don’t mention it——” and “Please excuse my glove.” He went off and fetched her his own milk; he could drink his tea without it. She had entered the house. He placed the jug on the doorstep under the porch, knocked apologetically and returned to his asters. But they were her asters. He stood fingering a piece of bass, while his

mind played with invisible knots. Was it quite tactful of him to remain in her garden? Ought he not to efface himself, respect the veil? He tied up one more sheaf, and then nobly slunk away, and closed his gate with nice emphasis.

Mary had entered the house. Her bag stood on the table; her mackintosh hung across the back of a chair. She sat down. She gazed about her with wide and deliberate eyes. She was at home. The room was very small, the furniture shabby and ugly, the pictures still more ugly. Well and good. She looked steadily at everything, the darned hearth-rug, the period-mahogany table, the horrible little old chiffonier behind the door, the chairs with their worn white and green cretonne covers, the three-legged black coal-pot, the steel fire-irons that were always rusting. Here was reality, reality as nine women out of ten know it, a cheap ugliness, makeshifts, shams.

But was it so? She stood up, and her gaze went inward. Objects were objects, kettles, tables, saucepans, forks, sheets, pastry-boards. They were made by and for hands. Human hands. There was humanity behind them. Certainly a woman's work is drudgery, if she had the soul of a drudge. But if she looks on it as something else, service, self-discipline, part of the essential scheme of things,—what then? Work has a soothing quality of its own. It is food and drink. It may contain love.

She carried her bag upstairs into her little old room, and her eyelids flickered for a moment. There was the bed to be made, but first—the sheets and blankets would have to be aired. A fire, that most essential of human tasks, the kindling of a fire. No home—in the country—without someone's hands in contact with blackness, unless you wear gloves. She would wear gloves. She went down with something of the solemnity of a young priestess, and filled the scuttle and brought in wood, and laid a fire in the range and lit it. It burned. She sat on her heels and watched it burn, and remembered how she had hated repetition. But life was repetition,—with a difference. You could make the difference yourself; you could transcend your environment, or make your environment accept your atmosphere. Smile at a mirror, and it smiles back to you.

But she was in no smiling mood. Deliberately she had come to do battle with things that had routed her; she attacked. When she filled the kettle she found that it had developed a leak. Without a frown, but with an air of supreme calmness she exchanged the kettle for a saucepan. Her odd woman about the house had equalled the perfunctoriness of the odd man in the garden. All the china would need dusting before it could be used; the grate was rusty; the scullery pail was missing, and she found it in the garden. A greasy dish-clout hung over the edge of the sink; there was no soap; an

empty sardine-tin, match-ends, and tea-leaves still remained in an old chipped bowl on the draining-board.

She set to work, without haste, and with a face that had a look of austerity. This was no picnic, but a probation; it was for to-day, to-morrow, and all days. She had a house, some clothes, and about one hundred and twenty pounds a year. She neither could nor would afford a servant. Monotony—yes. But monotony had driven her forth upon adventure; she had played, and the play itself had begun to be monotonous. Perhaps she had realized that monotony is your self's self; run from it, and it will follow and leap upon your shoulders.

Besides, there would be someone to observe her seriousness, or—at least—she hoped that he would observe it. Whether a completely disinterested purpose can be discovered is a problem for the theorists; she had her eyes on “Doomsday,” but they had become serious eyes. There was no escape for her from the thought that she had helped to mishandle the lives of two men. In the old days romantic regrets might have persuaded her into a convent, but remembering a live man's arms she set herself to wash pots and pans.

Her baggage arrived by the carrier, and Coode came in and helped with it and effaced himself when he had done all that she had asked him to do. A van from Carslake delivered groceries; another van brought her bread. After three hours of unpacking, and cleaning, and putting her home in order she prepared a meal that was both tea and supper. She had ordered a tin of salmon, and she cut herself rather badly when using the tin opener. Blood flowed. She went and held her hand under the tap, and having bound it up with a clean handkerchief, she completed the opening of the tin. Tea in the kitchen would have saved her trouble, but with solemnity she carried her tray into the living-room and spread a white cloth. Three spots of blood had soaked through the handkerchief, and they showed red as she took up the bread knife and cut the loaf.

Furze, wandering through the wet green tops of a field of mangels, saw from the Ridge her flag afloat. He had a gun over his shoulder, and as he paused to look at the little slanting pennon of smoke the wind made a hollow murmuring in the barrels of the gun. A wet sun splashed pale light upon the glossy leaves of the mangels. The Six Firs stood up straight and blue, and the smoke from the distant chimney was of the same blueness.

“Another picnic,” he thought with the cynicism of a wilful man, and ploughing on through the mangels, he fired at a bolting rabbit close to the

hedge and saw its white scut roll over. The sound of the gun disturbed the heavy melancholy of the valley, and all that wet, September greenness. The rabbit still twitched. Its pug was bloody, but Furze did not notice that blood. With the blade of a knife he slit one hind leg, slipped the other leg throughout the sinews, and slung the rabbit over his gun. The brown body dangled behind his back, and dripped blood upon his old coat.

It was supper time. This dusk would fall swiftly, and it would be dark in an hour, and when darkness came Furze went to bed. Candles and oil cost money, and what had a lone man to sit up for? Books? But books cost money, even the hiring of them, and music had gone out of his life. He lived for the farm, and since the farm's purpose was the exchanging of produce for money, he thought a great deal about money. He was hard. He liked to think of himself as hard; he willed himself to be hard. His heart-wood was oak.

He hung the rabbit up in the dairy and pushed a crock with his foot to catch the drip of the blood. His gun he had hung up over the mantelpiece. Supper was a perfunctory meal; he ate to work. The kettle was singing on the hook, and he made tea. The larder offered him a hunk of mutton and some cold boiled potatoes, bread and cheese. He used no cloth. Plates and dishes were put down anyhow. He used the same knife for meat and bread and cheese. He would kick off his muddy boots, and leaving them lying anyhow, make moist patterns on the red tiles with his socked feet.

That all the graciousness had gone out of his life was an accepted fact, and he acknowledged it tacitly, if he troubled to acknowledge it at all. He was not conscious of a pose, of a wilful and obstinate cult of his own savagery. If he brutalized himself he did it with a stubborn set of the shoulders. He would not let himself think or feel above the level of his byres, or beyond the limits of a root crop. He may have told himself that he did not want to feel; he had felt too much; it was an uncomfortable business. A farmer should be of the soil, or like a boot kicking a clod, or like hands that caught and threw a sheep.

He supped; he lit a pipe; he added the dirty plates to a pile in the sink where they would await his pleasure and five minutes' dabbing with a dish cloth. He pushed his feet into a pair of old leather slippers that were down at the heels. Twilight was at hand; the house door stood open; he went and lounged against one of the door-posts, collarless, unshaven, smelling of the soil. His farm lay about him with dusky trees and sharp-edged buildings, and fields growing dim under a September sky. He absorbed the feel of it, its greasy, fertile productivity, its beasts and roots and stacked grain, its muck heaps and fat pastures.

So, she was back at Cinder Town! He had pitied Cinder Town, but now he despised it, as a man in the force of his years may despise the potterers, and the little dilettante people, poor devils like Coode. His hardness had a touch of arrogance. And how long would she stay in Cinder Town? Three days, three weeks, three months? A widow, and assuredly a widow with some money? Her tragedy had touched him not at all, for he had heard nothing of it but the bare details, and he did not suppose that a financier's widow came naked out of such a scramble. Obviously, she had brought no good luck to the second man; Cinderella had had to weep over the grave of her prince. But had she wept? Certainly, he had seen her weep, and those dusky and babyish eyes all dewy with deceiving tears. Some women weep easily. His wife had not been that sort of woman, but in these days he would not let himself think too much of his dead wife. A hard man should not look back over his shoulder.

As for the memory of that June night, perhaps he was a little ashamed of it, and being ashamed of it, had tried to forget it. Mary had attempted no more adventures, even though she had been more free for them, but—then—when you are free—the adventure may lose its tang. He had added a dry cynicism to his hardness; his glances, when he looked at anything but beasts and crows, were apt to be ironical.

“She'll want milk,—I suppose.”

He allowed her the need—and with irony. Will's boy would deliver her her milk at half-past seven in the morning. Probably she would be in bed at that hour; she would have a servant, and the servant would take in the milk. He mocked—as men will—when they are too sure of themselves. Someone would always take in her milk for her.

It grew dark. He closed and locked the door, and taking a cheap red tin candlestick from the mantelpiece, he lit the candle. The saucer of the candlestick was half full of spent matches, and grease, and gutted candle-ends, but what did that matter if the farm was paying? And it was paying.

Furze went upstairs to bed, put the candlestick on one chair, and threw his clothes anyhow on another. The bed creaked, but once in it he lay very still, and was asleep in twenty minutes.

Furze was coming up out of the yard when he met Will's boy—now a lanky lout—returning with the milk-can.

“Call at ‘Green Shutters’?”

Harry had called there; he had been told to call there. The lady who had been Miss Viner had herself taken the milk from him. He told Furze so.

“She’s got no girl.”

Furze walked on, not deigning to ask Harry how he had assured himself of the absence of a girl, though Harry was now at an age when girls were assuming prominence. Harry called after him.

“’Bout eggs? Says as she wants half a dozen.”

“Take them to-morrow with the milk.”

“Says as she wants they to-day.”

“All right. Take them in the dinner hour.”

Again Furze met the lout coming back from Cinder Town. Something had amused Mr. Harry.

“I took they eggs. Beating a carpet she was.”

Furze asked him what there was to grin about. Carpets and other things needed a stick.

“Hung t’ carpet on the clothes line, and t’ clothes line broke. Broke twice while I was watchin’ of her. She got a sore hand, and couldn’t tie a knot proper. Knot slipped each time. ‘Why don’t ’ee lay it on t’ grass, missus?’ says I.”

He grinned, and Furze’s eyes were frosty.

“And what did she say to that, you fool?”

“Nout. And t’ line broke again as I got to t’ gate. Fair made me split.”

“I expect it did,” said his master.

He was surprised, not at the Sussex peasant’s idea of humour, but by this vision of Mary at work, her battling with the cussedness of inanimate things, knocking the dust out of a carpet. Surely, it was not a job for her delicate and fanciful hands? His thoughts might have touched a more sneering irreverence, but having met irreverence in the person of a wet-mouthed lout, he scowled at it, misliking the loutish caricature of himself. Useless and frivolous she might be, yet she was not for a lout’s laughter. But why this carpet beating? Did it suggest playfulness, or necessity? Lastly, what business was it of his?

