CONCRETE

A Story of
Two Hundred Years Hence
by

Aelfrida Tillyard

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CONCRETE

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Concrete

CHAPTER I

ALARIC GOES TO THE MATING-DANCE

THE doctor wrote for a few minutes in silence, as he had some rather complicated forms to fill up. Then he turned to Alaric with a smile, holding out a yellow card.

"Here you are!" he cried exuberantly. " 'A+.' I congratulate you!"

Alaric was pulling his white tunic on, and emerged with ruffled curls.

"That's good. So I can go to the mating-dance to-night?"

"Not going to lose any time?" the doctor commented.

"Well," said the young man, looking slightly embarrassed, "I am thirty to-day, and I've been looking forward to this for the last ten years or so. After all, the law puts it off pretty late for us—there doesn't seem to be any reason why we should put it off any later."

"No," the doctor agreed, "certainly not. Young men were eager enough in my day. It is an odd thing, though, there has been a certain reluctance in the last year or two on the part of men to come forward and do their national duty. There has been talk in some quarters, even, that conscription may be necessary."

"Conscription?" Alaric repeated. "Surely any man worth his salt would mate as soon as he got a chance? Besides, it's one of the Citizen's Commandments. Of course, there are always a few rotters about, but they tend to die out, don't they?"

"So one would have thought," rejoined the doctor. "As a matter of fact, 'rotters,' as you call them, are on the increase. One of the most curious phenomena of modern times is a weakening of the will-to-live. It doesn't get into the papers, but there it is."

Alaric looked unconvinced. In his own mind he thought doctors passed their time among the morbid, and consequently their opinion was of little value. A pleasant fellow, the doctor—what a pity his judgment was warped by his profession.

"Anyway," remarked the young man, "*I* don't feel that way. I want a mate. Where are the dances held in my ward?"

“Glad there is no compulsion needed in *your* case!” The doctor laughed genially. “Hyacinth Hall is where young people meet in your ward, and there are dances from seven till ten every third-day and fifth-day.”

“What does one wear?”

“Just the usual whites, with a scarf according to your class. The attendant will give you one in the dressing-room. All you have to do is to show your card. Don’t forget it, that’s all.”

Alaric still lingered, ruffling his yellow curls with his right hand, and looking as though he would like to ask a question but did not know how to begin.

“What’s your job?” the doctor asked, impersonally benevolent and courteous.

“I’m in the Ministry of Æsthetics. In fact, I edit the *Æsthetic Review*.”

“H’m. Very responsible work, that, directing the taste of the nation.”

“Yes,” Alaric agreed. He squared his shoulders. “I like responsibility. Besides, I have an excellent sub, who does the literary criticism, which is really the most important department. We meet the Professors from the Universities, too, every six months, and discuss new Schools and movements with them. *They* think the responsibility is all on *their* shoulders.” He grinned good-humouredly.

“Ever see the Minister of Æsthetics?”

“Not much! He is always over at Geneva. We get on very well without him.”

The doctor laughed too. “My experience is that one can get on very well without any particular individual. No one, I mean, is irreplaceable. After all, it is one of the achievements of civilisation that one man should be as good as another.”

Alaric did not pursue the subject further. Evidently he was thinking of his own affairs.

“About the dance this evening,” he said; “how soon do I have to make up my mind?”

“You mean, if you fail to find a mate immediately? You are eligible for ten years. I hardly think, if you want to know *my* opinion, that you will be as long as that about the business. Anyway, your Intelligence Card would lead one to draw a very different conclusion.”

“Thanks,” Alaric answered. “That’s all, isn’t it? May I go now?”

“Good luck,” said the doctor. “Mind you choose an A+ girl.”

“Suppose she won’t have me?” He put the question jokingly.

“Not much danger of that, I should think.”

A handshake, and Alaric went out into the street. The town time-signal was just marking midday. Another seven hours to wait. He thought of going back to the office to do some work, but remembered that he had put down for a day’s leave, and the other men always laughed at you if you turned up when you were supposed to be on leave. Should he return to his rooms? Bachelors’ Buildings did not seem to attract him in his present mood. He felt restless, elated, happy, and yet vaguely apprehensive, as a runner feels before a race. The evening was a terribly important one. All his education had prepared him for feeling how momentous it was.

Up till to-day he had, of course, as by law compelled, regarded girls merely as companions, and had worked and played with them as with equals. Differences between little girls and little boys were, as far as possible, ignored. Alaric knew that in the Age of Unreason adolescents of both sexes had been forced into premature sex-consciousness by differences of clothing and education, and by curious and unwholesome traditions of sentiment and emotion. Modern psychology had been wiser. The emphasis was on personality, not on sex.

Now, however, that Alaric was thirty and had passed a medical examination, he was bidden to cherish unaccustomed feelings towards women. It was really extraordinarily exciting. More, he was not only going to choose a mate, he was going to get rid of inevitable repressions, and the current of his life-force would flow in an unimpeded stream.

At last, he said to himself, he was going to have the answer to the question he had first asked as a child: “What are people *for*?” He had put the question in varying forms to his father, his favourite schoolteacher, his college friends, his Big Brother. Everyone had given him the same reply, couched in language suited to his understanding at the moment. People existed that there might be more people. The chief end of man was to produce more men.

When Alaric had not been wholly satisfied with the answer, he had been told that he must wait, and produce men himself, and then he would find out that his elders had been right. Till then, he must take it on trust that good little boys grew up and learned their lessons and took care of their bodies until they were fit to mate and beget other little boys, better than themselves. The process was to repeat itself along an infinite series of years. If one were interested in Philosophy, one should hold the theory of the Perfectibility of the Human Race.

It had seemed to Alaric, all the same, that it was wiser not to strain the eyes looking down an interminable vista of little boys, growing up and making other little boys, who in their turn became the fathers of an ever-improving breed of men. Alaric had had his moments of bitter depression, when the perpetual continuity of the human race had seemed to him an intolerable burden. Then he would tell himself that he was suffering from some kind of atavistic taint of melancholy, inherited from his ancestors in the Age of Unreason.

Once, having fought in vain against his dark emotions, he consulted a psycho-analyst, who blandly observed that the trouble was a common one and would disappear when he mated. Alaric therefore tried valiantly to sublimate his feelings, and threw himself with great enthusiasm into his work at the Ministry of Æsthetics. Speculations on the Destiny of Man receded into the background as he occupied himself with guiding the taste of the nation in matters of Art.

Now, all at once, as he stood on the threshold of a great revelation, the question tormented him again. What were people *for*?

Well, he would soon know. He would not be long, he felt convinced, in selecting a mate. Then his vital energy would be liberated, and with the manly exercise of bodily powers would come understanding and serenity of mind. A superb tract of his life lay before him. It was thrilling beyond words.

Swift movement and the upper air were both suited to his mood. He brought his moth out from its hangar and soared away into the clouds.

Hyacinth Hall was all ready for the mating-dance. Alaric was the first to arrive. As he entered an attendant accosted him.

"Grade, please."

"A+." Alaric could not help the tone of complacency that crept into his voice as he held out his card.

"Here is your programme and the rules. Ask the scarf-attendant for a gold eecharpe. Any mating-engagement must be immediately reported to the official hostess. Kindly change your shoes before you enter the dance-room."

The toneless voice ceased, and Alaric passed on. He donned his white gym-shoes, but in his excitement he fastened his gold scarf across the wrong shoulder, and was obliged to submit to having it arranged for him. The sight

of himself, tall and perfectly shaped, with a body both graceful and strong, reassured him somewhat.

The dressing-room was filling up now.

"New, aren't you?" a tall dark man, somewhat older than the others, spoke to him.

"Yes. This is my first night."

"What's your name and job?"

"Alaric. Ministry of Æsthetics."

"Augustus. Head of the Municipal Abattoirs. A less boring job than most."

"Can we go into the hall now?"

"No. You'll hear the time-signal. Two minutes yet. Take my advice. Don't choose in a hurry. I've been to these dances twelve years, and haven't chosen yet."

"Twelve years!" cried Alaric. "I thought you were chucked out after ten. Besides, what's the point of waiting so long?"

"If you haven't gone down a grade, you can renew for another five years. *I* don't want a mate. I only come here for the fun of the thing. Life's so boring anyway."

"You ought to see a doctor," Alaric retorted curtly. "Boring! Rot!"

At that moment Alaric heard someone whisper. "Who's the new A+?"

Then the answer: "Alaric. Editor of the *Æsthetic*. He won't be here long, by the look of him."

Alaric turned round sharply. The second speaker he recognised as Peter 55, Professor of Physical Hygiene at Cambridge, but the other, a grave-looking man wearing the blue scarf of B+, was unknown to him.

"Who's your friend, Peter?" he queried.

"Miguel, Registrar of Euthanasias."

The men bowed. A quick look of instinctive aversion passed between them.

"Time!" Peter 55 exclaimed. "Come along, everybody. Ten minutes for finding partners, Ally. Shall I show you round?"

"Thanks. I'd rather wander round alone, if it is all the same to you."

"Right-o. You can go up to any girl, you know, and ask her to dance. Gold is A+, rose-pink is A, orange is A-, blue B+ and green B. That's the lowest there is. Good luck—wish you an A+ girl."

Alaric stood for a moment on the threshold, looking across the shining parquet floor to the group of girls gathered near the daïs. He felt he had never really seen any girls before. Of course, he knew he had—his chief sub-editor, for instance, was a girl, but in white shorts and tunic, and with her hair cut short, she looked exactly like a boy, and there was no soft expectant light in her eyes to remind him that she was a creature different from himself. But these lovely beings looked like flowers with the petals inverted, wearing the strange dress which was, as he remembered being told, a survival from the Age of Unreason, allowed, by Act of Parliament, to be worn only at mating-dances. His eye was first caught by a tall girl with superb red hair, dressed all in gold. Close to her was a dark girl with a milky-white complexion and big eyes looking at you with a challenging expression. He wondered why she wore the green dress of class B, until he noticed that she had large feet and clumsy ankles. However, one man had already asked her to dance, and she was the first to detach herself from the group. Alaric saw Peter 55 talking eagerly to a girl in rose-pink. She was dark too, with soft wavy hair, a quaint pointed chin, and eyes that seemed to gaze past you into the distance. Surely she should have been wearing a gold dress, exquisitely made as she was! He looked approvingly at her straight neck, the curve of her bust and strong poise of the hips, the firm modelling of her graceful ankles. Lovely indeed—but a little too short, say five feet eight or ten. Still, she appealed to him. He stepped forward and asked her to dance.

There was no opportunity for conversation during the first two dances. Alaric was merely able to discover that his partner's name was Eleuthera, and that she was three weeks past twenty-five. As soon as the music was turned off for the first interval, she said, "We may go out of doors. Would you like to? The garden is fine."

They stepped out through the open side of the hall, and the balmy air touched them like a caress. The sky was covered with clouds, but the garden was flooded with artificial moonlight, and the song of a nightingale was broadcast from a famous old record. Little paths ran in and out among the trees, a tiny fountain or two played in the moonlight. Already some of the couples were beginning to hold each other's hands.

"I know a lovely sitting-out place," said Eleuthera, panting a little, for the last dance had been a strenuous one. "There's a stream down the bottom of the garden, and you can drop pebbles in if you like. There's *real* hay there, and you can sit on it. I expect it is rather squashed, but not many people know the way. Come on!"

She held out her hand for his, and they ran down the path.

“There!” she said contentedly, as she gathered up some hay to make her partner a seat. “Isn’t this great! Now we can talk. What’s your job?”

“Ministry of Æsthetics. Editor of the *Æsthetic Review*. What’s yours?”

“I’m flower-mistress at the school in my ward.” She looked at him keenly. “You are rather a great person, aren’t you? I suppose I’m a sort of subordinate of yours. We are all under the Ministry of Æsthetics, you know. You sent us an inspector round yesterday morning.”

“Did I?” Alaric laughed. “I wish I had come myself. What did he find? Was he pleased with you?”

“Frightfully pleased.” The girl gave a little wriggle of delight. “Standard IV was expressing the Joy of Spring in blue. He said it was the most satisfactory thing he had ever seen, and my children had been wonderfully developed. One of the girls expressed pure lyric emotion in her arrangement of blue lupins. She is our best eurythmist too. I expect she will be getting a State school for Girton in a year or two. It’s awfully thrilling, you know, when one’s pupils do well. Mine are a frightfully bright lot.”

“Of course, they would be, with a teacher like you.” Alaric produced the first compliment he had ever paid, with the air of a man who unwraps a parcel containing treasures.

Eleuthera considered the remark earnestly. “You *do* think, then, that the personality of the teacher *is* important? We are told, you know, in the regulations, not to influence the children too much. It is so hard, isn’t it, to inspire without influencing. And it is *such* a temptation when you get a clever pupil. I wish you would come and see me at work one day and tell me what you think. Is it very wrong of me to invite my Official Superior?”

“Of course not. I ought to have come before and seen the practical side of Æsthetic training. I’ve been working at theoretical stuff too long—though I do a good bit of applied criticism, you know.”

“Tell me,” said the girl. “I want to hear all about it.”

Far across the garden they could hear the sound of the music. Other couples were hurrying back towards the hall. There were quick sharp noises of twigs broken, leaves rustling, and gravel crunching, as the young men and girls ran back from the moonlight into the yellower glare shafting out from the sunshine in the dancing-chamber.

“Don’t let’s go yet,” Eleuthera murmured. “They are having ‘Black Nag’ now. Let’s wait for ‘Newcastle.’ I’m booked with Peter 55 for ‘Newcastle,’ and I don’t want to miss that, but Miguel asked me for this, and I think he’s horrid.”

“Do you like Peter?” Alaric asked quickly.

“Doesn’t everyone?” the girl answered. “Please go on with what you were saying.”

Alaric was puzzled at the unfamiliar annoyance he had felt when his partner had declared she liked Peter, but he could not stay to examine it, and continued: “About my work? Well, this morning I attended a conference to consider the proposed Manual of Æsthetics for elementary schools. As a matter of fact, I drew up the outline myself, though Rachel 15 wrote it. It begins by explaining why we lay so much stress on Æsthetics. John 2,000—he’s the head of Eton Secondary School—said you could not possibly expect elementary school children to understand the historical and theoretical aspect of the question, but we voted him down. I begin by explaining, you see, that two things differentiate man from the lower animals, Reason and the Æsthetic Sense. In the Age of Unreason, men valued a curious product made of a blending of these two, and called it Religion. They imagined a kind of Infinite Man whom they called God, and expended a great deal of energy, which might have been much better employed, in trying to feed their reason and their æsthetic sense on him. The so-called Science of Religion was a mixture of illogical propositions and poetry. Now that we see in it the blind strivings of Reason and the Æsthetic sense to find satisfaction, we can see that it had its place in the evolution of the race, but is now permanently superseded.”