He bent to his work. The stubble of the Sea Field was to be ploughed, and he took the horses up to the field. The wheel-plough lay on the land’s end by the gate. The plough wheels needed setting, and the draught adjusting to a dead centre for marking out the headland. The knife coulter had to be fixed at an angle and a little above and behind the marking of the headlands, tilting the plough over to the left so that the land wheel ran on the

ground. Then came the crown furrow, and the second furrow after a shifting of the draught. All this while his eyes were on the sticks, but with the lines of his land map laid out the work became more automatic. Travelling westwards he could look along the near horse's flank, and see Cinder Town lying beyond and to the right of the Six Firs. The little houses had the appearance of cardboard models, each set down in its patch of garden. Almost you could imagine a Sussex south-wester lifting them up and whirling them away.

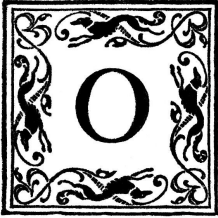
Presently he paused to rest and, leaving horses and plough upon the headland went to the gate and leaned upon it, the toe of his right boot tucked between the rails. He could see "Simla," and Oak Lodge, and "Green Shutters," and Coode's steel hut with a tail tacked to it. One or two tiny figures showed. A man was wheeling manure up the path of Colonel Sykes' garden. A white sheet and something red floated behind Oak Lodge. Someone was working in the long green and brown strip behind "Green Shutters," between a row of peas and a hedge of runner beans. It was a woman's figure. It pushed a fork into the ground, and then bent down as though picking stones.

Furze read those movements. She was digging potatoes, throwing the haulms aside, and collecting the tubers into little groups. Even at a distance he knew the nice shape of her, her slimness, and again he was conscious of surprise.

Digging potatoes!

And she was at it quite a long time, for whenever he glanced from his ploughing towards that little strip on the hillside below him he saw her figure bending to the fork and then stooping to collect the tubers. She was lifting the whole main crop, ten longish rows. The brown earth increased steadily, but very slowly at the expense of the yellow and withering haulm.

His thoughts paused over her. What was the meaning of this labour?



CTOBER came, a beautiful month, tranquil and still, with wide, clear eyes and a robe that grew each day more tawny. The fruits of the earth had been gathered in, and the winter lay hidden in the soil. In the early hours frost was very near, and the breath of the cows steamed at milking time, and the dew on the grass had the look of rime. Leaves began to flutter down and to lie yellow upon the orchard grass, where the windfallen apples rotted or were mere shells picked hollow by the blackbirds. Furze had no time to gather windfalls, nor was it worth his while to pay for the picking. He gathered what he could, or put two of Will's small daughters to the trees, with a few pence and a basket or two of fruit to satisfy children and mother. Most of his apples went to Cinder Town, and some of them to "Green Shutters," where old Hesketh's young trees did no more than fill a good sized tray.

Two weeks of September had passed, and ten days of October, and between "Doomsday" and "Green Shutters" silence held. Then days ran side by side, each day much like every other day, separate, with an aloofness that might seem final. To Furze it had every appearance of finality. He did not bother. He assumed that it made no difference to him her being there, nor could the manner of her being there soften his hardness. It did not alter his manner of living; he slogged about in dirty boots; he shaved when he pleased, wore no collar, piled unwashed crockery into the sink, let cobwebs and dust accumulate. Good muck and money were the things that mattered. He lived now on the assurance that he would allow nothing else to matter.

Yet, signals were flying between them. When Mary lit a fire under the copper, and dabbled her hands in a tub, and hung out her sheets and towels and linen to dry they were there for him to see. White flags, yet not flags of surrender. Furze might hoist no signal in reply, or keep a storm-cone flying, yet there was an inner eye in him that saw, though he might pretend to an obstinate blindness. Always there is duality, the yea and the nay, the positive and negative, the little dark slit of a man's wilful consciousness, and the broad spaces of nature. That a man should look at the world between two

slats of a fence may seem a monstrous foolishness, though he may not wish to see more than he wishes to see, and be a little proud of his narrowness.

The breaking of a silence required courage. It demanded an attack. Mary was more afraid of it than she knew, and yet like Godiva she stripped herself of her fear, and went out to shame man's hardness. Had he not taunted her with shirking the realities? She chose the broad daylight, and the full noon. She did not dress for the part. In her working clothes, an oldish skirt and a black and white jumper, hatless, without looking into her mirror, she left Cinder Town and ascended to the farm. You may strip yourself of fear, and yet be mightily afraid. At the end of the lane by the field gate of the Gore she faltered and fell into a trembling. What was she doing? Riding naked through Coventry? With any Peeping Tom to gloat over her nakedness! And how would the lord of the soil take it, as the challenge of a cheap wench, as an invitation? Her eyelids flickered,—as a woman's eyelids will when she knows herself gazed at too boldly,—but she went on. She held to a courage that was greater than his hardness.

She walked up the path, terrified and heroic. The door was ajar; she knocked.

“Hallo——!” said a voice.

She pushed open the door and went in.

He was eating his dinner, and such a dinner. He was coatless, collarless, wearing an unbuttoned waistcoat over a grey shirt. His muddy boots were thrust under the table. He sat and stared at her, with half a cold potato on a poised fork. She noticed details with a woman's swiftness: the loaf on the bare table, the crumbs, a slab of cold boiled bacon, a pot of jam with a spoon stuck in it, a cup of tea, sugar in a saucer. A sordid meal being eaten sordidly! His coat had been flung on the sofa. She saw mud and pieces of straw on the tiled floor. And yet—most strangely—she was not repelled by what she saw; it stirred in her a quick compassion; instead of squalor, or the incipient brutishness of the careless male, she touched pathos.

That was to save her. But would it save him?

She made the first move. He seemed to sit there rather like a surprised animal in a pen, sullen, resenting a strange presence, puzzled by it. She looked at him steadily, made herself look. She stood by the sofa and waited.

Not a word as yet. Then, he was up, as though pricked by a something in her presence. He removed the coat from the sofa and placed it on a chair. She sat down.

“Please go on.”

He remained standing midway between the sofa and the table. He looked at her under considering eyebrows. He did not appear embarrassed. Then, he sat down again at the table, but he sat square to it, with his feet drawn up, no longer sprawling in conscious solitude. His face was hard, ironical, attentive.

“You used to do my father a favour.”

Furze cut himself more bread.

“What was it?”

“You let him have two loads of manure for the garden. I shall want it.”

He met her glance, full eyed.

“Cow?”

“Yes, cow. Some of my soil is rather sandy.”

Deliberately he spread jam on the bread, using the jam spoon, and she wanted to say to him—“O, don’t do that,—you—a public school man,—you—who could play Chopin——.”

“Two loads. All right. Want it soon?”

“The end of the month will do.”

Two loads of cow-dung dropped outside the “Green Shutters” gate! Reality of realities! He might have left the matter there, but he did not leave it as a mere pile of crude muck. Hard he might be, but his hardness had a certain polish.

“Who is going to shift it for you?”

“I do things myself——”

“You can’t do that,” he said bluntly; “I’ll send Will along. He’ll barrow it and stack it for you.”

“Thank you. But that will be extra. What shall I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

He was curt to the point of roughness. He had begun to be embarrassed; he finished his meal in a hurry, and stood up and looked at the fire. He tossed a couple of logs on to the pile of charred wood and ash and crushed one of them down with a muddy boot. What was the game? He suspected symbolism behind this appearance of reality. Two loads of cow manure! Monstrous realism! Why hadn’t they burst out laughing? But she was serious,—different. She sat on his sofa without a flicker of an eyelid, strangely and mysteriously still, with her dark eyes terrified but steady.

“Things have rather changed for you——.”

He stood with one hand on the high mantelshelf, and still prodded at the log with a boot heel. She made no answer, and glancing round at her he

found her eyes fixed on the table. She gave a little flinching smile.

“It means so much work——” she said.

“Now——?”

“One’s sense of—what shall we call it——? Trying to keep a few flowers in the house.”

He too glanced at the table, and his face darkened.

“Bit of a piggery, isn’t it?”

And then he added with a touch of truculence:

“I like it like that. What does it matter? When muck makes money?”

If she shuddered she concealed the tremor. She stood up. He had succeeded in shocking her, but she was not to be driven from her tower of compassion. Let him but try to pull her down, and she would struggle a step higher.

“You don’t believe that—really.”

Pausing in the doorway, half in the sunlight and half in the shadow, she looked back at him with a slow smile. She spoke very gently.

“If you believed it I should know that the fault was mine—as well as yours. You used to think me a coward——. I am a coward——. I’m frightened to death of you and this old house.”

He remained by the fireplace, staring down at the fire.

“Then—why come? It’s not a playful house, my dear, but a dirty one, a grim one——.”

“My fault—again.”

He looked round at her sharply over a stubborn shoulder. His eyes were searching and suspicious. He did not put the inevitable question into words, but his eyes and his grudging severity put it as plainly as could be.

“Yes,—you wonder——. It’s understandable, Arnold——”

She touched a dark knot in the oak door-post as though testing his hardness.

“Life can be hard. Maybe it is meant to be hard for nine people out of ten. I had three years of softness. Now, I have ‘Green Shutters’, and about a hundred and twenty pounds a year. Just that.”

He made a movement of the head.

“Just that.”

He was not minded to bend, and he missed the look she gave him.

“What shall I owe you for those two loads?”

“Ten shillings a load.”

“And I shall be in your debt for Will’s time. I’ll pay it—perhaps——.”

She managed to laugh, and laughing—left him, but he stood up straight and watched her go down the brick path to the gate at the end of the yew hedge.

“Humbug,” he said to himself, but his oak had a “shake” in it.

2

When she had gone, Furze took a tin of tobacco from the black mantelshelf and filled a pipe. His fingers were deliberate and sullen. He kept glancing at the table and about the room with a suggestion of caution, as though he was afraid to look at it, and was not so proud of its ugliness as he wished to be.

Yes, he had to allow that the place was a piggery. And then something savage glowed in him. Damn her, what did she mean by coming to spy and to criticize, and to bring her delicacy and her little nice squeamishness into his house? Cow manure—indeed! Two loads of it! He struck a match, and threw back his head as though to laugh,—but no sound came. Primroses, bluebells, hay,—and now—cow manure! Women were ingenious cattle! What was she after? Sex, him, a home? But she had a home. Yet what was the ulterior motive? Was she pretending to be sorry? There was no need for her to be sorry for him. If she had any quarrel with his hardness and with the way he lived, let her remember that she had shirked reality three years ago. Cowardice. And she was afraid of him and his house, was she? Then—why the devil——?

He felt evil and he looked it. For months he had been giving way gradually to the brutishness that is in every man, turning his thoughts to “muck and money” where a weaker man might have turned to sottishness. That he was growing miserly, a sloven, and rough in voice and mood he knew very well, and he had gloated over it half defiantly, but when his boorishness was challenged he was ready to fly into a rage. Aptly he might have described it as a slip of a girl laying a stick about a bull’s nose. Like an angry man he exaggerated things, even emphasized his own prejudices, and made a mock of anything that could be described as moral moonlight. Like the farmer asked to admire a grove of foxgloves, he could give a quizzical and sneering look at both the æsthetician and the flowers. “Them things! What we can’t make money out of don’t matter. Can’t say as I have much of an eye for flowers.” He remembered too that she had described her efforts

towards delicacy as an attempt to keep a few flowers in the house. That was the woman's idea, was it?

A woman's idea! Flowers! And at that very moment a memory caught his gloomy scoffings by the throat and choked them. "Be silent. Beautiful things are done by human hands. How dare you scoff,—you man. Was not love yours?"

He stood as though sullenly listening to a reproachful voice, and unwilling to admit a twinge of shame.

"I'm hard. That's all dead and done with."

He moved uneasily about the room. He opened the door of Mrs. Damaris' parlour, and stood vaguely aware of innumerable memories, human murmurings. His head drooped like a tired and sullen beast's. And suddenly he saw himself in the old long mirror opposite the fireplace. He stared. Something very like surprise, a shocked surprise showed in his eyes. He saw an untidy, slouching, gloomy-looking man, standing round shouldered, biting a pipe-stem, hands thrust into trouser pockets. The image of himself looked at himself inimically. The face was cruel. It gloomed at him hard mouthed and dirty chinned above an unbuttoned waistcoat and slovenly grey shirt. It was a face that suggested ill-temper, sordid thoughts, unlovely tendencies. It had no brightness, no quick light in the eyes, no human tremblings about the mouth.

Good God, was his mouth like that?

He was aware of feeling shocked. He took his pipe from his mouth, and approaching the mirror, looked at himself more closely and with curiosity. He had little lines on his face, puckers between the eyebrows, and the eyes stared fiercely. His hair needed cutting; it was all rats'-tails, and straggling over his cheek bones, giving him a shaggy and ominous look. Primitive man! He ceased to be surprised at her fear of him, and he began to be a little afraid of himself as he considered the reflection in the mirror, and wondered why he had not seen himself becoming what he had become.

He surrendered a point. He went upstairs and shaved, and felt the better for it, and stood fingering his chin, and looking in the shaving-glass. Yes, those eyes and that mouth were hard. Could the hardness be helped? But in the future he would be clean, hard but clean. If he did not owe that to the live woman, he owed it to the dead one.

Mary had paused by the field gate of the “Gore.” She leaned against the gate, remembering that June night, and the full moon, and her tears. Below her the oaks of Gore Wood showed domes of greenness flecked with gold. The old thorn hedges on either side of the gate were full of yellow corn and red berries. A yaffle flew laughing overhead and went winging towards the oak trees.

The bird’s laughing note was like a passing salutation. He went from wood to wood, through sunlight and shadow, gay in his green coat, uttering that humorous and exultant cry. O laughter! Had Furze forgotten how to laugh? Could he but look down at his gloomy face, and realize the humorous futility of his gloom,—and then burst out laughing! O, blessed laughter! She wanted to laugh at her own fear, for she was afraid, all trembling between repugnance and pity. She clung to her pity, for somehow she knew that if she did not cling to it with passion, and refuse to let it go, fear would overcome her.

She felt responsible for everything, for that almost filthy room, his hard slovenliness, that look of mockery and suspicion in his eyes. If “Doomsday” had frightened her in the old days, it was far more terrible to her now, and yet terror can attract. She was in the thick of the wood of reality, fighting her way to the light, and calling to him to come with her. “Oh, Arnold, my man.” She knew now what love was, laughter and tears and terror, and a pity that clung with wild hands and would not be thrust off. She had to face love now, a gloomy love growing brutish in that beautiful but grim old house, and though she trembled so that the gate shook she saw her life before her.

These woods and fields, those rambling rooms and crooked stairs, and great dark dairy! The apple trees brushing at the windows, the wind in the chimneys on the long winter nights! Lamps to be filled and trimmed! Muddy boots. A wet lane leading to a village.

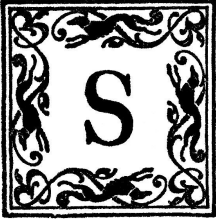
Martyrdom?

No, she cried out against self-pity. This was life, the life of Adam; and Eve had to share it. She clung to the gate with both hands, and her face had a white radiance. She had not given; she had to learn to give.

For in a flash she saw him as a man starving in the midst of plenty, with the fruits of the earth at his feet, and beauty before his eyes. The soul of him was going blind, and like a blind man he did not see the stains, the blemishes, the tragic squalor of his surroundings. He had forgotten how to smile and to laugh.

She stretched out her hands to the oaks of Gore Wood.

“O, dead woman, give me courage.”



HE cooked, she scrubbed, she cleaned, and washed and polished, and made her bed, and worked her garden, and for the first month she went to her room so weary that she felt too tired to do her hair. But she made herself sit down at the dressing-table, and satisfy her self's pride and her mirror. She was soft and out of practice. She was full of aches; her hands were blistered and survived them; she knocked her knuckles and managed to laugh. She laughed at her softness. She made wilful fun of the exquisite Mrs. Percival Fream, that soft and perfumed creature in her rosy marble bath. The Mrs. Freams of the world had their uses; they flowered, they developed the beauty and the charm of an elegant leisure, but a social mannequin was not much use to a working partner. She had set herself to be a working woman, to clasp repetition to her bosom, and to transmute it into service.

As her young muscles grew firm she found herself less tired at night. She slept serenely. She saw very little of her neighbours, for she was seeing so much of her new self. She was able to quiz the future Mary. She supposed that some day she might see herself as a round-backed, slack-bosomed creature with a rather scraggy neck, and hair growing thin, and a complexion that had lost its bloom. A working woman, rather worn and anxious and grey, and perennially tired? Was that the inevitable prospect? If so, was it any uglier than the prospect of becoming a young old girl, mutton dressed as lamb, clutching at every artifice, living in fear of the day when men would cease to look? Did men never look at a woman in any other way? Was there not the comrade's look? "Dear heart,—a wrinkle or two! My wrinkles as well as yours. Scars of honour, beloved pledges." A man might glance at the baby faces, but he would look at the sacred face of his mate.

She endured, and in enduring found a strange tranquillity and a patient strength. She did not think too much. Having taken to-morrow in her hand and scanned it mercilessly, she put it away in the drawer of to-day.

For a week after the tragi-comedy of her quest of two loads of cow manure Mary saw and heard nothing of Furze. She had planted her seed and she waited. She was becoming a little wise as to life and its growth; she had

done with childishness and the digging up of her seed to see if it was showing plumule and radicle. She had come away from "Doomsday" knowing that he had not liked her visit, or its suddenness, or its laying bare of his so-called hardness, and she knew that there was significance in his displeasure. Having let pity loose she had become far more sensitive—and therefore more foreseeing. Either he would quarrel with the brute in himself or he would not. She would help him to quarrel with it, and stand by him terrified and trembling, but devoted.

In her garden a few roots of hardy chrysanthemum occupied an odd corner by the tool-shed, and she kept an old china vase of the flowers upon her table. She had changed the withered flowers for fresh ones on the very afternoon that a grey horse drawing a blue cart appeared outside her gate. A garden fork, standing erect on the top of the load, suggested a mystic symbol.

He had come himself instead of sending Will. She saw him through the window, backing the cart towards the fence. The load was shot out, and the cart righted, and the grey horse tethered to the fence.

She went out to him.

"I hope Will is not laid up?"

"No. Can I borrow your barrow?"

His face had a more alert look, and a sleek and polished chin. She noticed instantly that he had lost that sullen expression. Hard he might be, but with a lean and Roman hardness; the shaggy ape-man had had his hair cut and had put on a collar.

"It is in the tool-shed. I'll get it."

"All right,—I will. Is there a piece of spare ground where I can pile the stuff?"

"Will you come and look?"

As they were returning down the path, Furze trundling the barrow, she asked him how long he would be. Or was he going back for the second load? No; he would bring the second load to-morrow. He was carting the stuff early while the weather remained dry, for you might expect it to break about the third week in October.

"I shall have tea ready."

He did not look at her,—but reached for the fork.

"Thank you.—But after a job like this—you know——"

"It is part of the day's work. Tea is my share. You can wash in the kitchen."

He glanced at his boots.

“I’ll put out a pair of poor old father’s slippers. The horse will be all right?”

“Quite.”

His face and his voice told her nothing. She had an impression of him as man who neither avoided nor welcomed the occasion, but whatever his inward attitude might be she knew that she had gained ground. She left him to the work and went in to get tea ready and to place that pair of slippers for him at the back door. She felt curiously unexcited, but rather tense and strung up and on the alert, just as she had felt in the early days of Weyfleet before one of her social occasions. She put out her prettiest cups, and was glad of the fresh flowers. Since her return to Cinder Town she had rearranged the little sitting-room; some of the old Victorian furniture had been sold or exchanged; she had put up new taffeta curtains of powder blue, and spread a few pleasantly coloured old rugs over the carpet. The table was a Sussex gate-leg. The sheaf of bronze and rose and white chrysanthemum looked well on it in their massive grey jar.

She had a can of hot water ready and a clean towel, and when she heard him at the back door, she put the can in the hand-basin in the sink, with the towel on top of it.

“Here is some water for you, Arnold.”

He was unlacing his boots.

“Thanks.”

“I’m making the tea now. You will find me in the sitting-room.”

Had she seen the way he looked at the clean towel and the can of water she would have been able to smile. He took off his coat, hung the towel very carefully on a hook, and proceeded to wash. His finger-nails did not please him, and when the yellow soap and the towel had done their best in the absence of a nail-brush, he found a match-end, sharpened it with a kitchen knife and used the improvised orange stick. He was taking longer than she had expected; the splashing had ceased, and the tea was getting stewed; she went softly to the door, and being able to see along the passage and into the kitchen, she discovered him solemnly busy upon his finger-nails.