Eleuthera sat up very straight and stiff. “You are going to tell children *that*!” she cried. “Won’t they want—shan’t we *all* want—to know more about Religion? What was the use of scrapping every vestige of the Age of Unreason except a few folksongs and a dance or two, if you are going to tell children about it *now*? Surely the Board of Education will never pass your manual?”

“I don’t see why not,” Alaric observed, sitting up straight too, and squaring his shoulders. “Now that Society is tolerably well organised and we are able to satisfy every child’s reason, and minister to his love of beauty, we have nothing to fear from the old superstitions. *You* aren’t afraid of them, are you?”

“Afraid?”—she echoed the word slowly. “No.” Everything was very still in the garden. The song of the nightingale had been turned off. There was no breeze to ruffle the trees. Even the distant sound of dance music was hushed. Eleuthera’s eyes looked past her partner, away into the dark.

“Do you know a lot about the Age of Unreason?” she whispered. “Would you tell me, if I asked?”

Alaric was startled. “My dear,” he protested, “you know that euthanasia is the penalty for indiscreet questions. You don’t want to give a job to our friend Miguel, I suppose.”

As he spoke, a figure loomed up in front of them. “Who is talking about me?”

“Oh Miguel,” said the girl, not in the least disconcerted, “is it the supper interval? Sitting out here and talking does make one hungry.”

“You are aware you are fined a florin for every dance you cut,” observed Miguel drily to Alaric. “You were down to dance with Rosina and Mabel 7 and Katinka.”

“Oh well,” said Alaric, “that is the worst of a modern community—one has everything one wants free, so there is nothing to spend one’s money on, and mine may as well go in fines. They don’t charge anything for supper, I imagine. They won’t fine me one of the courses?”

At the supper-table he was next to Katinka, the red-haired goddess in the gold dress. She had an excellent appetite, but not much conversation, so when he had elicited from her the information that she was forewoman in a milk-factory some twenty miles away, and had come in by air-bus, he troubled her with no further questions, preferring to watch Eleuthera as she sat with her delicate profile in the line of his vision. Eleuthera was seated between Miguel and Peter 55, both evidently competing for her favour. Alaric could see how their admiration made her glow and respond.

“Don’t you like banana salad?” Katinka asked.

“I’ve finished,” he said shortly, pushing back his chair. He strode over to Eleuthera. “Will you dance with me again?”

She looked up. “But we don’t dance any more after this. We have to go now. We have to give up our programmes in a minute. Oh, look! Barbara 17 and Adrian are reporting their engagement to the hostess. That’s the only one this evening.”

The girl in the green dress and a tall man were standing a little self-consciously on the daïs, where a middle-aged woman came forward to shake them effusively by the hand. One or two of the men clapped.

“Eleuthera,” Alaric whispered, bending over her while the attention of her companions was drawn elsewhere, “mate with me.”

She sprang up and moved a little away from him. “But I’ve only just met you.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Besides—I haven’t given Peter his answer yet.”

“Curse Peter!” cried Alaric, with an energy that surprised himself. “I want you!”

“I’m not going to be hurried by anyone.” The girl tilted her chin a little in the air.

Alaric had not foreseen the difficulty in which he found himself. He had always assumed that when you asked a girl she said ‘yes.’ Reason demanded —well, what *did* Reason demand? “Always ask yourself,” he had been taught, “what is *reasonable*? Always follow the dictates of Reason.”

“Anyway,” he suggested, “you will let me take you home. I have my ’plane on the roof, and Maids’ Mansions is hardly out of my way.”

“I don’t live in Maids’ Mansions. I live with my people in a funny old house beyond South Boundary. If you come with me, you will have to walk.”

The room was emptying now; goodbyes were being said; Peter and Miguel were both waiting for the lady of Alaric’s choice.

“Thank you,” she said, fastening her white coat. “Alaric is seeing me home.”

“Little flirt!” Miguel had exclaimed before they were out of earshot, and Eleuthera’s eyes filled with tears. She and Alaric walked down to the street in silence.

Overhead, the ’planes were busily buzzing this way and that. At their feet the roadway moved endlessly on its strong quiet way, north-and-south in the cutting below them, east-and-west on the level.

“We go right out to South Boundary, till the end of the movable, and it’s about ten minutes’ walk after that,” Eleuthera explained. “Ours was one of the first houses built after the Age of Unreason. It was dreadfully old-fashioned and inconvenient, but we had the milk laid on and a food chute put in, and it isn’t so bad now. Anyway, it is better than Maids’ Mansions. I can’t stand a lot of women together.”

As the roadway bore them towards their destination, Eleuthera kept on talking.

“We are altogether a kind of survival of the past, you know. Mother and Dad have never had any mates except each other, and there are five of us, and we all live at home and don’t quarrel.”

“You *are* lucky,” murmured Alaric. “My mother divorced soon after I was born, and I think she is in the United States of South Africa, but I am not quite sure. Father’s President, so I don’t see much of *him*.”

"*President!*" Eleuthera was enormously impressed. "Do you mean Childeric himself?"

"Yes—but what good is that to me, except to make the other men say I got my job by influence, which is a lie? My father has had six mates and eight children, so it isn't likely he should take much notice of *me*. I don't believe he has seen my mother for thirty years. I call on him at the Residence every now and then—I went a year ago last week, if I remember rightly."

So they continued their way, talking alternately of themselves and each other. He would have walked with her all night, but a few minutes later she was dismissing him.

"Cross the footbridge and take the northbound—it goes straight back to Hyacinth Hall, if you want your 'plane, or you can change at Seventy-Fifth Street for Bachelors' Buildings. Good-night. Yes, I've had a lovely time. Thanks so much"—and she was gone.

CHAPTER II

WHAT CAME OF IT

ELEUTHERA pushed open the front door, groped her way to the dining-room, and turned the sunlight on at half-radiance. The room was unobtrusively furnished in green. Two sides were taken up with vitaglass windows, one with panels concealing wall-cupboards, while the fourth, washed in a rich creamy white, was left bare for the teleflick. The girl felt hungry after her dance and walk. Opening one of the cupboards, she turned the tap and filled herself a glass of milk, then peeped into the next cupboard to see what the municipal kitchens had sent for supper. There was a hot mushroom and malt savoury, with egg and watercress salad, rye crispbread, lactic cheese, and strawberries and cream. Eleuthera selected the strawberries and the rye cakes, replaced the unwanted food in the parcel-chute, and sat down at the glass-topped table to eat. Under the glass was spread a cloth of pale green linen embroidered by Eleuthera herself.

As long as the strawberries lasted, the girl's thoughts seemed pleasant enough. She looked out into the garden, where outlines of trees showed black against a clear sky, with only a few clouds drifting away towards the town, and as she looked she smiled a little to herself as though she saw pictures that contented her. Presently, however, the shadows of sadder thoughts darkened her eyes. Tears welled up. A few minutes later she had pushed away her empty plate, dropped her head on her folded arms and was sobbing unrestrainedly.

Eleuthera did not hear the door open and her mother come in.

"Eleuthera," said Athena, bending over her, "what is the matter?"

"I don't know."

"You do know," her mother corrected her gravely. "Do you wish to tell me, or do you not wish to tell me?"

"I do wish."

"Very well. I will wait till you are yourself again." Athena took a chair, clasped her hands lightly in her lap and waited, with no show of impatience or concern. She was a beautiful woman, perhaps fifty-five or six years old, but with no sign of age about her, except an indefinable maturity of aspect, very gracious and serene.

Gradually the girl's sobs grew quieter, and then ceased altogether. She pushed her hair back from her eyes and sat up straight.

“Mother,” she said, “you know what you have always taught me—never to give anyone pain. At school they always said to me: ‘Develop *yourself*, think of *yourself* first, your first duty is to *yourself*—if you hurt anyone else, he will tell you quickly enough.’ But you always wanted me to be kind and to make everyone love me, didn’t you? You always said pain was the most terrible thing in the world, physical pain and a pain in our feelings. Nothing ever hurt *me*, but oh, to-night I’ve given pain, and it hurts me too, dreadfully! What *shall* I do?”

“Yes,” said her mother. “Go on.”

“It was at the mating-dance. I did love them so to begin with, and now something seems to go wrong every time. I didn’t mind the time Miguel asked me to mate with him and I said I wouldn’t. He’s horrid, anyway, and when people are horrid you don’t somehow imagine they can feel much, do you?” She paused, looked questioningly at her mother. On receiving no reply, she continued with a pout: “Well, I didn’t care if I did hurt him, and Katinka likes him even if I don’t, and he likes her in a sort of way too, but I *do* like Peter 55—he’s so gay and jolly and good fun, only——”

Eleuthera broke off, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Go on,” said her mother. “You can cry when you have finished, if it relieves you.”

“I don’t want to cry!” Eleuthera exclaimed. “It makes my head ache. Peter 55 asked me last week, and I said I’d think about it. I’m not frightfully interested in Physical Hygiene, and he does talk about it such a lot, and I think it’s rather silly having the same name as fifty-four other men in the town, but we always got on awfully well together at school—and—well—I couldn’t think of any special reason why I *didn’t* want to mate with him, so I said I’d think about it.”

“And then?”

Eleuthera hung her head. “This evening there was another man there,” she murmured almost inaudibly, “called Alaric. He’s A+. He’s the son of the President, and he’s—quite different from everyone else. I felt—I felt—I wanted him to be a fire so that I could drop into him and be all burned up. When he asked me I felt I would do anything he wanted.”

“What did he ask you?”

“You know what he asked me. I said I’d think about it—just the same as I said to Peter. Only Peter looked at me, and he knew I would say *yes* to Alaric in the end. Miguel knew too. He said I was a flirt. I hate him.”

“Eleuthera, it is not lawful to hate anyone.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. But what am I to do about Peter? *Must* I hurt him?”

Athena rose. “I see you have found your mate, my daughter. I know Alaric. His writings are noble. Unfortunately, civilisation has evolved, as yet, no way out of the difficulty with which you are confronted. The situation is one which is not dominated by Reason. Therefore Reason can find no solution. Our chief consolation is that these wounds soon heal. You had better go up to your balcony and sleep.”

“Then I can’t help hurting Peter?”

“I am afraid not.”

“But you think he won’t mind for long?”

“Not for long. Good night, Eleuthera.”

“Good night, Mother. Poor, poor Peter!”

After all, the mating-engagement was made quickly enough. Eleuthera looked forward, half with dread and half with desire, to the next mating-dance, but Alaric sought her out at school on the following morning. He found her in the garden, seated at the foot of a tree, with her white-clad pupils round her. Alaric explained, a little self-consciously, that he had come to see a lesson in Practical Æsthetics, with a view to embodying his observations in the school book he was writing.

“Certainly,” answered the young teacher. “We are dancing to the flowers, to express our joy in their beauty. Colley sings for us.” With a gesture she showed a boy, somewhat taller than the others, who was leaning against the tree trunk. “Now, Colley, sing.”

Without a trace of embarrassment, the boy sang. The song and words were evidently all his own, trills and runs and lilts, soaring up and running down the scale, swaying and darting like a bird in flight. As he sang, he looked up into the blue sky, infinitely absorbed and content. Meanwhile, the children were dancing round the tree, now joining hands in a ring, now racing away in twos and threes to bend over the flowers, swinging their arms in free, happy manifestation of delight.

“Exquisite!” exclaimed Alaric, when they had done. “The most beautiful exercise I have ever seen!”

Eleuthera flushed with delight. “Do you really think so? It’s all my idea —I mean, dancing to the flowers—only, of course, they interpret it in their own way. Children, you can rest for a few minutes now.”

The children flung themselves on the grass, kicking up their legs in the sunshine as they lay at full length. Only the boy who had sung wandered by himself among the flowers.

"*He's* a genius," murmured Eleuthera. Then she laughed. "*All* my children are something special. It's most fascinating work. I'm terribly keen on it."

She was talking eagerly about her work, making pretty animated gestures, when the grave note of a gong sounded across the garden. Everyone sprang up.

"Dinner!" shouted one of the boys at the top of his voice.

"Run away and wash your hands," the teacher ordered—but the children were already half-way across the lawn.

Alaric rose and took the girl's hand to detain her a moment. "Eleuthera," he said, "I loved you last night at the dance, but I love you even more here. Tell me at once that you will mate with me?"

Quite simply, she lifted her face for a kiss, and as their lips met they felt as though all the beauty and joy of the flowers and the garden and the fresh summer morning were gathered into their caress.

A small piping voice disturbed them.

"Please, teacher, why do you squeeze your face against that man's like that?"

Alaric turned with a scowl, Eleuthera with a smile of recognition and amusement.

"Oh Jimmy, is that you? Why aren't you washing your hands with the others?"

A very small boy, with big head set on a frail body, was looking at them with wistful eyes.

"No one ever squeezes his face against mine like that, nor puts his arm round me neither." His voice trailed off into a whimper.

"He's a boarder," Eleuthera explained. "Kissing is against the rules as disgienic. Why, Jimmy darling," she continued, raising her voice, "you know everybody loves you. This is only a way big people have of saying 'I love you.' "

"I wish someone would say it to *me*!" Jimmy rubbed his knuckles into his eyes.

"Run along now!" the young teacher urged. "There is the second gong. There are going to be strawberries to-day—don't you want any strawberries?"

He trotted off down the grass path, a quaint, ungainly, pathetic figure.

"Doesn't look very fit, does he?" Alaric commented. "What's the trouble?"

“I *know*.” Eleuthera’s tone was very earnest and anxious. “He just *won’t* grow, and he never seems quite well. His parents divorced when he was four, and the thing is that he can just remember his mother. He is seven now, but he still cries in the night and wakes the other children in the balconies. Poor Jimmy, he loves me and follows me like my shadow when he gets a chance. I wanted to take him home to live with me, but, of course, it was against the rules.”

“Oughtn’t he to go to a special school—seaside or something?”