She took her secret triumph back with her to the tea-table.

“Ready.—Arnold?”

“Coming.”

He arrived, looking very serious and just a little self-conscious. She saw him glance at the flowers, and the tea-cups, the thin white bread and butter

and the cake. She used no cloth on the polished surface of the old oak table.

“Sit there—won’t you?”

He sat. She divined his awareness of the room, its feminine atmosphere, its simple and delicate flavour. He kept looking at the flowers.

“I hope the tea won’t be too strong for you?”

“I like it strong.”

All through the meal she was reminded of a big, shy, grave-eyed boy. He looked at her cautiously. He talked rather formally about old Hesketh, and the garden, and ate two slices of plum cake. Obviously he liked the cake.

“Jolly good cake this.”

“Glad you like it. It’s my third attempt. The first had to go into the dustbin; the second—was better.—I ate it.”

She challenged him to smile. He did smile, though it came very slowly. He appeared to meditate.

“You used to make cakes in the old days.”

“I was out of practice. A cook has to have hands. Another cup?”

“I have had two.”

“Why not three? Such little cups.”

He watched her hands.

“Rather pretty cups.”

“Aren’t they. I picked them up in the antique shop at Carslake. A bargain. Won’t you light your pipe?”

He moved a little uneasily, and seemed to question the room.

“O, not here,—thank you.”

“Father used to.”

But he would not light a pipe, and his obduracy pleased her. Also he was replenished, physically and spiritually, and he seemed to desire to carry his impressions away with him. There was work at “Doomsday.” O, yes, she knew that very well. She too had work to do. She was taking a few of the chrysanthemums up to the grave, but she did not tell him so. As he went out of the room she was aware of him giving a quick glance at the flowers and the blue window curtains and the reddening sky. He was putting on his heavy boots when she carried the tea-tray into the kitchen.

“The other load to-morrow?”

“Yes.”

He felt for his pouch and pipe, and stood there, filling the pipe. He looked deliberate,—thoughtful.

“Who is going to dig that stuff in for you?”

“Oh,—I shall.”

He struck a match, lit his pipe, and put the spent match back in the match box.

“Not a job for a woman. I’ll lend you Will for half a-day,—later on.”

“I’ll pay you for him.”

“No.”

“But two teas will not be a fair exchange.”

“Two——?”

He caught her smile, and was a long time making up his mind about answering it. Smiling came hard to him.

“There is plenty of cake left,” she said.

“Thank you.”

His deep eyes stared at her for a moment. He took his pipe out of his mouth and raised his old hat.

“Thank you, Mary.”

When he had gone she folded up the towel he had used, and with a queer tremor of light in her eyes, put it carefully aside in a drawer, for it was her first captured flag, a trophy.

2

He came with the second load on the following afternoon, and the interplay repeated itself, but with a difference. He was less shy, but more grave, and he talked, and his talk was of the life on the soil. She felt that there was a purpose behind his words; he was warning her; three years ago she had humiliated his pride in his job, and now he talked to justify his pride in it, though there was no need for him to justify it.

He said that in these days the world seemed shy of the soil.

“But—after all—we carry the whole crowd on our shoulders. When the revelation comes—if it does come—the last word will be with us. We shall stand over our crops with our guns, and even the Reds will have to cringe to us as they had to cringe to the peasants in Russia.”

She cut him more cake; he needed more sweet things in his life.

“Yes,—the peasant is back of everything,” she agreed, “the man with the hoe.”

“Or the tractor and the cultivator. But the mere machine man won’t do on a farm, Mary. A farm is alive, and live things are exacting. That’s why

the life's so hard. Weeds to fight, and sick beasts to care for, and lambs being born. There is something in me that loves and fights, perhaps a bit too fiercely. I have no use for your city crowds and your cinema people. The soil's king—though he may be in exile just now, but he'll come back when the English city rotter has loafed the country into bankruptcy.”

Suddenly, he smiled at her.

“I say,—this cake's good.”

She laughed.

“A little cake is good—for beasts and men, Arnold. Not too much—you know.”

He pondered a while, with his head down, and then looked at her keenly for a moment.

“I was wrong three years ago. I'm a bit of a fanatic about the farm. I realize now—that it wasn't fair to ask—a—cultured woman to come and live that life. It wasn't reasonable. Work—day in—day out, and not much money; a good deal of loneliness, and few of the things people want these days.”

She watched his face.

“Why do they want them?”

“Because we are supposed to be better educated, more civilized——”

“More restless.—Not facing your realities, Arnold. No coats off.”

Again he smiled at her.

“That's what I think. A gloomy, old-fashioned Hodge, my dear. But Hodge does think. He is not quite an antediluvian fool, and he is getting less so. Pushing a hoe in a fourteen-acre field isn't thrilling. Driving a tractor in a hundred-acre one—may be about as monotonous and lonely. But someone has to do it. The monkey-man will find that out—some day. It may be a bit of a grim jest—I'm thinking.”

She answered him very gently.

“Why—grim? I have seen the pathos of things. I have been ignorant; I have been hurt. Your poor little monkey-men—aren't they pathetic?”

“I'll think them pathetic when they begin to look it,” he said.

That was as far as she could move him. He stood up suddenly as though he had delivered his message, and filled his pipe, though he did not light it.

“Yes, it's a hard life. It's not for everybody. But to me—it's a good life, Mary.—It might make one a bit of a brute—unless—— Well,—I'll send Will up some afternoon.—Anything I can do——”

She followed him to the door.

“And I?” she wanted to say, but left it unsaid on that particular day.

He paused by the corner of the house.

“Suppose you wouldn’t care—to have a look round—ever——?”

“When may I come?”

He frowned at his pipe.

“Next week? Say Wednesday. Bring a friend—if you want to. The bracken is rather fine. If it won’t bore you——”

She smiled at his obstinate eyes.

“It doesn’t bore you—because you love it,” she said. “If one loves something very much—one need not be bored.”

3

While leading the grey horse home Furze’s consciousness was held by those last words of hers. They were true, but only relatively true, for the modern mind has arrived at the blessed half-way house of relativity. The absolute is out of fashion. Furze, having run the blue cart into the wagon-shed, and stabled the grey horse, washed his hands at the pump, and went to the cow-house to help Will finish the milking. With his head pressing against a warm flank, he let his thoughts travel back and forth, until they returned to share his cautious incredulity.

No, such a future seemed impossible. Mary might stand the life for six months, but sooner or later she would weary of it and its drudgery. Her heart was not in it. Mere sentiment is poor cloth for a farmer’s breeches. Moreover, had not his thinking got ahead of his caring? Did he care? Or was it that he was afraid to care, and like the hard and cautious husbandman,—considered a woman’s points as he considered a cow’s? It was necessary. Only a fool would try to make a lady’s hack pull a plough.

But of the two selves in him, the farmer-self might plant his feet in the gateway of life and square his shoulders, while the lover-self went wandering in quest of the heart of healing. Did the soil grow nothing but turnips? Furze found himself lost that evening in a sudden world of beauty, not beauty as a boy sees it, but as a grown man sees it when he has known ugliness and pain. He wandered among the beeches of Beech Ho, dripping with yellow light and autumn splendours, and still clasping leafy mystery. He looked at his fields and his house lying under the edge of the sunset, and suddenly the hardness fell from him like a buckram coat. He was conscious

of humility, wonder. Muck and money! Had this soil of his nothing finer to offer him? Surely, he had been going blind.

Coming down the hillside he had a strange feeling as of walking naked, his body stripped of its clothes, and his skin tingling to the rays of a strong sun. The sensation was physical,—but imaged from within. You cast off your sorry garments, and let something blaze into you, a gentle radiance that warmed and made alive, and eased your thoughts and your feelings. That was it,—you felt; something thawed in you; the stiffness went out of the joints of your soul.

A mood? No, it was more than a mood, for a mood is a mere pool of rain-water that soaks away and evaporates, and this feeling flowed. He knew—as a man knows at such a moment in his life—that the supreme wisdom lies with you in the flux of an inspired impulse. He let it carry him along. He found himself in Mrs. Damaris' parlour, touching the notes of the piano. It needed tuning, even as he did. It needed hands to play upon it with human tenderness, drawing from it all those subtle modulations, the movements of pathos or of gaiety, or the touch that provoked tears. He had suffered its wires—and his to rust.

Presently, he wandered out again into the dusk and along the lane, and a little way down the Melhurst road. It was very still; dew was falling; the trees and hedges wrapped themselves in dimness. He was close to Will's cottage, and did not know it, for he was not very conscious of the outer world. But passing the big elder tree in Will's hedge he heard the sudden voice of a scolding, screaming woman. It tore a cheap and vulgar rage to tatters.

Furze turned back.

“Poor Will!”

But that little, scolding scrag of a common woman had her uses. The evil in her served Furze. Almost he had heard a voice that might have been the comrade voice of his “muck and money” self. He was conscious of disgust, of a deep revulsion of feeling, of a reaching out towards humility. He was discovering for himself a truth that is as old as time.

A woman should be gentle; she should have a soft voice and kind eyes. It was this gentleness that a man asked for, finding in it the honey for the cup of his maleness, and Furze, deep under the shadows of the Six Firs, saw the light of a woman's gentleness burning like a lamp in his man's darkness.

And he thought—“How years pass and the pain of them before we see things clearly! Is the gentle woman out of fashion, or do we find the gentleness when we set out to seek it? The sweetness that saves us from

growing sour in our fields and our workshops! O, gentle hands and gentle voice, and eyes that suffer our tired grumblings, and our comings in out of the rain and the mud. Gentleness wins a woman everything.”

He was made to smile. He went slowly down the lane to his home.

“Yet—what do I know of woman—the modern girl? But is not woman always the same when you kneel down and put your head in her lap? The war of the sexes! There is no war when a woman is gentle, and man not wholly a beast. A man comes back to his woman’s knees.”



MAN wakes when he wishes to wake, and Furze woke very early. Also there are different ways of beginning the day, with haste and a pulling on of any old clothes—mental and otherwise, or calmly and consideringly and with the freshness of the dawn in your nostrils. Furze stood at his open window, and the dawn looked at him like the gentle brown eyes of a dog. “What of the day, my Master?” Verily the day was good. The haste had gone from his soul.