“It’s been tried, but nothing seems to do any good. He failed in his medical last year, and I’m so *terribly* afraid he’s going to fail again——” Her voice broke off expressively.

“Euthanasia?”

She nodded. “And he’s only *seven*. I think it’s brutal!”

“You must put the race first. Besides, if the poor little chap is miserable . . .”

“I don’t know. I feel there’s something in him worth keeping—something more and better than just strong muscles and all that sort of thing.”

“You mean he is good at his work?”

“No, not a bit. I mean—I mean, he’s just *Jimmy*, and no one else is quite that.”

The little boy came trotting back to her along the path.

“I *knew* I’d somefing to ask you!” he exclaimed in a tone of triumph.

“Oh Jimmy,” she cried reproachfully, “how late you’ll be!”

“Not no later nor you. Please, teacher, tell me, what is with me when I’m alone?”

Eleuthera gravely considered the question. “Is it a riddle, Jimmy?”

“No, it’s an I-want-to-know.”

“Do you mean something nice or something horrid?”

“Nice.”

Alaric looked with aroused interest at the keen little face, all alert for information. “I know what it is, my boy. It is your own thoughts about the Beautiful.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Not like that. It’s like wings I can’t see. Not flying-about wings, but what baby chickens gets under. Please, teacher, what is it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, Jimmy. What do you think he means, Alaric?”

“Haven’t a notion. Queer child, anyway.”

Jimmy slipped his hand into hers. “I’m not going to dinner till you come, teacher. Send that man away.”

Alaric looked none too pleased. “I suppose I’d better be going. Then I may put that notice up at the Town Hall, Eleuthera?”

“Which notice?”

“*Our* notice.”

She gave him a shy look of comprehension. “Yes, if you really want to. Come, Jimmy. . . .”

CHAPTER III

AT THE RESIDENCE

ALARIC swooped down towards the broad gravel drive, hovered a moment or two to see that all was clear, landed, climbed out of his moth and parked it under a tree. Discarding his coat, cap and gloves, and shaking his curls with pleasure at having no headgear, he walked up the steps to the door of the Residence. A man wearing the white uniform of the Republic, with red strappings on collar and cuffs, sat on the top step reading a newspaper. He was the sentry on guard.

"Hullo, Mortimer!" Alaric addressed him. "Busy as usual?"

"Hullo, Alaric!" answered the man. "Come to see your dad? Orders, he's not to be disturbed till four. He's having a siesta on the balcony. What have *you* been doing? Thank Heaven, my time here is nearly up. If you're as fed up with anything as I am with the view from this step, I'm sorry for you."

Alaric laughed. "I should try to give artistic expression to my reactions instead of grousing about it."

He turned and looked back. Below him lay parkland and trees, the whole sweep of Hampstead Heath undulating at his feet; beyond, the white towers and roofs of London sparkling in the unpolluted air. In the clear sky innumerable aeroplanes darted over the city, as gleaming dragonflies dart above a pool, while here and there a silver-shining airship seemed to hang majestically poised. The sound of woodpigeons in the elms mingled with the soft whir of the propellers, and somewhere in the distance a cuckoo called.

"Ah, *you* would," grumbled Mortimer. "I'm fed up—fed up."

"You should get engaged," said Alaric, "like me. My mating-engagement was posted at the Town Hall this morning."

He had more to say on the subject, but up the steps, with a slow, dignified walk, came a middle-aged man, who laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Greetings, Little Brother."

It was Manlius, Chief Secretary of State for Reason, second in power to the President alone. For the Ministry of Reason occupies a position analogous to that of the Treasury, and just as no measure can pass the two houses if there be no chance of financial support, so no Act can find favour unless it survive the scrutiny of the Minister of Reason. Besides this power

of being a drag on the wheels of progress, the ministry exercises positive functions. Working in close co-operation with the Board of Education and the local authorities, it organises courses on Civics and Ethics, and secretly controls all tuition in Moral Sciences given at the Universities.

"Hullo, Big Brother. I haven't seen you for an age." Alaric looked affectionately at the heavily built tall man, whose massive face showed power and determination.

"I must see the President before I talk to you."

"Sorry," put in the sentry. "Orders are, the President sees no visitors to-day—except his son, that is."

Manlius gave him a sharp look. "Not ill, is he?"

"Not that I know of. There has been no doctor called in."

"Going down to the House to-night?"

" 'Plane ordered at seven-fifty sharp."

"I'll stroll with you in the garden for a bit," said Manlius, turning with a sigh of relief to his Little Brother. "You know the way about—order us some coffee, will you. Shall we go through?"

They passed through the great entrance hall, down a tier of marble steps into the garden beyond. There, having paced the walks for some minutes, they sat beside a lily-covered pool and chatted as they sipped their coffee. Alaric wanted to tell of his engagement, not the bare fact only, but the details. It was very important that he had first thought Eleuthera's eyes were dark brown and then discovered that they were a deep blue with long lashes fringing them. It was very interesting that her wrists were exquisitely modelled, and that she had a tiny soft mole right in the centre of her left cheek. He could have talked for hours on these and similar matters, but Manlius gave him no opening.

"Alaric," he said, "I wish you would resign from the Ministry of Æsthetics and come over to us."

"Why? I'm keen on my job—keen as mustard."

"It's a footling job all the same," observed Manlius contemptuously. "I should like to see your office close down to-day. What does it all amount to? With all the education and scholarships and prizes and subsidies, there hasn't been a poem worth reading or a picture worth looking at produced in the whole of the last twenty years."

"We teach the masses to appreciate Beauty."

"Oh, do you? And what then? You look at a sunset and feel something ineffable—don't you?"

Alaric nodded.

"The masses drink a glass of beer and also feel something ineffable, until you come along and snatch the beer out of their hands and bid them stare at sunsets instead. What do you suppose they see? Lobster salad and mayonnaise in the sky. Ineffable. Indescribable. Pooh!"

"You evidently haven't attended any lectures on Æsthetic Appreciation," retorted Alaric, amused and nettled. "But what about Self-expression?"

"If a man has anything in him worth expressing he will do it without the State needing to spend fifty millions sterling a year on extracting it," said Manlius drily. "You think you have accomplished something when you set half a dozen little girls contorting themselves to express *pâté de foie gras* or *joie de vivre* or some other fool's business. Footling!"

Suddenly he threw his cigarette away, leaned forward and said: "Alaric, I am horribly uneasy. There is something wrong with England."

"Wrong!" cried the younger man, amazed. "I thought we were never as prosperous as we are to-day. According to the League's returns——"

"I am not speaking of material prosperity," Manlius cut in impatiently. "Something far deeper. Not wrong with England alone, but with the whole world."

"I see nothing wrong."

"If I can make you see it," said the older man, "you may decide to come over to us. Your miserable Æsthetics helps to make men soft. You are disintegrating our toughest fibres. It is surgery we need, not eau-de-rose."

He frowned sternly to himself. Alaric, absorbed in his own prospect of personal happiness, and feeling that all the world must necessarily be full of song because he, Alaric, was joyful, watched his Big Brother a little impatiently. If there was, however, one man on the face of the earth whose opinion he valued, it was that of Manlius, so he brought back his thoughts from the imaginative consideration of Eleuthera's wind-stirred curls, and waited.

"What I tell you must be known to no living soul but ourselves," commanded the older man. "Give me your word."

"You can trust me."

"Good." Manlius considered for a moment and then went on. "When the Revolutionaries inaugurated the Age of Reason they were not thorough enough. The body-politic was more diseased than they knew, and they should have cut deeper into the rotten flesh. They killed all the criminals and imbeciles, priests, effete aristocrats and physical defectives, and thought the

amputation was enough. Their attempt to build a world-federation of republics based on equality and reason was a noble one, but it has only partially succeeded. The old sores are there, and will infect the whole State if they are not ruthlessly excised."

Alaric stirred uneasily. "History is bound to be a process of becoming," he urged. "At any given moment there are imperfections. The nations *are* progressing. A world that can abolish poverty and war in the space of two hundred years has made colossal strides. After all, what is two hundred years compared with the age of this planet? A breath—no more."

"My dear Alaric, if I felt we were progressing, I should not mind a few innocent shortcomings. Curiously enough, what torments me is more an intuitional impression than a conclusion based on reason. I have, however, a good many facts. I have them here, if you care to examine them. I brought my documents to lay before the President, who, it seems, would rather gossip with his son than consult with his ministers."

Opening a small attaché case, Manlius took up some papers. "The International Bureau of Reason, of which I have the honour to be chairman," he observed, "has its Secret Service, working in every country of the world. The business of our agents is to bring to our notice any flagrant instances of persons, or preferably groups of persons, acting in violation of the laws of Reason, and consequently in an anti-social manner. Here are summaries of some recent reports. In the Spanish-Portuguese Peninsula there are societies which meet together regularly to watch pain inflicted on animals. I will not give you details, but there seems no doubt that these societies are formed with the exclusive object of affording the members opportunities of gloating over suffering. France has a wide network of drug-takers, who supply each other with heroline, whose effects you know."

"I do not," Alaric interrupted.

Manlius smiled a little and went on. "Perhaps you, at the Ministry of Æsthetics, have never heard of the unnatural vices. In Germanaustria, in spite of most carefully thought-out legislation whereby every citizen, by regulated use of contraceptives in necessary cases, is allowed an unusual measure of sexual satisfaction, we find similar secret societies meeting for the practice of unnatural vices. In the Scandinavian Federation someone discovered a particularly potent form of whisky, and illicit stills are widespread. From China comes a most significant report. A group of doctors determined to make experiments on human beings for the purpose of discovering the relative sensibility to pain of the different races. In broad daylight, in the streets of Canton, their servants captured sailors of thirty nationalities. These victims were carried off to a laboratory established in

the hills, and there subjected to unspeakable tortures, their reactions being carefully noted by the assembled doctors. The results were tabulated, printed and published by the doctors themselves, who, on the day when the book appeared, all committed suicide. I hear that their Chinese confrères wish to erect a statuary group to them in Canton, as martyrs to Science."

"My opinion is," said Alaric, "that you pay your agents by results, and that they feel they must deliver the goods. That Chinese story is simply incredible. These things do not happen in the Age of Reason. In every nursery-school in the world, children are taught that one of the greatest of evils is pain."

"Facts are facts," retorted Manlius, "and your theorising will not alter them. I could go on for hours multiplying these instances of race-degeneracy. Oh, there is rather an amusing thing from the United States."

He unfolded a paper and handed it to his companion. There was a portrait of a grinning girl, and underneath were the huge headlines:

> SAY! Do you know who this is?
>
> Is it the loveliest girl on the ball?
>
> No, it ain't.
>
> Is it Sally Lovejoy, the teleflick star?
>
> Gum no.
>
> It's Billie B. Brandenburg, the cutest little nectarine of Hooverville, Pa., who was shot from a gun this morning at the rate of 5,000 kilometres an hour. A million cheering throats witness this unique feat in the annals of womankind. Read right away how she did it.

"Quaint old-fashioned place the States is!" Alaric commented. "One of the few countries to keep up surnames, isn't it? Always after new stunts, too. They are like children over there, aren't they? Well, anyway, that report sounds pretty likely to be true. Nothing very terrible in that, is there?"

"Not as an isolated fact," Manlius agreed. "Taken however, in conjunction with other facts, it is certainly significant. The Americans have entirely lost the power of keeping still. Every American sleeps in a rocking-bed. Half the business in the States is transacted in the offices attached to the trains, perpetually on the move between New York, Chicago, and other big cities. Non-stop flights round the world are the most popular form of holiday. Over a million men a year ask for euthanasia, and a quarter of them are under thirty. You don't call that a country dominated by reason?"

“No,” Alaric agreed, “I certainly do not.” He looked out over the garden, quiet and dreamy in the perfect beauty of a summer afternoon. Its loveliness rose like a perfume in his nostrils. The wide-spreading trees, heavy laden with their leaves, the matchless English lawns, the lavish glory of the roses, a certain cool, intimate freshness emanating from water and shadow, all sent him their serene message of beauty. The garden represented England to him, and he felt as if he could kneel and kiss every inch of it.

“You began with England,” he reminded Manlius. “What’s the matter with England?”

“It is somewhat difficult to describe. I should call it an immense lassitude. We give the masses opportunities for a full and rich life, and they are too inert to avail themselves of them. With all our scholarships and maintenance-grants, are the universities full? The cinemas are free, but who troubles to go and look at them? Most of the houses have the teleflick, but the owners are too bored to turn it on. Who reads the books in the free libraries? Why is there always such difficulty in getting an audience at a lecture? Who bothers to join the free trips abroad? The mating-dances are very poorly attended. Only one opportunity is appreciated—we provide public parks, and there are always plenty of loafers ready to go and lounge in them.”

He laughed, a short bitter laugh, and was silent.

“I think you are unreasonable,” Alaric urged. “When the goal seems very distant, and present conditions are intolerable, it is natural to make more violent efforts to progress. Our people do not need to work as hard as they did two hundred years ago.”

“Is achievement, then, to take all the zest out of life? How rarely do I meet a man who is interested in anything! England, as I see it, is suffocating in a vast fog of boredom. Horrible!”

Alaric was silent, trying to reconcile the picture with life as he saw it. Being honest, he recognised that he himself had had days of almost agonising depression and weariness, when no beauty moved him, and his feet refused to dance to the rhythm of life. He was perfectly convinced however, that this was nothing but sex-repression, and looked forward to perfect happiness when he had Eleuthera . . . when he had Eleuthera . . . when he had . . .

But Manlius was speaking. “That fool of a sentry says your father is all right, Alaric, but I very much doubt it. For twenty years our President has dominated the thought, not only of England, but of the whole of the League. There is something wrong with him now. He hasn’t the grip—the colours

seem to be fading out of his personality. Who is going to take his place? Look at you, wasting your time deciding whether schoolgirls had better sing 'Heydiddle-diddle' or 'Baa-baa black sheep.' You aren't half the man your father was."

"Perhaps I am more like my mother," Alaric suggested, hiding his annoyance with a laugh.

"Exactly," his big Brother assented. "She had no sense of civic responsibility. I daresay you *do* take after her."

The insistent whir of a propeller above their heads made them both look up. A small tourist-moth was volplaning down towards the lawn. Presently it settled, ran to within a few yards of them, and pulled up short. A man in a dust-coloured overall climbed out, lifting off his goggles as he approached.