Leaning his arms on the sill with his shoulders touching the oak mullions, he saw the valley full of white mist, and the woods on the hillside more grey than green. A couple of cows were pulling at the wet grass on the other side of the wall of the sunk garden. A robin twittered. An old pear tree stood up a pyre of soft flame against the grey blue distance. Rushy Pool looked like a sheet of quicksilver. Nothing could have been more gentle than this daybreak, or the stealthy way in which the sun pushed feelers of light along the valley and touched the sleeping heads of the oaks in Gore Wood.

It seemed to Furze that the gentleness of the dawn was like the gentleness a woman might bring into a man’s life, a serenity, the tempering of man’s essential fierceness. With him lay the heat of the day, the sweat of accomplishment, but dawn and evening were the woman’s. She was the grey of the dawn, and the cool greenness of twilight. She gave what man lacked.

And what would he give?

He gathered that for the moment he had no right to give her anything but silence. The right of choice was hers. He could but wait in silence, though suffering her to see that the silence had eyes of understanding. But there were things that could be done, and he would set about doing them. Her presence should penetrate and possess the inwardness and the outwardness of life. He could show her that the brute in him was clean and chastened.

A burnt offering! And sudden laughter came to him as he lit the fire for that queerest of sacrifices. His old clothes, sodden with sweat, and the slime of evil humours!

He collected them, breeches, socks, shirts, a filthy old coat, several frayed collars. He stuffed them on the fire blazing under the big chimney, using the poker as a fork. The black cat, couched on a dirty mat, looked at him dubiously, and then—misliking the smell of his burnt offering, arose, and with a look of yellow-eyed disdain, leaped up and out through the window.

Furze laughed.

“Good for you, old lady. May all black moods go out of the window after you.”

He picked up the mat upon which Tibby had been sleeping, and added it to the conflagration.

This was the beginning, and a very practical beginning. He set the doors and windows open wide, piled most of the furniture on or about the table, and after moving his working bench into the yard, turned bucket and broom loose upon the tiled floor. He sluiced and swept it like a stable floor, pushing the spent water out through the porch door and down the steps along the path. Later in the day there came to him a realization of the old house's dignity, or rather—a rediscovery of it, even as he was remembering his own dignity. Coming up across the paddock he paused to look at the great and general spread of “Doomsday's” roof, with the autumnal orchard on one side of it, and the spires of the larches for a background, and he realized the indescribable dim beauty of the old place. He tried to analyse this beauty, and failed. It was like the elusive beauty of a face. All that he could say was that some man had builded well, and that some other man had planted trees, and that the sun and the rain had played upon the bricks and the tiles and the stonework. On this autumn morning too the house had a gentleness, a veiled beneficence. It looked at him with a wise kindness.

And he thought.—“It is possible to sin against the spirit of a house. Houses have seen and heard. They can enter into us as we enter into them.”

He re-entered it with a renewed sense of dignity. He stood bare-headed, thoughtful and reverent, conscious of an inward cleansing, moved by a stir of memories. Surely, a house could be sacred? The old Romans were right with the cult of their household gods. The roof-tree, the home, the hearth, solid things, realities in a world of restless and vain imaginings, something to come back to and to shelter in. For a house can be full of sweet scents, homely perfumes, savours of herbs and fruit, and the smell of flowers and of fermenting juices, and the fragrance of the earth.

He wandered over it, up the stairs and about the rooms, as he had wandered in the old days. He felt humbled, happy, conscious of the human

essence of things, of love and pity, of an invisible presence, of ghosts, sad and gentle. He knew now that he had sinned against that against which it is fatal to sin, his self, other selves, beauty, the eternal mystery of life, those strange yearnings towards something divined but unseen.

He met her in the lane.

Her appreciation of the change in him was instant and vivid. An inward ease had come to him; it showed in his face and movements, and could be detected in his voice. He spoke more slowly, as though the words flowed from a deep spring, and were not jerked half resentfully to the surface. His eyes met hers with a shy but steady kindness, and if there was love in them, it was attentive and silent but sure. He looked larger, as though the twists and contracted ruggednesses of him had been all smoothed out. Serious he might be, but with a seriousness that could break into a little, tolerant smile.

“It is good down yonder.”

He was gazing through a gap in the hedge at the oaks of Gore Wood, and she stood and gazed with him.

“Why do some oaks turn gold and others bronze, and others stay quite green?”

“I can’t tell you.—Like us—they have differences—I suppose.”

She had placed herself beside him as though she belonged there.

“Differences are good. Don’t you think so?”

“Contrasts?”

“Yes.”

He was smiling.

“O,—surely. The discovery came to me the other day. It was about time that I discovered it.”

Coming to the gate of the “Gore” it was her turn to pause, and to stand at gaze, with her elbows on the rail, and her two hands folded over her throat. She had wept upon this gate. She had passed through it into her first great emotional experience, and had felt as a woman feels when reality touches her. Insight comes with a flash. While leaning upon the field gate she had had her first glimpse of the essential sadness of life, and now on this October day she faced the inevitable repetitions, the tasks that man and his civilization have laid upon woman. She was sorry for herself, but sorry with a kind of gladness. She had touched compassion, and knew that one must

pity to be pitied. She thought that what a woman asks for is to be wanted, and she knew that if he wanted her she would go to him.

“Does it make you sad to see the leaves fall?”

He leaned with her on the gate.

“No. They have to fall.”

She considered his words.

“Yes, perhaps that’s it. When you realize that certain things have to be —. No escape.”

He was looking at her intently.

“Sad words, Mary.”

“O,—not so sad as I used to think.”

She gave him a quick glance, rallying herself in answering him.

“You can’t have a meal without washing a plate. That’s so obvious. One tries to escape the obvious, but in the end—you surrender. But then—so much may depend——”

“On the how and the why?”

“I suppose so. But can you understand, Arnold, that a woman’s gorge may rise at a bowl of greasy water? In order to be just decently clean one has to do such a number of things. And refinements? Flowers, prettiness, daintiness, they grow out of the sweat of a woman’s soul. We have always to be brushing, washing, mending, dusting. These are the woman’s realities, the man’s woman.—Aren’t there any things you hate doing?”

“Lots.”

“Tell me.”

“O, messing about.—Well, never mind.”

“I think I know. You hate doing the things that women do.”

“My dear,” he said, and was gently and guiltily silent.

She trembled a little within herself. Inevitable drudgery, and yet with it the inevitable pride! She was groping towards self-fulfilment, even in the conscious struggle of her youth with the problem of pots and pans. It seemed that you had to go down on your knees and wash life’s feet as a king used to wash the feet of a beggar.

“Poor Arnold,” she said.

His shoulders moved, but the movement died away, and he remained apart from her, rigid as the bars of the gate.

“Not a bit of it. I chose this life.—It is a hard life—. It may be a devil of a business trying to keep yourself clean—as well as to make a living. There

has to be effort of some sort; even a parasite sucks. The farmer carries the curse of Adam,—if it is a curse——”

“And Eve too?”

He stared at the woods.

“One has to live—. Funny it should be such a desperately poor business—growing other people’s food. Seems to me, Mary, that a man has the best of it. I’m sorry——”

“Why?”

“Oh, a man gets out in the air and uses his muscles. He is slogging, and building and contriving. The woman has to stick indoors so much. I don’t wonder that women rebel. I don’t blame them.”

She touched his sleeve with the point of a finger.

“But imagine an admirable machine in the house, Arnold, doing all the dull jobs perfectly. Would you like it?”

“Not a bit.”

She smiled deeply to herself.

“No. How could a man? And even I? Even in my little box of a place? When you have got everything nice and orderly, and you can sit down in a comfy chair, and toast your toes.—Watching a machine wouldn’t give you that feeling of satisfied tiredness——”

“Perhaps not.”

It seemed to her that he purposely broke away from the too intimate challenge. He glanced at his wrist-watch.

“I left the kettle on. We had better be moving.”

3

The change in “Doomsday” was as apparent as the change in its master. The frowsiness had gone from it. One glance at the tiled floor of the living-room made Mary remember the qualms it had raised in her with its grease-spots and the debris of food and match-ends and shreds of tobacco scattered about. All this was changed. The brass candlesticks, the canisters, the tobacco tins and pipes on the shelf above the fireplace showed the new order. The work-bench had gone. The room was almost meticulously neat, and she—who knew how much self-discipline so nice an orderliness implied, was instantly touched by it. The room’s neatness was masculine, ascetic, rigid; woman’s neatness is different; it suggests sentiment, colour.

But Furze had forgotten to wind the clock. One of these cheap, old-fashioned clocks, with a painted glass door, it stood on the high mantelshelf, showing a view of a very white windmill on a very green hill. To forget to wind a clock is human.

“Not boiling yet.”

He stirred the fire, and standing back for the kettle to begin its humming, he noticed the silent clock.

“One seems bound to forget something.”

“The housewife’s motto—‘Do it now.’”

He opened the glass face and felt for the key.

“It is all ready in there. Won’t you go in?”

She left him winding the clock, and its busy tick-tock was added to the purring of the kettle. She stood in the middle of Mrs. Damaris’ parlour. Her fear of the house had passed. She was aware of impressions following upon each other like the turning of the leaves of a book. The sun was shining in. It sleeked the room, and her body with it. She pressed her hands to breasts that were still firm and virginal, and her sense of the warmth and the colour of life was quickened. Compassion opens the eyes of the soul. You saw just that which you were capable of seeing, dust and monotony and greyness, or motes in the sunlight, the beauty, the red flower of loving service.

O—this swift awareness! She wanted to lay her hands upon this house, to go up and down the stairs, to feel its emptiness filling with her presence. It wanted her, just as he did. But he was not going to tell her that he wanted her. She divined the restraint behind his silence. How pleasantly silent the place was. Nothing but the ticking of that clock. Vaguely she may have appreciated the fact that in later years she might come to love this silence, this aloofness from the vulgar screaming laughter and the ugly voices of common people and the nastiness of their children. Precious aloofness, growing more and more rare in these machine-made days. The house could possess dignity, distance. In it you could think your own thoughts, and think them as you pleased.

Furze came in with the teapot. She had noticed that the tea-service was different, a cheap and rather flowery thing; but she did not ask him what had become of the pink lustre.

“Will you pour out?”

“Just as you like.”

She seated herself on the sofa with her back to the window. He stood for a moment, glancing round to see if he had forgotten anything, and then sat

down in a straight-backed chair on the other side of the table. She observed a lace d'oyley under the bought cake. Also, he had contrived to provide her with thin bread and butter, cut and buttered by himself. It was a sort of oblation, a practical confession of faith, and she was yet more touched by these little attempts at delicacy. Also she flushed with the heat of a remembered shame. In the old days he had offered her the same simple things and she had spurned them. How it must have hurt him! Yes,—she understood—now—.

He appeared both shy and a little formal. He was entertaining both a friend and a stranger, and she realized how natural it was that he should be shy of her. He did not know what to expect, and so erected the assumption that he expected nothing. Each had much to forgive, but his shyness did not seem to assume that everything was forgiven.

She asked about Bobbo. O,—Bobbo was dead. So many people were dead. He too—he told her with a queer and serious smile—had come to remember that he was mortal. It made a difference—somehow; either you grew more restless—or kinder.

“I think it has made me kinder,” she said.

She divined a question.

“You,—but you are too young——”

“Nearly thirty, Arnold——”

“A child.—Let me cut you some cake. I'm afraid it is not like your cake——”

“Thank you. A child—dear man—is not much good at making good cakes——”

“No?”

“Childhood is too much taken up with eating its cake, guzzling. O,—how pompous——!”

They laughed.

“But I suppose it's true.”

She met his eyes. He was looking at her as though he was discovering all sorts of puzzling changes in her. She was more solid, more sure; her brown eyes were just as liquid, but they had a quality that the Mary of the Viner days had lacked. She looked more firmly fleshed. She had things to say that made you pause and wonder.

“Are you going to show me the farm?”

Yes, he would show her the farm. He still had Will with him and Will's boy. Will was one of those good, dog-like souls; the boy would never be the

man his father was.

“Who helps in the house?”

He had been waiting for that question.

“No one,—just at present.—But I’m getting an old body to come in three days a week.”

“That is absolutely essential, Arnold. A man has to be cooked for. Otherwise—makeshifts—cold potatoes—and indigestion.”

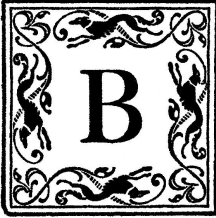
He gave her a grave, shy, upward smile.

“Yes,—that’s so.—One can bless God—you know—even for an old body who can make you Irish stew.”

If she had come to “Doomsday” to be convinced, that little human confession of his would have conquered her.

XXXIII

1



UT as the yellow leaves fell, and November brought grey skies and mud and misty meadows, Mary had to explore the inwardness of Furze's obstinate silence. That he wanted her was obvious; she could not be a woman and be near him without knowing it, though he put on the appearance of being the most practical of friends. Considered emotionally this aloofness betrayed a conscious inhibition, a fear of wanting her, a dread of the depth of the waters of his necessity. On the land the life goes on, demanding permanence. The moods of the weather are the only moods that can be acknowledged, and to fickle weather a man may fear to add the moods of a fickle woman. She felt this fear of his, and in recognizing its reasonableness, was driven to climb higher than her workaday self. She had to face finality. This man was rooted in the soil, and to be his mate she would have to take root beside him.

She thought that she could do it. Her whole impulse now was towards the doing of it. Three months ago she would have used the word renunciation, but now she thought of the future as fulfilment. He had given her proofs of his new understanding. He had prepared and planted his little garden; it was there, as much there as he could make it, but he would not ask her to walk in it.

Her problem was to convince him that she could be a mate, as well as a mistress.

Cinder Town itself impelled her along its cindery track. Romance? O,—perhaps! But one's neighbours are rarely romantic; they live too near. A man visited her, though it might be less than twice a week, and sat most respectably before the fire, and smoked a pipe, and talked of impersonal things. She too went to the farm. She supposed it was known, and it was. People still raise their eyebrows at such adventures. Even the Sage of Simla could speak of "Tightening up your social straps, don't you know. All this post-war laxity,—what!" She was both aware of Cinder Town and unaware of it. This congerie of failures did not matter. Her youth was insurgent. She was not going to be a failure. She was not going to think of herself as a colony of dying trees, people who had no roots, mere members lopped from

the growing world and left to rot. Her man had a job, a job that mattered; she saw it now; he was one of the quiet workers hacking away at reality. He was part of a problem, one of the eternal problems. Man does not live by bread alone. No modern cry—that—in the self-crushing cities. In the years that were to come the man who gave bread and meat might be greater than King Coal.

Divining the deadness of Cinder Town she was able to smile. She could smile at poor Coode's uncomfortable avoidings of her. He tried to turn a blind eye and failed. Simla looked at her rather severely with a glassy one. The Twists showed a certain nice chilliness; the Perrivales ceased to ask her to tea. It seemed to her very ridiculous. It did not hurt her in the least. It reinforced the emotional conviction that she belonged to "Doomsday" and not to Cinder Town. She was growing towards realities, the realities of the soil and the mine and the workshop.

The winter was a wet one, and having dug her garden, and cut the grass for the last time during a spell of comparative dryness, and tidied up all the odd corners, and sorted out pea and bean sticks, she was left with nothing but her housework. She had learnt to organize the work; she found that she had quite half the day on her hands, and when "Doomsday" needed hands it seemed absurd that they should not be used there. The house was crying out for them. Furze's decrepit old "body" was too stiff to go down on her knees. "Doomsday," that strong old house, needed a strong young woman.

Mary would sit and stare at the fire. The solitude of these long winter evenings seemed so irrational, when at the end of muddy lane a man was equally lonely. Yes,—that muddy lane, Sussex mud,—reality! She dared it on occasions, flouting Cinder Town, wading with deliberate patience towards the inevitable! Mud and tears? The mud was unescapable, but the tears had not been wept, though the weeping of them might be necessary. She would weep—if tears would help him and her. She supposed—or rather felt—that no great thing can happen without emotion, or without the shadow of a possible tragedy clinging to it. Her tragedy might discover itself in Furze's refusal to believe in her.

There were chances and prejudices to be dared. She felt at times that she and Furze were like two people on the edge of a cliff, she ready to throw herself over, he capable of pulling her back. "Don't be a fool, my dear; you will only break on the rocks." She had to convince him that she would not break, but here again she discovered a dilemma. Should she take the leap alone, and leave him up above, watching. She would have to cry to him—"See I'm alive. I am not broken.—Believe in me,—follow." And

supposing he refused to leap after her? Then, indeed she would be broken and ashamed.

But, on such a cliff, courage carried the lamp. Sitting solitary before her fire she saw pictures in it. She saw a woman's hand reaching out to pluck out the live coal. It might burn her; it was the old ordeal eternally dared, and sacredly suffered. Love and love's great compassion make such ordeals possible.

So, when three months had gone, she arose and stood prepared. His silence remained, and it was for her to challenge it. If he would have her ride naked through Coventry, then she would dare that ride. There is no shame in generous daring.

She chose a day when his old "body" would not be there. She took what she needed with her, passing on the cinder road poor Coode trundling two chicken coops on a barrow. His one eye glanced woefully at her basket.

"Going shopping?"

No, obviously she was not going shopping. Her basket was full, for him and all the world to see.

"Good works," she said, and smiled.

He paused to look dolefully after her. In fact, he left the barrow outside his gate, and slouching down the garden, played the devoted Peeping Tom. Through the leafless hedge he saw her go up the road and turn by the Six Firs into the "Doomsday" lane. "Doomsday"! Then—why the devil didn't the fellow marry her? Letting her compromise herself! It wasn't nice.

Two muddy cart-ruts half full of yellow water brought her to the farmyard and the pond. No one was to be seen, but she heard the sound of a root-cutter in the barn where Will was feeding mangels into the machine while Furze turned the handle. Food for the sheep and the beasts! While other hands should be preparing food for the man.

No one saw her enter the house. She went straight to the kitchen, taking her basket with her, to find that there was no fire in the range.

"One of his 'cold' days," she thought.

A tray full of breakfast crockery waiting to be washed lay on the dresser. She took off her hat and coat, put on an apron, and hunting up wood and paper and coal, lit the kitchen fire. Her housewife thoughts kept pace with her hands. "A good oil cooking-stove would save time and money".—With the fire alight she explored the larder. On its whitewashed shelves she found a knuckle-end of cold mutton, a vegetable dish containing yesterday's boiled potato and cabbage, half a Dutch cheese, a few tomatoes, half an apple pie with a crust like putty. Poor man! His "old body's" hands had the English

touch. Cabbage and boiled potatoes, and apples with the cores left in. She possessed herself of the cold mutton; she had brought some onions and potatoes with her, also a pot of jam, a tin of baking powder and some flour and raisins. But first she dealt with the dirty crockery and knives and forks, before sleeking herself over her cooking. She found that the oven promised well; she hunted out a pastry board and roller, cake and pie tins, a flour dredger, knives, spoons. She carried in the glass-faced clock and set it on the table. Then she got to work, sleeves rolled up, a woman happily full of kitchen affairs. She was a good cook when she chose, and she very much chose on this December morning. She had a cake and pastry baking in the oven; she contrived a savoury mess of mutton, onion, and crisply chipped potatoes. With her eyes on the clock she knew that he dined at half-past twelve, and that he would come in some minutes before the half-hour, to get what joy he could out of that very joyless larder.

Her excitement grew. She was flushed and bright-eyed, and neither knew it nor cared. By a quarter-past twelve she had the table laid and had put off her apron and resumed her hat and coat. A jam tart, and cheese biscuits were laid out, and a dish of savoury stew ready to be whisked out at the last moment when he should appear at the gate at the end of the path. That would give her time to place her dish upon the table, and escape by the back door, and through the vegetable garden and the larch plantation into the lane. She knelt upon the sofa, and watched.

The hands of the clock, replaced upon the mantelshelf, stood at five and twenty minutes past twelve. She kept her eyes on the end of the yew hedge where the brick path met the grey green of the oak gate. She saw Will and his boy pass and go up the lane. Furze would be coming, and so intent was she on watching for his coming that she did not think of other chances. She forgot the back door as a means of entry as well as of escape, or that a man may develop a respect for his own floors. She was all eyes and no ears, kneeling there in a muse of staring.

But Furze had come round by way of the orchard, and had pulled off his muddy boots at the back door. He entered through the kitchen on his socked feet, and stood in the doorway with her kneeling figure before him at the window.

She was caught, but for the moment she did not know it. Her intent and watching poise as she knelt upon the sofa with her hands resting on the back of it and two rather muddy little shoes turning their soles towards him, had

in it something of a mystery, of dear and eager childishness. He had the countryman's deliberate way of looking at things and of gathering their meaning. He saw the carefully laid table, the white sheen and the smoothness of it, the food that she had cooked. Obviously she was watching for somebody,—for him.