"News from Russia," he said, handing a sealed packet to Manlius.

"Oh, thanks," the other returned. "Have some coffee while I just look. Afraid it's rather cold."

"Anything wet will do for me," said the aviator, accommodatingly. "I've come non-stop from Moscow, and one gets a bit thirsty driving."

Alaric poured him out a cup of coffee, while Manlius glanced hastily at the papers that had been brought him.

"Any answer?" the messenger asked.

"No," said Manlius, "you can go. I shan't want you any more to-day."

When machine and aviator had disappeared into the blue sky, Manlius turned to his companion.

"What do you think of this? My agent has discovered a sect in Russia called the Skoutchniki, whose one tenet is that life is not worth living, and who are banding themselves together in order to persuade the whole human race to commit suicide."

"Let them!" cried Alaric contemptuously. "No sane Englishman would listen to such tosh!"

The elder man rose. "Well, my boy, you had better go and talk to your Daddy. I must be off."

"How are you going? Shall I call a taxi-moth? You can get the air-bus at the gates."

"No thanks. I am old-fashioned enough to like motoring, and I parked my car underground. I'll take the lift down." He looked earnestly at Alaric, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Goodbye, my boy. Whenever you are a little less interested in your own affairs, come along over to us at the Ministry of Reason."

Alaric flushed. “I haven’t talked about my own affairs.”
But his Big Brother only smiled and turned away.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRESIDENT

THE PRESIDENT lay asleep on his couch. Alaric as he came quietly out on to the balcony and drew up a low chair, saw that his father must not be disturbed. The sleeping man's face, shadowed as it was, showed up haggard and unhealthy; his lower limbs, full in the sunlight, were shrunken.

"He is a very sick man," thought Alaric to himself. So he looked out and away over London, whose great buildings sent a tremor of joy into his very soul for the sheer massive beauty of them, and waited.

He had not long to wait. The President moaned a little, stirred, and raised himself on one elbow.

"Well, Father," said the young man, softly.

"Alaric!" cried the other. He struggled to a sitting posture, then pressed one hand to his head. "Have you been here long?"

"Only a minute. I came early, but I had a talk with Manlius in the garden."

"Curse him—what does *he* want? Tell him to leave me alone. He is always persecuting me about something. I wish he would mind his own business."

Alaric was silent.

"Here, help me up," said his father. "I must go into my room a minute. Did I order tea?"

"I don't know."

"Ring, anyway. No, don't come with me."

He stepped unsteadily through the open door into his room, while again Alaric waited. He had not expected to find his father like this. For a while he brooded uneasily, interrupted for a moment by a pretty girl who brought in a tea-tray and wished him good afternoon.

"You're the President's son, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well," she observed, looking at him frankly, "it's a pity the office is not hereditary!"—and, before he could protest, she was gone.

He wondered if his father had heard, as he emerged with a now firmer tread from the room within.

“What did Manlius say about me?” asked the President, sitting down. “Pour out tea. I like mine strong.”

“He said he was afraid you were not very well.”

“Curse him!”

Silence. As Alaric lifted the teapot his hand trembled slightly.

“Alaric,” ordered his father, “look at me. Do I look well or ill? I want the truth.”

“Ill,” said Alaric. “I never saw you look so before.”

All at once the President hid his face in his hands.

“I’m done for!” he moaned. “Done for! I can’t hide it any longer. Everyone knows now. All that agony in vain!”

“For humanity’s sake, what is it?”

“I’ve got . . .” The older man’s voice dropped as he named the terrible disease. “I’ve fought it for six years, and now I’m beaten.”

“But isn’t it dreadfully painful?” cried Alaric in horror. “Why ever haven’t you asked for . . .”

“Euthanasia, you mean? Sit down again and I’ll try and explain. I’m an ambitious man. I always was. When I was seven, I swore I would be President one day. I never cared about anything but power. I got what I wanted. A man always does get what he wants if he is prepared to sacrifice everything else to it. I’ve ruled England as if I had been a king. I’ve bent the League to my will. I’ve made history. My task is not done yet. Just when I was at the height of my power, this foul disease came along. I swore no one should guess. I know it is incurable. I did not need a doctor to tell me that. I set my teeth and endured the pain—pain that never leaves me, unless I take drugs. I can get no sleep without them. I suppose it was worth it—what I have been through.”

“Father,” exclaimed Alaric, much moved, “surely euthanasia would be better! I hardly know what pain is, but——”

“That is all very well,” the President interrupted bitterly, “but think what it means. I am sixty now. I have spent forty years in teaching the silly flock of men to follow me like sheep. Now I can do what I like with them. Fortunately for them, I wish them well. Am I to throw away my power and their chances of betterment because I am too much of a coward to bear physical pain?”

Pain, as if summoned by the word, gripped him. He bent his head, clenched his hands. Alaric, who had never seen anyone suffer, felt sick with pity. The paroxysm passed, and the President went on speaking.

“I see nothing before me but blackness and despair. Sometimes I think these drugs are affecting my brain. I am becoming a coward. I dare not face either life or death. Life is defeat and bitterness and agony, but it is better than to cease to exist. Alaric, I cannot die.”

He rose to his feet and stood, gripping the balcony-rail with both hands.

“Look at that city!” he cried. “There is not a man or woman and hardly a child there who does not know and love my name. I made London what it is. I found England weak and torn by factions. I led her to unity and strength. Do you want me to stop living, not to breathe, not to see, not to know, not to command—darkness, darkness, the unutterable darkness of death—I can’t face it—I can’t!”

Alaric was dismayed and disturbed to the very depths of his being. He had come joyously to the Residence, his mind full of his good news, brimming over with glorious exhilarating feelings of love and health. Manlius had greeted him with forebodings of national evil. His father wrung his heart with personal tragedy. He felt dazed beyond speech or thought. It was easiest to take refuge in the trivial.

“Your tea is getting cold,” he suggested.

The President did not hear. “I was always afraid of being alone,” he continued. “As a child, I screamed if they left me alone—and screamed until they listened to me and obeyed me. I cannot do without my fellow men. I feel myself twice as alive when I am facing a huge audience. There is something in a crowd that I can drink and feed on. If death were not so lonely—if I did not have to die alone! It is the loneliness of it that is half the terror—black darkness and solitude . . .” His voice died away.

“It can’t be as bad as you think,” Alaric urged. “Think of it more as a long sleep from which there is no awakening. No one is afraid to go to sleep, but you are all alone then.”

“Alone?” queried his father. “Alone? I am never alone when I sleep. The dream-world is full of faces, strange and passionate and pleading. Sometimes I think it is more real than waking, fuller of sounds and scents and colours, and pain is dim and far-off like a distant sea. Are you alone when you sleep? I never am.”

“Father,” said Alaric, uneasily, “I wish you would have some tea. We all have to die some time, and it isn’t any worse for you than for anybody else.”

The President turned back towards his son, looked at him keenly for a moment, and resumed his seat. When he spoke again his tone had changed.

“Did you discuss the Ministry of Æsthetics with Manlius? He is thinking of getting it abolished if he can.”

“You won’t let him, will you? Without our work the human race would relapse into barbarism. Man cannot live by Reason alone. Surely you would not permit such an unthinkable disaster?”

The President lifted a deprecating hand. “My day is over. You must fight your own battles. I wish I could feel you were more my son. You are my first-born, and your poor mother was my favourite mate, but she made a mess of her life, and there is the same deplorable lack of sternness about you. Æsthetics are all very well in their way—yes, I should be sorry to see the Ministry close its door. Still, it might very well be left to women to run. I know the ‘soft-side’ theory is out of fashion, and nothing makes a girl furious like telling her she belongs to the weaker sex, but facts are facts, and one of them is that Beauty is the province of women. I am not referring to creative Art, but to the Science of Appreciation, and the artistic self-expression of the commonplace.”

“You despise women?”

“I do. Not more, however, than I despise men.”

Conversation languished. Alaric rose. He had not yet delivered his news.

“Goodbye, father. I wish you would see a doctor. It might be nerves, after all. There’s the new uranium treatment too. You ought to try everything. By the way—did you see the announcement of my mating-engagement?”

“No. I take no interest in those matters now. I hope the woman is A+.”

“No, only A. She is not tall, but exquisitely lovely.”

“Of course.”

As Alaric walked back to his moth, he felt a confused anger against the two men whom he had just met. He had wanted them to rejoice with him, and they had not rejoiced. They had failed him at one of the most important crises of his life. They were self-absorbed, hard and unimaginative. They were incapable of understanding what Great Love meant.

He paused for a moment before climbing into his machine, bathing his hot and angry soul in the beauty of nature around him. Ah, Beauty never failed a man! What fools they were to talk about the Ministry of Æsthetics closing down! Nature always responded. In sorrow she soothed, in joy she sang. The trees and the soft-glowing sky, the shadows of the lawns, the symphonic colours of the flowers seemed to gather round him and tell him that they understood.

“And yet, if I hadn’t been taught to appreciate,” he murmured to himself complacently, “I should have got nothing out of the gardens or the park either. Fancy thinking our office isn’t needed!”

Climbing in, he laid his hand on the lever, and flew away lightly towards home.

CHAPTER V

CONGRATULATIONS

AFTER an engagement, congratulations—or condolences.

"So you're going to commit the Supreme Act of Folly," remarked Berta 2. She was a powerfully built young woman of thirty or so, somewhat short and squat in the figure, with a strongly marked, intelligent face. Her white tunic reached scarcely below her waist, her shorts ended above the knees, and she wore brown stockings and heavy brown shoes of synthetic leather. Beside her, Eleuthera, in tunic to the knees, and blue belt matching her pale blue shoes, looked absurdly girlish.

"What on earth made you do it?"

"Lots of things." Eleuthera smiled a little mysteriously to herself. "For one thing, I want a baby."

"You haven't heard the latest from Germany?" Berta queried. "They have been trying experiments in the labs there, and promise us that in a year or two a mate will not be needed. Of course, most women prefer the mate and not the baby, but girls with over-developed maternal instincts like you will be able to buy——"

"Don't," said Eleuthera, in a low voice. "Why are you so fond of trying to take the poetry out of everything?"

"Take the poetry *out*—there isn't any *in*, as far as *I* can see. Where's the poetry in a baby? You feel beastly before it comes, and it's a nasty messy little thing when it arrives. No thanks. You've got a soft job as Flower Mistress—why don't you stick to it and be satisfied?"

"Wait till you've seen Alaric."

Berta looked unconvinced. The two girls were strolling in the garden, past tall rows of white lilies and up and down among rose trees.

"These flowers are rather nice," Berta commented. "What are they made of?"

"They're all natural, every one of them," said Eleuthera proudly. "Mother won't have anything else in the garden. Dad gardens."

"Great Bernard Shaw! You *are* a family! At Maids' Mansions all our flowers are rubber. You see, they don't spoil in the rain."

"These don't either. They rather like it. You should see how they lift up their leaves in a shower just as if they accepted the caress of the rain."

“Do they, though?” Berta stopped and stared at them. “I wish they’d have natural ones in the parks. I suppose they are too much trouble, that is what it is. Of course, ours are out all the year round, and they get changed once every six months.”

“Some of the parks have them. All the school gardens have natural flowers, and they have got them at the Residence and Kew and the National Reserves. I expect you don’t know the difference.”

“Perhaps I don’t,” Berta admitted. “We haven’t much time for that kind of thing at the International Clothing Depôt. Have you heard the latest from America? Electric flowers that you turn off and on like sunlight. Good stunt, isn’t it?”

“I like these best.” Eleuthera bent over a lily, and emerged with a yellow dust on the tip of her nose.

“Of course, you’ll have a dinky little garden when you and Alaric retire together to one of those *terrible* mating-bungalows to be bored. When’s the Dismal Day? Of course, I’ll come and shout with the crowd.”

“My dear Berta,” cried her friend, “where do you live? Don’t you read the *International Gazette*? Surely you know that the League passed a law fixing the public mating-ceremonies for every quarter-day. The next comes at the end of this month. Alaric has sent our names in. We are going to fly out into the country to-morrow to choose our bungalow.”

“Of course Athena is pleased. What does your father say? Doesn’t he think that if you *had* to make a fool of yourself and chain yourself to some man you had better put it off a bit?”

“He isn’t back from Africa yet,” said Eleuthera. “He’s on the Backward Races Commission. I wish you wouldn’t say ‘chain yourself,’ Berta. I wish you’d fall in love—it would do you all the good in the world.”

“Who is talking about chains?” cried a fresh voice just behind them. The girls turned, and saw a gay young woman of thirty-five dressed in whites coquettishly embroidered in mauve, and with a large mauve hat on her yellow curls.

“Eleuthera, my child, congrats—is it congrats? Are you most frightfully happy?”

Eleuthera nodded gravely.

“Let’s sit down,” said the lady. “I’m melting. I came straight over from Paris when I heard the news. Who’s your friend?”

“Geneviève—Berta 2.”

“Job?” Geneviève queried.

“International Clothing Depôt.”

“Bad luck to you!” laughed Geneviève. She had a tiresome way of laughing for no apparent reason, and wagging her forefinger to emphasize her words. “I’m sick of International Standardised Clothes. Why can’t we wear what we like?”

“We have lovely frocks for the mating-dances,” put in Eleuthera. “Mine all floated about. It was too beautiful for anything. I felt it was a great deal to live up to.”

Geneviève sank into a chair and burst out laughing.

“And the man? Is *he* a great deal to live up to?”

Eleuthera nodded soberly.

“Well, my child, if you want to know anything about mates, come to me. If we can’t change our clothes, at least we can change our men. I never can stand a mate for more than a year. You get absolutely at the end of them before twelve months are out. Some make rather a fuss when you tell them you can’t stand them any longer, but generally it is very mutual, very mutual indeed.”

“I should think it would be,” observed Berta.

“Are you a wit?” said Geneviève, surveying her coolly. “If that was a joke, please explain it to me. I live so much abroad that I lose touch with the English sense of humour.”

Berta scowled, and got up to go. “I’m off. Goodbye, Eleuthera. Let me know when.”

“You’ll——” Eleuthera sprang up too, and caught her friend by the hand. “You’ll wish me well, if you come, won’t you? I don’t want people there thinking I am making a fool of myself. I want everyone to rejoice with me, because I’m so happy. I wish several of us were going to be there together—even you, Berta.”