“You——!”

She was startled. She had turned quickly as though the impression of his unseen presence had penetrated to her consciousness, and in her confusion and her quick smothering of it she was to him like light and shadow. She came down from the sofa. She began to button up her coat; she turned up the fur collar; she made herself appear deliberate, practical.

“You will find a dish of stew keeping warm in the oven——”

But her coolness did not carry her very far. Her fur collar was up about her flushed cheeks. She made a little gliding movement towards the door, only to find him somehow between her and escape. He was immensely serious; his eyes looked at her all the while as though holding her and her adventure nailed upon a cross.

“How long have you been here, Mary?”

She tried to hide behind an air of playfulness,—“O, long enough to make you a cake,” but with his eyes still upon her she knew that concealment was useless. She and all the inwardness of her were naked. She looked up at him a little pathetically, but his pathos had courage.

“Mayn't I do things——? I want to. I can.”

He stood very still; he was looking at the table, and his face seemed to her to be both bright and dark. And then—suddenly—he was near her; an arm held her close; she trembled; he was still looking at the table.

“My dear,” he said,—“you shouldn't——”

Her little brown hat was against his shoulder.

“But why——? O,—my dear man——”

She felt the tightening muscles of his arm, and hung on the edge of her crisis. For a moment he said nothing, and she waited, conscious of him as a human cloud charged with unknown forces. The clock ticked. He could feel her heart beating under his arm,—and suddenly his arm relaxed.

“No,—my dear——”

He put her gently away, and his gentleness desolated her. She stood alone, looking ashamed.

“No,” he said.—“You are sorry for me. I'm not quite so selfish as I was.”

He walked to the fire and stood for a moment with his back to her.

“I’m not going to let you be sorry for me. I’m all right now. The devil is cast out.”

He turned squarely; he could smile. And for the moment she was mute, all eyes, repulsed yet not reproachful.

“Have you had your dinner?”

“No,” she confessed.

“What you have cooked you shall share. I’ll say grace to you for it.”

He placed her a chair. He slipped his feet into a pair of slippers, and went and fetched more plates and cutlery and silver, and brought in the dish of stew. He stood by his own chair, with his hands on the back of it, head bowed. “For what I have received—I am thankful.” He smiled suddenly yet slowly at her. “The savour of your offering I will take,” said his eyes, “but not your sacrifice.”

They sat down.

“You can’t; you will be too hot in that.”

She had to rise while he took her coat from her, and laid it gently on the sofa.

“Will you serve?”

“Yes.”

She seemed to hang—disconsolate and tragic over her own hands. She filled his plate and passed it to him, and made her eyes meet his, for the great issue had to be met.

“You don’t believe in me, Arnold.”

“I don’t believe in a woman being sorry for a man, my dear,” he said.

She protested.

“I’m not,—I’m not. I’m sorry for myself.”

He let that pass, and there was silence between them for a while.—“You are hungry, Arnold; I’ll not chatter.”—He raised a slow and thoughtful head.—“Thanks, my dear.” But they were talking to each other over the tense chords of silence, each consciousness pressing upon the other, contending dearly with a passionate awareness of the other’s presence. She felt that she was being judged, that she was riding naked, and yet that he judged her with eyes of reverence and kindness. He had a right to judge. But was he judging? Was he not the man of the soil, saying that such and such a field could not carry the crop she wished to grow upon it? He considered the realities. But what did he think of her cooking? That was a reality. She ate but little herself; she kept her eyes on his bent head; he was eating very slowly. She felt that he was eating her heart.

“Is it all right, Arnold?”

“You can cook, Mary.”

She opened to the full the appeal of her wide brown eyes.

“Not for once—but for always. You won’t allow me that. I know. It is understandable. And yet you have changed.”

“How—my dear?”

“Since the autumn. You know;—the house and you. I allow it to you; it has touched and humbled me. And yet—you won’t allow—that I have changed.”

“I do allow it Mary. That’s why—I don’t snatch—. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“You mean——?”

“Look at your shoes, my dear, all Sussex clay. Five or six months of that in a year; a muddy lane; lamps lit at half-past four. You are too fine and sensitive; you are trying to be generous to me.”

“I’m not. I want to be real——”

His smile puzzled her; it was so deliberate and kind and sad.

“Reality! The soil! Yet what things grow out of the soil——”

“Love does,—and the hard oak,—Arnold——”

“Oak. Hard oak is kind. My dear,—I won’t ask you—. No, it is no good. How much oak would there be left in me if I had to watch you eating your heart out here?”

She pushed her plate away, and hid her face in her crossed arms laid upon the oak of the table. He looked at her. There was a quiver about his lips, and his eyes yearned. He half rose—and sat down again. She was quite silent; there might be tears in that concealment; or it might be the bowing down of a woman in labour and in prayer.

He got up and touched her shoulder very gently.

“Mary, it is not your life, my dear.”

She raised her face from her arms. It was not the face that he had expected to see. It had a bright pallor. She stood up, strong and straight, as though conscious of a burden and her power to bear it. There were no tears.

“I must think—” she said,—“I must think.”

She passed by him without looking, and took up her coat. She put it on, and the dark fur was a soft wreath under the firm pallor of her face.

“What would make you believe in me? Would anything?”

“My dear——”

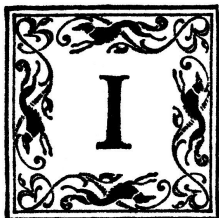
“There must be—must be something. I must go away and think.”

She went to the door, he following her with eyes and heart and head. She paused at the door, opened it, and stood looking along the path.

“You make it hard for me, Arnold,—and yet—yet so easy——”

He would have touched her, but she put out a quick hand.

“No, dear, no, not in that way—and not yet. You don’t know me—quite,—not as I know myself.”



T WAS about three o'clock on a December afternoon, and Christmas Eve, when she locked the front door of "Green Shutters," and picked up her suitcase. A steady drizzle had been falling, and though it had ceased, a grey and smoky gloom enveloped the landscape. She went down the muddy path, opened and closed the gate with an air of deliberate calmness, for Cinder Town was very much about her, looking like a collection of modern "English homes" as exhibited at Olympia. She knew that she was observed by Cinder Town; she had prepared herself to expect to meet people, and she did. Poor Coode stood nobly off the path for her as though he were letting a funeral pass. His one eye observed her suitcase.

"Excuse me,—but are you carrying that to the station?"

She smiled at him. There was no guile in his question.

"O,—no, not so far."

She could not help noticing that he looked shocked. She was sorry, and she was still feeling sorry when she met Colonel Sykes full of lunch and coming from Carslake.

"What, going away for Christmas? Capital,—splendid!"

"Yes. A happy Christmas to you."

"The same to you, madam, the same to you. Your sister's—I suppose. Capital!"

He was considering her and her affairs like an inquisitive old woman, and she showed him a face of austere serenity. Should she blurt out the truth, just for the sake of hoisting her flag? No, surely it was not worth it. So few people deserve the truth. Moreover—in a day or two—they would be able to enjoy her nakedness.

"A happy Christmas to you."

With those ironical, old and homely words upon her tongue she passed on, aware of the interrogations behind the eye of glass. She turned into the main road and went up it until she came to the Six Firs and the "Doomsday"

lane. She looked up at the dark tops of the trees, drew a deep breath, and smiled.

The lane was muddier than ever, pocketed by the hoofs of beasts, and seamed with wagon tracks, but by keeping close to one dripping hedge it was possible to walk upon a strip of grass. She picked her way past the mud-holes and over the ruts. Furze's tumbril had been carting coal, and at one rotten place two large chunks of coal that had been jerked from the tumbril lay waiting to be recovered from the sludge. By the pond the surface was so rotten that faggots had been thrown down, and as she passed over them yellow water oozed up between the sticks.

A faint haze seemed to hang over the byres, and she had a glimpse of Furze stodging across yellow straw with a big zinc food-pan upon his shoulder. He did not see her. She pushed open the oak gate, and went up to the house. For a moment she paused outside the door, her dark eyes looking back along the lane as though she were suffering herself to absorb its muddy significance. Vacillation had left her. She had no need of courage, for her purpose and its inspired impulse made all that she did and dared seem humanly inevitable.

She went in and closed the door. She put her suitcase on the sofa, and took off her hat and coat. The fire needed mending, and she mended it, not as a guest,—but as the hearth-tender. Then she carried her suitcase up the stairs and into the room overlooking Mrs. Damaris's sunk garden, the room where the other woman had slept, Rose, the wife. It had not been used since Rose's death, but it was clean and fresh, and in the bottom drawer of the chest she found two new blankets. She took them out and laid them on the white bedspread covering the mattress. She would need sheets, bolster, pillow slips; she could find those later. Meanwhile, she opened her suitcase and unpacked it, arranged her brushes and mirror and comb and manicure set upon the dressing-table, put out her shoes, and opened the various drawers. Some of them held woman's gear. She left most of these relics untouched, and clearing herself one long drawer, put away her linen and woollens, her nightdresses, her handkerchief sachet and stockings. The spare dress that she had brought with her she hung upon the door. One plain white nightdress was laid upon the bed.

Her wrist-watch told her that it was a quarter to four. Descending the narrow stairs she hung the kettle on the chain over the living-room fire, and going into the kitchen, collected the tea things on a tray. She carried the tray in and set the table. She hung up her hat and coat, using the pegs fastened to the parlour door. The kettle was singing. She cut two rounds of bread from

the loaf, put the butter to warm, and kneeling down, made toast, using a knife as a toasting-fork.

She was kneeling there when Furze came in, and she remained there quite still, as though she had lived in the house for years and had become part of it and its life. He paused to look at her. He hung up his hat. He had left his muddy boots outside the door.

His slippers were by the fire. She held them out to him.

“Ready,—Arnold?”

He looked at her curiously as he took the slippers. There seemed to him something final about her,—a suggestion of fixity.

“Toast—buttered toast—.”

“I’ll make the tea.”

She rose with her plate of brown bread, and the butter dish, and placing both upon the table, began to spread the butter.

“The kettle is boiling—.”

He went to take it off the hook, but paused to look at her. She seemed intent upon spreading the yellow butter on the brown toast. She had spoken very quietly, and she moved as quickly as she spoke. He caught an impression of soft, tragic, still finality. She might have been there for years, doing these familiar, simple things as though she had a right to do them, and would surrender that right to no one. The room seemed very still; the clock ticked; the knife made a crisp sound on the toast as she spread the butter.

He lifted the kettle from the hook, and then stood holding it as though he had forgotten its existence. He had noticed that she had changed her shoes; she was wearing black and silver house-shoes.

“Is the tea in the pot?”

“Yes.”

He was filling the brown pot when she uncovered her crisis.

“I have put my things in Rose’s room. Do you mind?”

His hands remained steady. She was cutting the toast into squares.

“Your things——?”

“Yes,—I can take one of the other rooms—if you would rather. I have unpacked,—but I can move—easily.”

He placed the teapot on the table.

“What things—exactly——?”

She raised her eyes to his.

“Why—my things,—what I want for the moment. I came down with a suitcase. The rest can be packed—and brought down—later.”

She dropped her glances, and pretended to be busy with the things upon the table. He stood there, completely still,—holding the kettle, and she wondered how long he would remain there holding it. She had the courage to look at his face,—but did not look.

She was aware of him hanging the kettle on the hook. It seemed to her that he loitered for an unconscionable time before the fire.

“Mary,—what’s this—mean?”

She sat down and began to pour out the tea.

“I am to be your housekeeper. Come and have tea, or the toast will get cold. If you want to discuss anything, Arnold,—we can talk it over afterwards.”

He stood and stared.

“Housekeeper!”

“Come.—Yes,—they know up there at Cinder Town. I told the Vachetts this morning.”

2

It was the most silent meal that she had ever sat through. His face, perplexed and distressed, was like a mirror into which for some reason she dared not look. She wanted to run to him and take his head in her arms and cry “O—my dear—don’t look so tragic. Laugh,—speak to me.” Once only did he break the silence, holding his cup and staring into it as though searching for an inspiration.

“You can’t stay here, Mary.”

She sat up straight and calm in her chair, hiding her terror.

“But I must. You think I can’t stand this life,—that I’m restless and fickle. A woman wants to be wanted, and when she is wanted she wants to get to work. You will try me for six months.”

“As my housekeeper?”

He pushed his chair back, and went to stand by the fire and fill a pipe, and she turned her chair so that she was facing him and the fire. His face was all cloud, and the gloom of him made her more gentle.

“Yes,—Arnold. Let’s be honest,—let’s be real. You want me, and I—you. But you don’t believe in me yet, and you can’t have me till you believe in me—.”

He bent down and held a spill to the fire.

“But—good God—my dear,—don’t you see——?”

“Of course I see. I’m wide-eyed, dear man. I’m not playing a trick on you. Like Godiva I’m ready to ride through Coventry.”

He gave a jerk of the head.

“But the world—the nice—merciful world——?”

“Of course.—I accept that. And if I fail, my dear, well—I’ll go as I came. When you have failed—in the great thing—nothing matters.”

He leaned against the mantelshelf.

“My dear, it is too much—.”

“But I shan’t fail. Nor will my being here cost you more. I am arranging to let ‘Green Shutters’ furnished. That—with my little income—should give two hundred a year.”

He made a movement of protest.

“Don’t—my dear. It is not that. But don’t you see that I can’t accept——.”

He would not look, and she sat very straight and still and silent until he had to look.

“If you want me, Arnold,—you will let me try.”

It seemed to him that her face was transfigured.

“If you don’t want me—well—nothing matters.”

3

He had to go out again to feed and milk, putting on his muddy boots at the door, and taking a lantern with him, for the night had come down like a mass of wet crêpe. She went out with him to the door and saw him go out. “It is Christmas Eve, Arnold.” So it was; he had forgotten. She stood and watched his figure grow dim beside the swinging lantern, the rays of which played upon the smoking drizzle. She glanced upwards, and realized that no stars would shine on this Christmas Eve, and that they could not be expected to shine, and that her one star was her man’s lantern. It had disappeared behind the yew hedge, but she could trace its passing by a faint and moving aureole like the glow about the Grail.

There were lamps to be lit, and she lit them, and cleared away the tea things, and washed up. She was in the midst of her crisis. It would not do for her to sit still and drift, for she did not know what manner of man would come back to her out of the darkness. Her bed was waiting to be made, and

she lit a candle, and spent a quarter of an hour hunting for sheets, finding them at last in an oak press in Furze's bedroom. She spread them over the backs of two chairs in front of the fire, and while they were airing she explored the larder and considered the problem of his supper.

An hour later she was upstairs, making up her bed when she heard a door bang. He had come in with the milk, and she went to the head of the stairs and called to him.

“What time would you like supper?”

She got no reply other than a distant clanking of cans in the dairy, and presently she heard him go out again.

She tried to smile. No doubt it was a somewhat disturbing experience for a man to find himself the sudden possessor of a young housekeeper, and to be shut up with her in a lonely farmhouse on Christmas Eve. Or was he accepting her at her own valuation, and preparing to allow her those six probationary months? Well, it was she who had issued the ultimatum.

She made up her bed; she would lie in it; that was the most final thing she could do.

By eight o'clock she had supper ready, and had found some mending to do, and was sitting by the fire, steadily stitching, and awaiting her fate. She looked much calmer than she felt, and she was trying to feel that she belonged to and that nothing could move her from that fireside. She was willing herself into the house. She kept repeating the words—“I am staying, —I am staying.” She did not know that he had come softly to the window, and looked in on her, and gone away with a sombre and perplexed face.

The hands of the clock stood at half-past eight. She put her work aside, seemed to reflect for a moment, and then went and opened the porch door. The night was a black drizzle. She could hear a sound coming from one of the buildings, the sound of wood being sawn.

She went down the path and called to him.

“Arnold,—supper's ready.”

The sawing ceased for a moment.

“Hallo.”

“Supper's ready.”

“Have yours. I shall be late.”

She returned to wait. She felt that she could touch no food, for the food that she craved was the proof of his need of her. The clock struck nine, nine loud, rackety, clanging strokes. She picked up her work, and sat with the lamplight shining on her hair. She tried to catch the sound of the saw, but not

being able to hear it, she rose and opened the window. Then she could hear it. It went on and on.

At ten o'clock he was still sawing wood, and she was sitting with her hands lying relaxed and idle in her lap. Suddenly her face had taken on a look of extreme weariness. She sat there for quite a long while before the final inspiration stirred in her. She rose, put her work away, lit a candle and went to bed.

She was in bed when she heard him moving in the room below. She lay very stiff and straight, listening. Presently she heard him come up the stairs. He passed the door of her room, and went along the narrow landing to his. He paused there.

“Good night, Mary.”

“Good night.”

His door closed. She pressed her hands to her breasts. Had she lost or won?



IN THAT dead season of the year a month passed with an eternal drift of rain against the windows, and without ten hours of sunlight to be remembered. The pond overflowed, and oozing over the farm road turned the lower third of the lane into a yellow squelch. Furze put down more faggots. The wheels of wagon and tumbril were caked with mud.

In the house Mary cooked and cleaned and washed and mended, and lit fires and trimmed lamps, and scoured milk cans and pails. For a week she did not go farther than the bed in the vegetable garden where the winter greens grew; she needed them for cooking, and that is why she went.

At meals they sat decorously opposite each other, uneasily self-possessed, while between them stood that bowl of red and mystic fruit towards which neither would stretch out a hand. She had asked for her six months, and he was giving her her six months. It was her probation, and astonished at herself and at him she clasped her burden. She held it hard against her heart, secretly exulting, watchful, calm. She would not fail. She had him in the dark and tender toils of her surrender, and each day she drew them closer.

On the first Saturday when Mary went up to Carslake to shop she knew at once what all the world was saying. It was unnecessary for that little pug of a man behind the grocer's counter to ask her that particular question.

“To ‘Green Shutters,’ Miss?”

“No, ‘Doomsday’ Farm.”

She went out of Carslake with a patch of colour on each cheek, and her eyes both bright and cloudy. She exulted. What more could she surrender? She had begun to understand Furze's awkward and passionate silences, his glances that touched her dearly and then seemed to turn inwards with impatient self-reproach.

Never had he been so fed or cared for even in Rose's day. She brought a daintiness into the house, a perfume, an indescribable something that seemed to cling to the very furniture. Her practically was not all puddings.

Hardly a day passed without his noticing something fresh, some nice detail, a little feminine gesture. The house had changed; it seemed warmer, more intimate, better clothed, more full of colour.

Carrying her Godiva ride to the very alley's end, she bribed Will to take the tumbriel up to Cinder Town, and to carry and load for her some of her possessions. Furze's tumbriel! It was there for all Cinder Town to see, and so was Godiva herself, coming and going and carrying things. Poor Coode saw her; so did Colonel Sykes. It added cream to the scandal.

When Furze heard of it he looked troubled.

“By God—she has pluck!”

Nor was it wantonness, nor the clinching of a bargain, nor the application of more birdlime for the sentimental trapping of her triumph. He knew that, but without quite knowing how he knew it.

Each night at bedtime they went through the same parade. She would rise, put her work away with an air of glowing placidity, while he would watch her half furtively, devotedly.

“I'll be going now, Arnold. Good night.”

“Good night. I think I'll read a bit longer.”

She would go upstairs to bed, and he would sit and listen to her moving in the room above. All life seemed to move with her; she was the breath and the murmur of it. And on more than one night he rose and began to walk about the room.

“Enough” was his cry,—“I was a beast to let her prove it.”

Yet the oak in him still held.

2

Why he woke so early on that February morning Furze could not say. No sound had startled him. Gloom still curtained the windows; he was conscious of both a nearness and a loneliness, something that called.

He lit a candle and dressed. He went out on his socked feet into the passage, feeling that other presence in the house like a sacred flame burning. Woman but not wife! And the careless breath of the world, the gigglings, the irreverences.

And suddenly he felt profoundly shocked, shocked with himself, but not with her. He went softly along the passage, and stood outside her door.

“Mary—beloved——”

He tried the handle; the door was not locked. He went softly in, shading the candle with one hand; she was asleep.

And it seemed to him that she had been weeping while she slept. Her hair made a dark wreath; her lashes threw shadows; her mouth looked plaintive.

“My God,” he thought,—“what is man——!”

He withdrew his hand from screening the candle. And suddenly she woke. Her eyes looked up at him; a smile seemed to tremble.

“Arnold,—what is it——? Am I late?”

He put the candle on the chair beside the bed, and knelt down.

“O, my dear, you are greater than I am.”

She took his head in her arms, and turning softly, blew out the candle.

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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 *Doomsday* by Warwick Deeping]