“It’s no good—I simply can’t see the attraction.”

“You’ll admit there must be babies?”

“No, why? I’m a Skoutchnik.”

“A what?”

“Oh, well, perhaps I’d better not tell you now. You’re not in a mood to listen to anything Reasonable.”

Geneviève was humming a little song, but looked up with a laugh when Eleuthera came back to her.

“My dear, it isn’t the slightest use trying to convince your dumpy friend of your point of view. No man in his senses would look at her.”

“I never thought of that,” murmured Eleuthera in rather a troubled voice. “To me she seems so strong, and strength is always attractive.”

“Is your Man anywhere round?” the visitor enquired. “I should like to have a look at him. Don’t be nervous—I won’t try and make a conquest of him. As a matter of fact I have got one of my own in Paris. A fine blond Viking of a man. I got frightfully tired of the Latin Races, and thought a Swede would be a new sensation. I find, I must confess, that all men are very much alike. That is the worst of our modern civilisation, it does standardise everything so frightfully.”

“Does it?” Eleuthera asked innocently. “I shouldn’t have thought you and Berta were a bit alike.”

“Alike?” Geneviève looked quite offended. “Of course we’re not! What a silly idea. My dear, I simply must tell you about Fritz 1,000—he was just the type of your Alaric, who strikes me as frightfully Germanic.”

“When did you see Alaric?” Eleuthera looked puzzled.

“Of course, I haven’t ever set eyes on him. It was something your mother said when I met her in the hall a minute ago. I forget what it was, but I get impressions so quickly, and I always find they are right. What was I saying? Oh, yes, about Fritz—my dear, it was too funny for anything . . .”

She rattled on, telling anecdotes now of this man, now of that. Geneviève had had an amazing variety of mates. Some had been old, some young, some scholars, some simple, some earnest, others frivolous. One had gone out of his mind, another had eloped with a Javanese. One had been legal adviser to the League, one had made toothbrushes. All, however, had one thing in common. They were all absurd, ridiculous, too comic for words, screamingly, impossibly, frightfully funny. André sat down on his hat and looked for his spectacles when they were on his nose. Fritz was air-sick. Lalai Lal was afraid of mice. Juan was jealous. Fritiof squinted. It was all too comic.

Eleuthera listened, fascinated, horrified. She felt as if she were watching a circus, one of those strange performances which were so popular in the Age of Unreason, when men and women actually found pleasure in seeing monkeys, who ought to have been swinging gloriously from forest tree to forest tree, smoke cigarettes and drink cocktails; and human beings with whitened faces jump through paper hoops. What was the reason of it all? Where did it all lead to? Above all, what was its relevance to Alaric and herself?

She felt like a sleeper awaking from a nightmare when another visitor was announced. A little old lady, tiny and frail, but erect still for all her

hundred and fifty years, came quickly across the lawn.

"Eleuthera!" she cried. "My dearest child!" and she folded her in her arms.

"Great-gran, how sweet of you to come! Mother radioed you about Alaric? Did she send a telephoto too?"

"Yes, my pet, and she said he was coming to supper here to-night and invited me to meet him. My dear, dear child, it makes me so happy that you are carrying on our family tradition of wives and mothers."

"Do sit here, Great-gran. May I introduce——"

"I must catch the air-bus," Geneviève interrupted. "I'm meeting Alan in town. Goodbye, Eleuthera. If there is anything more you want to know about men, come to me and I'll tell you."

"Who is that ill-bred young woman?" enquired Aspasia, raising a disapproving lorgnon.

"A sort of cousin on Daddy's side. She lives in Paris."

"So one would imagine from her conversation. And you, my treasure, how are you? I need hardly ask? Happiness certainly becomes you. And when is the wedding to be?"

"Quarter-day. Alaric doesn't want to wait."

"Ah, my dear, you manage things very quickly nowadays. When I was a girl, everything was very different. I daresay the tradition from the Age of Unreason was still very strong. Looking back over the years, it seems to me that the year when I was engaged was the happiest of my life. Poor dear Robert, how I did idealise him! He seemed a regular hero of romance. After the marriage, my dear, you get so used to each other. A husband seems as commonplace as the daily paper. I daresay you miss him just as much when he isn't there, and take him just as much for granted when he is. But when one is engaged—ah! I sometimes think that the moon does not shine as brightly now as it did when I was a girl. Dear me, dear me, it seems like yesterday!"

The old lady was silent, her eyes following pictures of the long-dead past. Eleuthera, alert and sympathetic, was silent, too.

"Ah, my pet, a wedding is not the grand affair it used to be. Of course, the religious ceremony was done away with before I was born, but in my day each couple had a civil wedding. A very grand affair it was, too. The bride still kept to the old-fashioned wreath and veil, though dresses were often very bright. Scarlet remained the fashion for a number of years after the Revolution, I remember. Then there were the presents! Now that you

have so few personal possessions, you can hardly realise what wedding presents meant to our generation. Dear me, many an hour's sleep have I lost wondering whether I would give the bride a clock or a cakestand! Ah, that reminds me, my pet, your Great-grandpapa has a little present for you. He wishes you to fly over to the Hundreds to-morrow and receive it at his hands."

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Eleuthera. "Won't it be thrilling to have a present? What is it?"

"That is not for me to say."

There was a hint of solemnity and emotion in the old lady's voice which set Eleuthera wondering. What could the gift be? Some symbol or relic of a more romantic time, some object still perfumed with the strange scents of the Age of Unreason? Eleuthera felt the drawings of a powerful curiosity.

"Yes," she said, "we will certainly come to-morrow. Alaric and I are going to choose our bungalow. We can fly over to the Hundreds in less than an hour. Did you say you were staying to supper this evening? Will you excuse me a moment while I 'phone the municipal kitchen for another portion? You don't find it too cool out here?"

"No, my pet. It is beautiful among your flowers. We had roses like that in our garden when I was a girl. But poor dear Robert never cared much for flowers. You mustn't expect your husband to have the same taste as yourself, you know."

Slipping again into a seat beside her great-grandmother, Eleuthera prepared herself to listen. She had an innate veneration for tradition, which, for her, was embodied in this dainty old lady. There was, moreover, a tradition of happy unions in the family. Eleuthera wanted to hear. Aspasia was ready enough to talk.

As Eleuthera listened, her distress and bewilderment grew. Marriage—for the old lady still used the quaint word which has long since dropped out of our language—was, it appeared, bound to be unsatisfactory. The man sought a wife, the woman sought a child. Hence difficulties, friction, misunderstanding, disillusion. The husband imagined he had found someone whose eyes would always be turned towards him, and whose ears would always be receptive of his ambitions and his grievances. The wife bent over a cradle, and had neither eyes nor ears for anyone but the child. Her conception of marriage was a partnership in which two strong beings united themselves to watch and tend their little ones. To the man, children were a mere sideshow. He dominated his own scene. Hence, real frankness and understanding were impossible from the outset. All that could be expected

was that the man should keep enough love in cold storage to prevent his being deliberately unkind, while the woman, on her side, had to learn all the arts of the slave in order to cajole her lord into behaving tolerably. Eleuthera, who looked to mating to quiet the vague restless feelings which, as she understood, tormented all young girls, felt deeply uneasy. Mating was surely bound to drive away the mist of futility which hitherto had hung over everything. She remembered how she, at seventeen, had come weeping to her mother and declared she could not tolerate the pointlessness of existence, and Athena had told her to wait—that she was, as yet, incomplete, and that a mate would complete the broken arc of the circle. So, because of the future, she had been content to teach her children—and wait. If marriage were only futility *à deux*, where was the hope for the human race?

She was roused by hearing her name called. Peter 55 stood in the doorway of the living-room, calling her. Excusing herself, she sprang up and hastened towards him.

"Oh, Peter!" she cried. "What is it?"

"Can I speak to you alone?"

"Yes, come in here."

The room, of a soft subdued green, the furniture upholstered in wood-silk, seemed to welcome them to intimate conversation.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, looking at his haggard face.

"My dear, you know as well as I do what is wrong. What have I done that Alaric should be preferred before me? There is nothing left to live for if you mate with him."

"Peter," the girl cried, deeply distressed, "what can I do? I can't mate with both of you. If I choose Alaric, you suffer; if I choose you, it is just as bad for him. Oh dear, oh dear, and I never wanted to give pain to anyone! I don't know *what* to do!"

He faced her stubbornly. "It isn't the same for Alaric as it is for me. It is as different as chalk from cheese. Alaric wanted a girl. He strolled into one of the dances and looked round and thought you'd do, and asked you and you said yes. If you hadn't been there, any other pretty girl would have done as well. I've always loved you. I can't remember the time when I didn't. I always wanted you for my partner in games, and picked you first for my side. I only did my lessons well because I wanted you to think that I was clever. I'm lazy by nature, as lazy as they're made, but I worked hard because I thought you would love me better if I did something. I never was brainy like Alaric, but I've made the best of the brains I've got. I never

looked at any girl except you. You're all my thoughts and all my plans and all my future. If you go, there is nothing left."

Peter dropped his head into his hands. Torn with pity, Eleuthera stood by his chair.

"Peter," she urged, "you *shouldn't*. It isn't right for a man to care so much for just one quite ordinary girl like me. You ought to have lots of other interests."

"Right!" he ejaculated scornfully. "What do I care about right or wrong? What's wrong, anyway, with my love for you? And what's right or wrong, if it comes to that? You don't know, and I don't know, and nobody knows. What I do know is that I love you ten thousand times more than Alaric does. Eleuthera, don't you *see*? You're just any pretty girl to him, and to me you are the whole world."

Eleuthera shook her head. "I can't change," she said. "I know it hurts you now, but you will soon get over it."

"No, Eleuthera. I shall never get over it."

"Perhaps you had better go now. It's no use talking, is it? I can't see any way out. You will just have to forget. You've got your work. You used to be keen on that."

"Only for your sake. I don't care a labour-unit for it now."

"Well, Peter, you'd better go. It isn't my fault. It's rather too bad of you to come and make me miserable. If you really loved me, you would want me to be happy."

As he made no move, but remained frozen in his posture of misery, she tiptoed gently from the room. Alaric was waiting in the hall, and in one moment all her joy kindled into life again.

CHAPTER VI

CHOOSING A NEST

"Isn't this frightfully exciting?" cried Eleuthera, as Alaric handed her into his 'plane.

He nodded, looking down at the map he held. "Where shall we go first? There are bungalows free on the Chilterns, and at Ewhurst, and between Clare and Cavendish in Suffolk. Of course, we could go further north, if you like, but it would take me rather a long time to get in to my work. I don't want to be more than twenty minutes by air-bus—and then, of course, there's getting to the station."

"Let's try Clare," Eleuthera suggested. "It's just next door to the Long Melford Hundreds, isn't it, where the great-grans live? Could we leave the 'plane and hike to Melford? I never do any hiking now."

"All right"—Alaric nodded again. "Ready? Now look how she takes the air. Isn't she a gem?"

"I know. She'll spoil me for the air-bus. Besides, they are always so crowded. You know I hate a lot of people together."

The town slipped away under them as they rose, and the air in their nostrils grew keener and fresher.

"Not too high!" Eleuthera pleaded. "I like to see something." Responsively, he dropped a few hundred feet. The country was spread out below them, an irregular patchwork quilt, here green, here gold, with the white threads of roads winding across its surface, and roofs crouching together in streaked dabs of black.

"Just two of us alone, and all space around us!" murmured Eleuthera. "Oh, Alaric, isn't this fine!"

Presently he slackened a little, veered, and began to descend. A spaced-out row of low houses, all turned sunwards, appeared on a slope. There were gardens round them, and in the gardens white-clad figures. At the foot of the hill was a level meadow. Alaric landed carefully, and turned to help his companion out. They walked in silence up the slope. Eleuthera's eyes were shining.

Iron gates barred their way to the enclosure, but in answer to their ring a woman came out and admitted them. She gave them a motherly smile.

“I see you are looking for a bungalow. We have three vacant. Which colour do you prefer? We have green, pale blue and rose-pink.”

“Rose-pink,” Eleuthera suggested, “the colour of my dress—you remember, Alaric?”

He remembered and was charmed. By all means let a rose-pink bungalow be their choice.

The woman led the way, volubly explaining all the arrangements. She touched the electric switch and pointed out how the bungalows were swung round to face the sun; she displayed the parcel-chute, the automatic vacuum-cleaner. She explained the rules about sending the wood-silk blankets to the wash every week, and the importance of regulating one’s diet according to the medical report and the vitamin-chart. Each bungalow, of course, had radio and teleflick. You could have a hangar for your own ’plane, but were not encouraged to fly very much. Hiking, on the other hand, was recommended. The nurse in charge attended to give gymnastic exercises and massage every day. Regulations concerning accouchement would be given in due course. And when would the young couple like to move in?

“It’s lovely!” cried Eleuthera joyously. “We couldn’t do better than this. Let’s decide on this at once. What is it called? Rose Cottage? How frightfully nice. You do like it, don’t you?”

“It seems all right.”

“I think its perfect.” Eleuthera turned to the woman. “Thank you so much. We’re coming in on quarter-day. In a week’s time. Is that all right?”

“Everything is ready,” said the custodian. “And would you like tea before you go?”

“Thanks, we’ve brought our own. May we go down by the stream and eat it?”

“Indeed, you may. You don’t mind the cows?”

“Cows!” cried Eleuthera in delight. “Oh, Alaric, what fun! I haven’t seen a cow for years! Come along!”

Joyously she caught his hand, and they ran down towards the stream. There were pollard willows marking the tortuous path of the water, and wild meadowsweet growing on the bank. On the other side were fields of brilliant green, first level, then rising gently up the Essex Ridge. Here and there in the folds of the hillside nestled thatched cottages, placed exactly in the right spot, as if by some master hand. Cows stood under tall trees, swishing their tails monotonously to keep the flies away. To the right lay Clare, to the left Cavendish. They stood as they had stood for five hundred years, except that

an open green marked the site of the church which after the Revolution had been razed to the ground.

"It was your father's doing, wasn't it," Eleuthera wanted to know, "making all this part a National Reserve?"

Alaric nodded. "Yes, and to make all the underground motor-ways, and leave the country roads free. You get real unspoilt country here."

She lolled luxuriously on the warm, short grass, dipping her fingers into the stream. "Don't let's talk for a minute. Let's listen. Do you know the notes of the birds?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. I don't even know whether it was a fish or a rat that made that splash."

"Neither. I threw a pebble in."

They laughed, then took to listening again. Suddenly Eleuthera said: "Alaric. Do you remember that odd question Jimmy asked? About what there was with him when he was alone? You know, there *is* something. Don't you feel it now? I don't know how to describe it. As though all the beauty in nature were alive and loved us, and could be like a mother and tell us what was right and wrong. I don't mean sort of civic right and wrong. I mean a kind that is more like loving. Don't you feel it?"

"I am afraid I can't follow you." Alaric looked uneasy. "This place is beautiful. There is something in me which responds to beauty. That is the beginning and end of it with me."

She sat up suddenly. "I wish I'd been clever enough to go to the University and take Science, and then I should understand how the world came to be. Scientists say it was a kick in the ether. Something made a hole, and the atoms and electrons and things took to whirling and combining, and so the universe, as we know it, came to be. I simply can't see it, can you? If I came along and saw your 'plane, I should say to myself, somebody made this. If I came strolling along through space and found this planet, I am sure I should say somebody made it. Alaric, is that what people used to mean by God?"

"Eleuthera," he answered, squaring his shoulders and speaking very firmly, "you have asked me questions like these before, and you will please not do so again. You know the penalty for belief in God, or even rash speculation on the subject. You are like Pandora and the box. It takes a woman to give rein to unprincipled curiosity. I should have thought that to-day of all days, when we have just looked at our future home, you would not

have bothered about such foolish matters. I am very much disappointed in you, Eleuthera."

"Alaric! How can you talk like that? I was just wondering, that is all. You aren't to speak to me in that horrid way. No one ever did before."

"My darling"—he put his arm round her, but felt her stiffen rather than yield—"I only wish to save you from the consequences of your own unwise thoughts."

"Well, I don't tell anyone except you, but sometimes I must tell someone. Don't be cross with me. If I can't help being like that, you would rather I told you, wouldn't you? Something says 'Come,' and I get up and stand and hold out my arms and look—and then it's all dark again and the music has gone, and I just stand there shivering."

"I know"—Alaric held her closer. "I've felt like that, too. It will be quite different when we are mated."

The girl looked doubtful. "I don't know. Do you think *most* fathers and mothers really seem different from the rest of us? They only seem to me to have exchanged one set of puzzles for another. Besides—I wish you'd let me go, Alaric: I want to think, and I can't with your arm round me. Listen to me!"

"I'm listening." He ran his fingers through his hair and stared at her uneasily. She certainly ought to have felt that no troubles could come within the magic circle of his arm, but these modern girls—dear me! How independent present-day education made them!

"What I object to about the national attitude to religion," said Eleuthera, sorting out her thoughts with an effort, "is that it isn't *reasonable*. First they say there is nothing there, and then they say 'Hush! Hush! You mustn't talk about it—it is dangerous!' Either there *is* Something or Someone who made the world and made us, or there isn't. Either we can know or we can't. Either way the situation ought to be faced. Why did the Revolution carry off all the priests? They may have been sort of early scientists, like astrologers. Personally I think there ought to be an International Commission to go into the matter. There might be all sorts of interesting manuscripts or monuments and things that people could dig up. Then the whole matter could really be gone into properly."

"My darling," cried Alaric, "the whole matter has been gone into properly. If you knew a little more, you would not talk like that. For instance, Government officials have access to archives not known to the general public. When I was doing a preliminary research for my handbook of Practical Æsthetics I came across a number of books on Art and History

in the age of Unreason. Religion was an intolerable superstition which made men hate each other. Certainly under its influence they painted admirable pictures, and some of their chief temples, to which they gave the name of cathedrals, were most imposing. That, however, does not compensate for their cruelty towards each other. Do you want men now to burn each other in the name of an imaginary God?"

Eleuthera's lip trembled. "Of course I don't. But suppose they had made mistakes because they were sort of backward races? Nowadays we might have what was good in religion and leave what was bad."

"Impossible. The whole thing was bound up together. One just had to make a clean sweep."

"Well," said Eleuthera obstinately, "I'm not at all sure there isn't a God all the same. Jimmy feels it and I feel it, and I believe a lot of people do, only they daren't say so."

Alaric turned away and began throwing pebbles into the stream. He was more angry and dismayed than he cared to admit. What a will of her own this girl had, to be sure! She looked like a flower, and whoever would have imagined she could be so persistent? Certainly, the day was shaping itself in the most unexpected and unwelcome fashion.

"I tell you what is wanted, Alaric," she continued, still pursuing her own thoughts; "the Something is too big for us, and we can't grasp it yet. What is wanted is a man bigger and better than all of us, who would give up his whole life to understanding it and interpreting it. I expect people would be horrid to him at first, but I wouldn't. I'd worship him, I think, if I had a chance."

"Eleuthera," cried her lover, getting up, "this is intolerable! You are breaking the law every time you open your mouth. Do you care nothing for me and involving me in trouble? Even my being the President's son could not save me if we were overheard. Once and for all, will you put all this out of your mind? Do, please, show a little common sense."

The girl brought her dreamy gaze back from the hills and looked at him steadily for a minute. "I've done now," she said slowly. "Perhaps, as you say, it isn't really any use."

"You don't seem to realise," Alaric urged, "that the greatest scientists in the world have long since investigated your hypothesis and dismissed it as incredible. They are perfectly satisfied with their explanations of how the world came to be. If you were a scientist, you would be satisfied too."

"Should I? Isn't what I want to know a little different from a scientific question? Aren't there different sorts of truth?"

“No! Nonsense!”

“Is it? I’m sorry.” She rose too, and gave him her hand. “I’m sorry I’ve been tiresome, darling. I don’t know what it was came over me. In the town you feel sheltered from the mystery of things, don’t you? But here it’s different. Kiss me, Alaric. When I’ve got a baby I expect I shan’t bother about anything else.”

Feeling how delicious was her penitence and the exercise of his magnanimity, he kissed her and held her close to him. They walked slowly up the slope, arms interlaced.

It was an unpleasant surprise to meet Miguel, Registrar of Euthanasias, tramping along with a notebook in his hand. He greeted them with a sour smile.

“Hullo, Miguel, busy as usual?”

“Busier than ever.”

“Anything special wrong?”

“Not that I know of. The usual season of intense boredom.”

“Surely not down here?” Eleuthera broke in.

“Nowhere is quite immune. Pretty dull here, anyway.”

“Oh, no! It’s lovely.”

“H’m.” He turned the pages of his notebook. “By the way, Jimmy 27 is at your school, isn’t he?”

Eleuthera raised her head apprehensively. “Yes?”

“He’s failed again in his medical. I’ve got him down for euthanasia this day week.”

“How too terrible for words! Are you quite, quite sure? Oh, surely one can appeal! He’s a perfect darling—you can’t——” her voice broke.

“You fool!” cried Alaric furiously. “Why did you tell her? I’ll have you fined for giving her pain.”

Miguel gave his sour smile. “Sooner or later she’d have to know.”

“It’s got to be stopped somehow,” said Eleuthera in her most determined voice.

“My dear young lady,” observed the Registrar, “it cannot be stopped. All you can do is to claim the privilege of carrying out the recommendation yourself. Well, I must be getting on. Duty calls.”

Giving Alaric an official salute, he stepped briskly away and was soon out of sight.

“Alaric,” the girl exclaimed, “we must go back at once.”

“What about the visit to your great-grandfather. Isn’t he expecting you?”

She deliberated a moment. “I haven’t the heart to see anyone. Still, I suppose we had better go, since they are expecting us. I hate Miguel. He’s a beast. Don’t you think he’s horrid?”

“Shall we hike?”

“No. We must take the ’plane. I’m in a hurry.”

Mournfully silent, they climbed into the ’plane, and a minute or so later alighted in the grounds of the Hall. Alaric, as he looked at the magnificent old house, felt proud that the credit of saving it from destruction was due to the Ministry of Æsthetics. No individual, of course, could any longer be allowed to own the manor houses, halls and castles of England. They were all of them, however, even if inconvenient and badly planned, capable of being used as institutions. It had been found by experience that old people, for instance, were more contented living in old houses than they were when lodged in even the most up-to-date vitaglass and concrete buildings. There is something mellow and serene and reposeful about the old buildings which the present age cannot recapture.

In the warm sunshine of the June afternoon Melford Hundreds looked peaceful enough. There were many aged men and women, all of them over a hundred years old, enjoying the fresh air. Some had run their motor-beds out under the trees and were asleep in the shade. Others sat in groups, drinking tea and gossiping. Two or three of the most energetic were playing bowls. Along the broad walks, a motor-chair or two passed slowly. Nurses in white caps moved about, waiting on their charges. One of them advanced towards Alaric and Eleuthera.

“Aspasia and Robert are expecting you. Will you take the lift up to No. 91? They preferred to see you in their own room. Yes, they are quite well, thank you. This is the lift-chair. Just take your seats. Set the indicator at No. 91 when you begin to mount.”

They sat side by side in a wide armchair. The nurse pressed a button, the chair set off unhurriedly along a track, ran without a jerk up an inclined plane through an open door, entered a lift. The lift door shut behind it, and it began to move slowly upwards. Eleuthera noticed a large ? suddenly flashing on a board in front of her. In the middle of a board was a large clock-dial with a hand and figures 1 to 150. Realising what was expected of her, she made the hand point to 91. The lift stopped, the chair rolled out, passed along a corridor, and came to a halt at a door marked 91. Eleuthera tapped, and she and her lover went in.

There were some rather fussy, affectionate, nervous greetings to be gone through. A little more tea to be drunk, the view from the balcony to be admired. Eleuthera's thoughts were far away with her pupil Jimmy, and she found great difficulty in paying attention to what the old lady and old gentleman were talking about. Great-grandpapa said but few words, uttered with slow ponderous emphasis, while great-grandmama chirped and chattered like a voluble bird.

"I expect you're ever so busy, my darling. Ah, when I was a girl, what a time it was just before the wedding! The bride had to have a complete new outfit—trousseau, we used to call it in those days—a dozen of everything you know, and all trimmed with lace if possible. Wood-silk, of course, was just beginning to come in, but real silk was far more prized. Of course, no one wears real silk nowadays, and a great pity too, for it was a most beautiful fabric. There was one I remember called crêpe-de-chine. There is nothing half so pretty nowadays. And how are the boys, my love?"

"Frightfully fit, thank you," Eleuthera answered politely. "They've gone round the world on an International Baseball tour, and Hebe has gone too to film them. Father's not back from Africa yet, either, so we are rather a small party at home. Mother radioed him about my engagement, so I expect he'll be back to-morrow or the day after—in time for the ceremony, anyway. At least, we may be going to put it off."

"What?" interrupted Alaric.

"Anyway, the date isn't absolutely settled," said the girl in some confusion, turning to whisper to Alaric; "we'll talk about it afterwards."

"So this is your future husband," observed the old gentleman, who had been staring at Alaric for some time.

"Of course he is," chirped Aspasia, "and a very nice-looking boy too. You'll take great care of our treasure, won't you, young man? She has not been brought up like many of the young women of to-day. When I was a girl no one would have thought of going off to live in chambers like the emancipated girls in Maids' Mansions. No keys to the doors at all, I hear, and they can come in at what hour they like. My great-granddaughter is very different from that."

Eleuthera patted the old lady's hand. "Thank you for giving me a testimonial. But times must change, you know."

"Yes, yes, my dear, I suppose they must. They change a great deal too fast for my taste. The world nowadays is all very well for young people, but it isn't the world to be old in."

“Perhaps it never was,” Eleuthera suggested softly. The sight of old age always filled her heart with an immense compassion. She felt it must be terrible to be old. Why didn’t these two old people ask for euthanasia? Being past the age of a hundred they could have it at an hour’s notice, and not, as was the case with younger people, need to ask for it a week beforehand. She, Eleuthera, certainly did not wish to live to be old. And Alaric—no, she could not bear to see him grow inert and shrunken and rather ugly, like poor Great-gran.

“What about the present?” she enquired, rousing herself. “Weren’t you going to give me a present?”

“Would your fiancé like to see over the house?” Aspasia asked, with apparent irrelevance. “Some of the old panelling and ceilings are much admired.”

He assented, and the two walked away.

“Come close to me,” commanded the old man when he and Eleuthera were alone. “Can you hide this little parcel, if I give it to you?”

“Well, I could put it in the pocket of my shorts. Mayn’t Alaric see?”

“No. No one. Swear!”

“Do what?”

“Promise. Promise me faithfully that no living soul but yourself shall know that you possess it.”

Eleuthera hesitated. “But I want to tell Alaric everything.”

“I only give it to you on condition that you keep the secret inviolate.”

“What is inside the parcel, Great-gran?”

“That you will discover for yourself. Will you take it on my conditions?”

Curiosity triumphed. Eleuthera held out her hand.

“Ah!” murmured Robert. “Thank Humanity, that is done! Now I can die in peace.”

He lay back on the cushions, white and exhausted.

“Aren’t you well?” cried Eleuthera. “Shall I call Nurse?”

“No, no. Let me rest.” He closed his eyes.

As Eleuthera sat by him, her thoughts were not of the mysterious packet that had just been handed to her, but of her little pupil Jimmy. Certainly it was right and desirable that the old should die, but it was monstrous that a child of seven should be put to death. She would not allow it. She would move heaven and earth to prevent it. Early on the morrow she would go to the Residence and see the President. She would tell him who she was. She

would charm him. She would ask a favour of him. He would grant it immediately. She would adopt Jimmy as her own child. He should come and live with her and Alaric, and she would love and care for him until he grew strong again. Perhaps, when he was a man, he would find out something about God, because he had intuitions that other boys did not have. Or she, Eleuthera, might have a son who . . .

Aspasia and Alaric re-entered the room. Eleuthera sprang up.

“Take me straight home.”

CHAPTER VII

CAJOLING THE PRESIDENT

THERE had been a thunderstorm during the night. When Eleuthera finally awoke her first thoughts were heavy with distress. She was dimly conscious of the passage of oppressive sulphurous air, of angry crashing thunderclaps, of rain streaming down the lowered roof of her balcony. Sending her thoughts back, she recalled the fact that she had quarrelled with Alaric, and that some dreary aftertaste of their disagreement remained, even though they had bidden one another an affectionate good night. She had said she could not and would not be mated that quarter-day, if, on the same day, Jimmy was put to death. Alaric had reproached her with loving the child better than she loved him. She herself had been furiously angry with him because he thought it a matter of so little importance whether Jimmy lived or died. He had argued that every quarter-day a number of unwanted individuals were painlessly disposed of, and that the mere fact that one of them happened to be a pupil of hers ought not to distress her as it did. Another quarter day would bring just the same crop of euthanasias. He intimated that he found her tediously sentimental. She retorted that he was hard and callous. A feeling, however, on both sides that their love was too precious to be endangered had led to a patched-up reconciliation. Nevertheless, Eleuthera was determined to save Jimmy's life if she could.

She rose early, and breakfasted alone. Looking at the rain still steadily falling, she decided that she must go by motor-bus to the Residence. To tell the truth, she was nervous of aircraft in thundery weather. So she walked along the covered footway, took the down-lift, and found herself waiting in the underground station. The air, artificially cooled and purified, felt pleasantly fresh. The little station was gay with rubber flowers, some of which were being sprayed with perfume by a porter. Few people were about at that early hour, and Eleuthera had the bus nearly to herself. She rarely came by underground, and looked with some interest at the mosaics which decorated the white walls, at the old-fashioned private cars which occasionally spun past the 'bus, at the outward-bound traffic beyond the rubber trees in the centre of the road. Every now and then she imagined and dramatically constructed the scene which she was about to enact. She would be her most charming self. It was only since she had been to the mating-dances that she had realised that such a thing as feminine charm existed, but now she knew, and she was going to wield the weapon skilfully. If she could

have worn her rose-pink flower-petalled dress! Unfortunately that was forbidden by law. However, her fresh white tunic was adorned with a rose-pink belt, and she wore shoes to match, and she had arranged her curls with the greatest care. The President would be pleased when he saw the girl whom his son had chosen. She would explain to him very earnestly and simply about Jimmy. The President would smile on her, and would grant her request.

The bus stopped again, and Eleuthera realised that she must get out. There was a subway to the door of the Residence. She was informed that she might come in and wait, and possibly the President would see her after breakfast.

The waiting-room was cool and spacious. On a polished table lay a variety of government publications. Eleuthera took up the *Æsthetic Review* and turned to her lover's article, "The Future of Art." She had just learned, with some surprise, that artistic production was falling off rapidly, and that some new source of inspiration was essential, and had not read far enough to discover where such a well-spring might be found, when the door opened and a page-boy asked her kindly to step this way. With a stab of excitement and pain at her heart, she rose and followed him.

The President was seated at his desk. His face was in the shadow, but Eleuthera saw his stern features, thin cheeks and determined mouth. He did not rise as she entered, nor did he speak, but motioned her to a chair where the light fell full upon her face.

Catching her breath a little, she began to speak, eagerly, a trifle incoherently. The President was not an easy man to talk to. He said nothing, did not look sympathetic. Even when she paused he did not help her out.

At last she had done. The case, somehow, had been put. The President now knew who she was and why she had come. He was aware that the life of a child was at stake.

For an interminable minute, he was silent. When he spoke, Eleuthera noticed, before even she grasped the meaning of his words, the extraordinary beauty of his voice. It had a timbre, a melodious resonance, seldom or never met with. Eleuthera guessed how it was that the President could hold and dominate vast assemblies of people.

"I understand, my dear young lady," he was saying, "that you have come to see me because you have entered into a mating-engagement with my son. Relying on your charm as a woman and my power as a President, you wish us to do an action which is against the law of the land. Do I state the facts correctly?"

Eleuthera was dumbfounded. She could only falter, “I—I suppose so.”

“For one thing,” he continued gravely, “you mistake the nature of my position as President. I am not here to exercise arbitrary powers. I am here to carry out the will of the people. Even if what you asked were desirable, it is not within my powers to perform it. Let us, nevertheless, have the facts before us.”

He picked up the telephone. “Secretary, please. Yes? Record of Jimmy 27, Ward 25. If you haven’t a photograph, get me a telephoto through. Can you do it in ten minutes? You have the photograph? Very well. Bring me all particulars at once.”

He laid down the instrument and turned to Eleuthera with a courteous smile. “So you and my son Alaric are to mate. He is certainly to be congratulated. I hope to preside over the ceremony. June is an excellent month for mating—excellent.”

Eleuthera was casting about for polite remarks in response to the President’s change of tone, when for a moment he got up and walked away. As he stood at a cabinet, she observed that he was trembling all over. He took up a small glass, swallowed its contents, closed the door and returned to her. A page-boy entered with a sheaf of documents.

“Here we have your small friend’s record,” observed the President. “Dear me, this is as bad as can be. Birth owing to a mistake, in spite of preventive measures. Bad health-record on both sides. Persistent ill-health. Intelligence slightly subnormal. Nervous system unstable. Night terrors. Morbid craving for affection. No special artistic aptitude. Anti-social vices, and lack of normal sense of camaraderie. Very bad, my dear young lady, very bad indeed. Why should the State be asked to support such a citizen?”

“I don’t know,” said Eleuthera desperately. “If you can’t see that it is wrong to kill a child who can’t defend himself, I can’t make you see it. Don’t you *feel* it’s wrong?”

“Right action is action which conduces to the good of the State. A wrong action is one which favours the individual at the expense of the State. There is no other criterion.”

“Yes, there is. There is compassion, unwillingness to give pain.”

“Certainly. If this poorly equipped boy lives he will endure much pain. Euthanasia is painless. It may even be pleasant. You have the right to inflict it yourself. For his own sake as well as for the nation’s, your Jimmy is better dead.”

“But,” she ventured tremulously, “you might argue like that about anyone. There are always things in life that hurt. It hurts when people you

love go away. It hurts when you have to be with horrid people. It hurts to hear babies cry. And it's terrible seeing people get old. All the same there are more beautiful things in life than there are ugly ones, and even the ugly ones are sometimes interesting. Anyway, they don't generally last long. People all like being alive."

The President answered her grimly. "Most men go on living because they are afraid of death, and for no other reason."

"I'm sure you're wrong—absolutely sure! There are some things, like dawn in a garden, and sunset over the sea, and clear stars in a frosty sky, that fill up the whole of life with delight though they only last such a little while. Jimmy could have all those."

"You forget," he said, becoming slightly exasperated, "that I have no power to grant your request. To rescind that medical certificate would require an Act of Parliament. Take my advice, my dear young lady. Invite the boy to spend his last week with you, and put him to sleep yourself. He will have no fear of death. A drop of thanatine on a handkerchief or even on a flower is enough. You will incur no risk in using it, as it will be mixed to be lethal to no one but the little lad himself. You know Miguel? He will make out the warrant to you, if you like. I will write the instructions now."

Eleuthera could not admit to herself that she had failed. She must go on trying. "What you don't realise, any of you," she cried, "is that Jimmy *has* a special value, and that all the State will be poorer if he dies. He isn't just any sickly little boy. He has the most marvellous intuitions. He feels wonderful things, and then, when I think about them, I begin to feel them too. Other people would—I know they would. I am beginning to believe that God is talking to us, and first of all children hear, and then——"

She stopped, almost with a cry, as she discerned the expression of cold rage on the face of the President. He turned, rang a bell. The page-boy appeared.

"Show this lady out."

The tone was like ice and whips and fire. Eleuthera, humiliated beyond tears, found herself on the doorstep. Thus ended the scene which she had so much enjoyed planning, as one plans a successful play.

CHAPTER VIII

HECTOR COMES HOME

THE INTERNATIONAL airliner *Orion*, sailing from South Africa to England *via* Timbuctoo, Madrid and Paris, landed an important passenger. This was Hector, chairman of the League's Commission on Backward Races, Hector, father of Eleuthera.

Athena, his mate, was gardening. She had come back a little dispirited from a meeting of the Free Library Committee, and was now refreshing her tired spirit among her flowers. The Free Library Committee had *carte blanche* to buy all the books it liked, and there seemed to be no books worth buying. Athena began to think she must write some herself. She could certainly write a book about a garden. Had everything that it was possible to say about gardens been said already?

"Athena!"

"Hector! Back already?" She stripped off her rubber glove and offered him a firm, well-shaped hand, which he clasped warmly.

"Yes. When I got your radiogram, I told the commission they could carry on for ten days or so without me. I wanted to come over for the child's mating ceremony. Alaric's all right, isn't he? She's doing pretty well for herself, isn't she? When Alaric's tired of his office, he can come along to Central Africa and I can give him a job there. There is plenty of spade-work to be done among the Bantu and the Zulus, I can tell you. How are the boys? I see they've been winning most of their matches."

"They were on the teleflick last night," Athena informed him with maternal pride. "They were playing the West Indies. The pictures came through splendidly. Didn't you get them up aloft as you came along?"

"To tell the honest truth," he confessed, "it was a bit thundery, and the *Orion* was none too steady. I still get air-sick every now and then."

"What happened to your official 'plane? Why did you have to come home by liner?"

Hector laughed. He had a big, frank, exuberant laugh, which was somehow exactly like his big, frank, exuberant self. "Didn't I tell you? My dear, the 'plane has gone crashing back into the Age of Unreason. Simply incredible, if it hadn't happened to me. Well, it will be something to liven up the Redpaper, and League Redpapers are apt to be a bit heavy reading."

“Nobody reads them,” Athena observed. “I’ll ’phone another lunch-portion, and we can have lunch on the veranda. Don’t my roses look exquisite after the rain?”

A few minutes later the traveller was enjoying his portion of synthetic steak, green peas and new potatoes, honey biscuits and strawberry ice-cream, and rambling on about his travels.

“Talk about backward races, my dear, prehistoric man isn’t in it! The League set up a milk-factory at M’Bangwe, fixed the price of grass, and piped the milk for a radius of I forget how many miles. D’you think our dusky friends would use it? Not a bit! They prefer the old-fashioned method of laboriously lugging milk out of the udder of a cow! Priceless!”

“You’ve a big task before you, levelling them all up to the standard of the League.”

He nodded. “Something to put one’s back into, isn’t it? I was telling you about the ’plane, though. You’ll get pretty bored with the story before I’ve done, for I shall tell it to every fresh person I meet. Flying over the equator, something went wrong with one of her wings, and down she came. As luck had it, Bruckmann, our pilot, steered her to a clearing in a forest, and we landed there. After we’d radioed a bit to get our bearings, we found we were a couple of hundred miles from the nearest Airways hangar and repair station. We had a good meal, the dozen of us, and held a council. We couldn’t very well signal for a relief ’plane, as landing room was so limited. Our wing was so badly damaged, you see, that it was a question of a new one. Finally we decided to follow a track through the jungle and see what it led to. I went in front with my electric far-shooter in case we met any wild beasts, but we didn’t meet a thing. After about an hour we heard, what d’you think?—a jolly old honk-honk, and there we were on one of the League roads, and there was an A.A. man flashing past on his ‘rocket,’ and the cars of all nations rolling along.”

Athena was appropriately impressed. She was just murmuring that it was a pity the League hadn’t built their arterial roads underground, when Hector intimated he had not yet reached the point of his story.

“Well, what d’you think came along next? The midday motor-bus. There was plenty of room for all of us, and we were just going to climb in and go along to the nearest hotel, when I found I’d dropped my pocket-book. Bruckmann offered to come along with me and look for it, and we could catch the evening bus. So off we set. When we got back to where we had made our forced landing, what d’you think we saw?”

She had no idea, but, as Hector had merely paused to take breath, he went on without waiting for an answer. “Priceless! Simply priceless! A whole lot of natives had appeared from nowhere and had taken possession of the ’plane. They had garlanded the whole structure with flowers, and what d’you think they were doing then? Worshipping it! It was the first time in my life, I can tell you, that I was ever present at a religious ceremony. Bruckmann and I hid behind a tree and watched. I’d have given anything to have had my ciné there, but, of course, I couldn’t get at it. However, Bruckmann took notes. The point is, don’t you see, they had deified the ’plane and were worshipping it. Could you have imagined such a thing possible? It shows that superstitions die hard. It’s a pity Bruckmann’s shop is entomology, isn’t it? If it had been the Commission’s folklorist! Poor old Popoffski, you should have seen his face when we told him what he’d missed! Where’s Eleuthera? She never used to be late for lunch.”

Athena rose. “I’ll go and see. No, she never is late. She went out at half-past seven this morning. The fact is, she is a good deal upset because her favourite pupil has failed to pass his medical. She shouldn’t have favourites.”

“All the same, she is my favourite child.” Hector laughed. “The boys and Hebe take after me, and Eleuthera takes after you, and perhaps you can guess why she is my favourite.”

She responded with a quiet, glowing look of content, and moved away.

Upstairs, Eleuthera was lying on a sofa in her room, face downwards on a cushion. She had kicked off her coquettish rose-coloured shoes, and her belt lay like a pink snake on the floor. Her whole body quivered as she sobbed, and she did not look up when her mother came in.

“Eleuthera, your father is home again.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you coming down to lunch?”

“I don’t want any lunch.”

“Aren’t you coming down to see your father?”

“No.”

“Eleuthera, are you behaving reasonably?”

“No.”

Eleuthera sat up and pushed her hair back from her eyes. “I’ll tell you what I did this morning. I went and saw the President and asked him to let Jimmy live. He said Jimmy was no good to the State and better dead. He’s a

beast. I hate him. I wish he wasn't Alaric's father. He has no more feeling than a dynamo."

"Did you go to school and take your class?"

"No. I didn't. I didn't let them know, either. I just came home and cried. I'm sorry. Tell Daddy I'm glad he's back, and I don't want any lunch, but I'll come down when I've finished crying."

"My child, you live too much by your emotions."

"It isn't my fault, is it, if other people are cruel? If I could manage things, there'd be nothing but nice emotions, and everyone would live by them."

"What about Peter?"

Eleuthera began to cry again. "I don't think you need have reminded me. I'm quite unhappy enough about Jimmy anyway. I'd made such lovely plans for what he was to do when he was grown up."

"Our first duty is to obey the laws of the land. That makes for the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

"Does it? Not if they are horrid laws. I wish you'd go away now, please. I don't want to be rude to you, but I'm not feeling nice, and I might be rude to anyone who happened to be here."

She buried her face again in the cushion, and her mother, grave and slightly disapproving, withdrew. When, however, Athena rejoined her mate on the veranda, her brow was once more serene.

"Where's the child?" Hector asked. "A nice welcome she's giving me, isn't she?"

"I found her crying. She says she will come down when she has finished."

"Shall I go up and comfort her?"

"No, Hector. You always want to spoil the children. Eleuthera is a woman now. She must learn to bear her troubles alone."

"Poor wee thing, I hate to think she has any. Girls ought to be as happy as all the birds in the air, oughtn't they?"

Athena rested her elbows on the table and her chin on her folded hands, and looked at him long and gravely. "Hector," she said, "do you think Eleuthera and her mate will have to go through what we went through?"

He was puzzled. "What was that? D'you mean when we were staying near Innsbruck and the hotel was struck by lightning?"

"No, of course I don't, you big stupid! Don't you remember that evening when Eleuthera was a month old? We had both of us, you remember,

suffered a good deal from the storm and stress of adolescence, and going to Cambridge made us worse rather than better, because all possible and impossible questions were constantly being discussed, and we lived in an intolerable intellectual ferment. Don't you remember—you had a sort of nervous breakdown and had to go on a six months' walking-tour with three other undergraduates, and they sent me to a Domestic Science college? Then you were psychoed and told that mating would cure you. When we got engaged we felt we were entering on a new life in which all our values would be different, and that when we were mated there would be no more pain. And that evening, don't you remember, my baby had cried and I could not quiet her, and then you took her in your arms and carried her out on the balcony and she went to sleep? I came and stood by you, under the stars. And then, don't you remember, we confessed to each other how bitterly disappointed we were—not in each other, for we were never that—that life was just the same, and that all the pain and mystery was still there, symbolised for us in a baby's crying? We faced despair that evening, despair that in time all men's hopes and desires and noblest achievements would go down into utter darkness, and that, just as the light of the stars would be put out, so we should die, and the child we had made would die, and our love for each other would cease, and there would be nothing left. In begetting life we had begotten death, and however much I loved the baby I could not save her in the end. What was the use of effort and achievement? Why write books and paint pictures and make music, as though there were any ultimate goal to humanity? Don't you remember, Hector, how we faced the truth then? Must Eleuthera and Alaric go through it too? To me she is still the little baby who cried and whom I could not comfort."

For a minute she bowed her head. Hector, hardly sharing her emotion, said, "It seems a long time ago. I've been very busy all these years."

"We made a compact then," the woman went on, "that we would never, you and I, do anything to add to the pain of mankind. If we had had to walk through the waters of despair, we would come out purified. I have tried never to swerve from my ideal of compassion. We are all doomed men, and we may as well be kind to each other during the short time that remains to us. Compassion and courage. I have tried to teach my children, too."

"I remember now," said Hector musingly. "To tell the honest truth I had forgotten the incident until you spoke of it. I got busy—ever since then I've kept things humming pretty well. The boys are like me—more buoyant, don't you think? Hebe too, perhaps. Eleuthera takes after you. D'you suppose the child has had her cry out yet? Shall I go up and see?"

"Hector, you are incorrigible!"

“Well, my dear, if the poor child has got a bad time coming, hadn’t she better have a little petting first? What d’you think? Alaric’ll be good to her. Perhaps they won’t be as metaphysical as you were—I daresay they won’t. Of course, the child’s terribly sensitive, but she doesn’t think questions out the way you used to. She seems pretty happy among her flowers. Don’t you think so?”

Eleuthera came in slowly, penitent and pretty and a little tear-stained, like a lovely child.

“Well, Daddy,” she said, “do you like the Backward Races better than you like us?”

CHAPTER IX

JIMMY

It was all over. Jimmy was dead. And now there was nothing to do all day long. Eleuthera had not even the relief of work. Thinking she would be mated at the end of June, she had sent in her resignation, and when she decided to attend the September mating-ceremony instead, she could not, of course, go back to her teaching. Her mornings had previously been spent at school, naturally. In the afternoon she generally went to the municipal nursery-gardens to choose flowers for the morrow's lessons. The nursery-gardens were near the swimming-bath and the tennis courts and the skating-rink, and various other pleasant places where you could meet your friends and have exercise and tea. Now, somehow, they had all lost their attractions. And Alaric, whom she had banished for a week, had not yet been to see her.

Eleuthera had taken the President's advice and claimed her right as Jimmy's form-mistress. Instead of spending the last week of his short life at the Necrospital under the eye of Miguel, he had come home with Eleuthera. His delight was unbounded. The mornings at school were irradiated with happiness cast by the joy of breakfast with Eleuthera. Afternoons were spent in the garden with her. She had taken him to the pet-store and allowed him to choose a pet, for she thought a fluffy kitten or roguish puppy would add much to the spice of life. Jimmy chose a tiny tortoise, and lavished on it an inordinate amount of affection. However, it turned out to be a most suitable pet, for the little fellow was always rather tired and languid, and a kitten or a puppy would have been too exacting. Whereas Captain Jones merely crawled, or didn't crawl, or ate yellow flowers, or did not eat them, while Jimmy lay on a rug and gazed at it in rapture.

When he had had enough of tortoise-gazing, he could sit on Eleuthera's lap and listen to stories. At night his little bed was beside hers on the balcony, and every evening at bedtime she gave him two things, a flower and a story. The first story was about animals, and the second about mermaids. Then Jimmy wanted a story about flowers, and another one about trees. The fifth was about the sea, and the sixth about the stars. And this was the seventh.

It had been a hot day, and Jimmy was very tired. Still, when the freshness of evening came, he had asked to stay in the garden a little longer, and as it did not really matter one way or the other, Eleuthera had said yes.

So it came about that dusk was just beginning to gather when he climbed into his little bed and lay down, and Eleuthera put the white blanket over him.

"Jimmy," she said, "do you remember once asking me what there was with you when you were alone? You said it was nice, like wings. Well, would you like to hear a story about that?"

"Fink I just would!" he cried, with a little expectant wriggle of joy.

"Well, once upon a time there was a man who was more beautiful and more strong than anyone had ever been before. He was beautiful like dawn and sunset and the sea, and strong like trees. He was different from everyone else, because he had wings. But the wings were a secret, and only little children could see them. Grown-up people thought he was just like everybody else, except that he was strong and very gentle, but the children could see his wings."

"What did he do?" Jimmy asked, following the story with breathless eagerness. "What did he make?"

"He made lots and lots of things. Mostly toys and flowers. His toys took a long time to make, because they were very beautiful. While he worked, people used to come and talk to him. They used to say, 'You look so happy working. Tell us about it,' and he said: 'What makes people happy is love. People are happy who love each other, and who make peace if they see two people quarrelling. People are happy who don't want everything for themselves, and who love others to have nice things too. It makes you happy to look for beauty and goodness, because you are sure to find it. It makes you happy to have been sad, when someone you love comes and comforts you!' "

"Did you hear him say it?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes. I said, 'Hurray, that's just what I think!' but some of the men who were listening said 'Nonsense.' "

"Was I vere too?"

"Wait a minute. One day he had been working very, very hard, and he had made the most beautiful red roses."

"Like the one you've got in your hand, teacher?"

"Just like that. They had the loveliest, sleepiest smell you could imagine, just like this rose has. He said to himself, 'I wonder who would like these roses. One of them is more beautiful than all the others. I wonder who would like that.' As he was saying that to himself, two or three little children came up and looked at him. One little girl said, 'Oh, look at that man, he's got *wings*. D'you think he'd mind if I went and stroked them?' And another

little girl said, ‘Oh, no. I’m sure he wouldn’t, he’s got such a sweet face.’ So several of the children came up, and he put his arms round them and talked to them and smiled at them. But some of the grown-ups were there, and they said to the little children, ‘You’d better run away home, because I am sure it is your bedtime, and you’re bothering our friend.’ He said, ‘No, children never bother me. I’ve been working all day to make them these roses. And now I’m going to give everybody a rose before they run home to their mothers and go to bed.’ But there was one little boy there who hadn’t got any mother, and he stood a little way off and wished and wished there might be a rose for him, though he didn’t dare to ask. D’you know what his name was?”

“Jimmy!” cried Jimmy, kicking his legs rapturously under the bedclothes. “It *was* Jimmy, wasn’t it?”

“Jimmy it was! Aren’t you a clever boy to guess! And the man with wings said, ‘Come, Jimmy, come and sit on my knee.’ So he took Jimmy and put him on his knee, and said to the grown-ups, ‘I love little boys like this. He never quarrels, and he loves everything that is beautiful, and now he is going to sleep on my knee with his head on my arm.’ He gave Jimmy the loveliest of all the red roses, and Jimmy put his head down on his arm and the wings folded round him—and Jimmy, darling, aren’t you getting sleepy? Here’s the red rose, and, look, darkness is coming round you just like wings ____”

“You’ll go to bed soon, won’t you, teacher?”

“Yes, darling, in just a minute. Let me kiss you now. Here’s the rose. Put it by you on the pillow. Can you feel the wings in the darkness?”

“Oh yes, sure. I’m all lovely and sleepy. Good night, teacher.”

“Good night.”

With the still little form in the bed beside her, how should she sleep? Yet Eleuthera slept, and did not hear her mother come in softly at midnight and take away Jimmy, so that in the morning the small bed was empty.

She came down to breakfast, listless and heavy-eyed. She did not cry, for it seemed to her that the spring of her tears was dried up and she should never be able to cry again. Athena and she were alone at table, for Hector had returned to Africa, promising to come back for next quarter-day.

“May I look at the paper?” Eleuthera asked, as she did not want to talk.

Her mother hesitated.

“What is in the paper that you don’t want me to see?” the girl asked.

As her mother did not answer, she exclaimed, “I know. The list of euthanasias. I forgot it would be in this morning. Let me look.”

“Eleuthera, haven’t you had all you can bear?”

“Who is dead now? *You* tell me.”

“Peter.”

“Peter!” The girl started from her chair in dismay. “Not *our* Peter!”

“I am afraid so, Eleuthera.”

She was silent as the terrible truth came home to her. Because she, Eleuthera, had refused to mate with him, he had found nothing in life to hold him, and had put an end to his existence. For this tragedy she, the friend of his childhood, his playmate of long years’ standing, was directly responsible. He had not thought of his duty to the State, of his parents or his work; or, in any case, these had been but the dust in the balance compared with the pain of seeing her mate with another man. Eleuthera imagined for a moment what Peter must have suffered before he had decided to ask for euthanasia—young and strong, life must surely have been sweet. The thought of so much pain was intolerable, and she averted her mental gaze.

“Oh, mother!” she cried. “You said Peter wouldn’t mind for long!”

Athena said nothing. After all, what was there to say?

CHAPTER X

THE BOOK

It was a good thing that, just then, Eleuthera should have remembered the parcel. When she did remember it, and recalled how the old man had handed it over to her, she could not understand how she had forgotten it. And yet it was simple enough. On arriving home after her call at the Melford Hundreds, she had thrust the packet under a pile of clean tunics in her wardrobe and left it there. Her grief about Jimmy, and uneasiness at her quarrel with Alaric, had filled her mind to the exclusion of everything else. Now, however, on this dreary morning, when the wind had suddenly veered and a cold rain was drenching the garden, she turned eagerly for relief to anything that promised to distract her thoughts. Running up to her room, she opened the wardrobe and took out the parcel. It was so carefully tied up and sealed that some minutes elapsed before she could unwrap the contents, and her curiosity had time to sharpen itself on delay. What could be inside? Embroidery? An inlaid box? A book?

A book it proved to be. At the first sight a dull and sober little book, bound as it was in faded black leather and marked with a sign †. On the worn back were the words COMMON PRAYER.

Eleuthera's heart beat fast. Here indeed was a treasure. She, perhaps alone in the world, possessed a book of ritual of one of the religions which had passed away with the Age of Unreason. Now she would know something of what those long-dead men and women held sacred. She would find out what they killed each other for. It was too thrilling for words.

She turned to the title page.

THE BOOK OF
COMMON PRAYER
AND
ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS

(What were sacraments? Well, never mind. Read on.)

AND OTHER RITES AND CEREMONIES OF THE
CHURCH, ACCORDING TO THE USE OF
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Yes, that was it. The cult of a local deity. How very, very strange and interesting. But why should this book have been put into Eleuthera's hands?

The first few pages were in very small print. "An Act for Uniformity of Common Prayer" did not look very interesting. Anyhow, she would read it another time. To-day, somehow, her eyes were tired. "The Preface"—no, that could wait too. She turned several pages at once.

ANOTHER TABLE TO FIND EASTER.

What was Easter? Not the name of the local deity? No, you wouldn't want a table to find—oh yes, you might. A sort of invocation. No. It said "Easter Day" on the opposite page. Then Easter was a public holiday, like Blossom Day and League Day and Thanksgiving. Why did you want a table to find it. Well, go on. That need not be answered yet. Ah, here the book really began!

THE ORDER FOR
MORNING PRAYER,
DAILY THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

Every day of the year, every day, some unknown functionary here called "the Minister" used to read these strange sentences "with a loud voice." Where did he read them? To whom? Why?

When the wicked man turneth away . . .

The first page of Morning Prayer heaped puzzle on puzzle until Eleuthera was fairly bewildered. What was a "soul"? Why did it want "saving"? Who or what were Ezek., Ps., Joel, Dan., St. Matth., and the rest? Why did the minister read little bits of their sayings like that? What was a "sin"? Whose face had to be hidden from it, and why? Who wanted to arise and go to his father and say he had sinned? And what was heaven; and why, if he was his father's son, wasn't he worthy to be called son any more?

The last quotation—for quotations they certainly must be—was the most mysterious of all. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. . . ." What *was* sin? Eleuthera felt she might very likely assert that she had none, because she had no idea what it was. Had she got some without knowing it? If so, where? What was it like? It was evidently something that one ought to own up about. But to whom? Who was it who was going to forgive? The "minister," perhaps? Eleuthera had not the slightest idea.

There was only one sentence that sounded hopeful. “The Lord our God.” That was the name of the deity in whose honour the Church of England (presumably some kind of national temple) had been built. There was something comforting in the sound of the words. If it had not been for them, Eleuthera would have closed the book in bewildered despair.

She read on.

“Dearly beloved brethren . . .”

(That was a nice way, a frightfully nice way, to begin; it also made it clear that the minister was talking and some people were listening. Men only? Or were there women too? She had heard that women occupied an inferior place in the Age of Unreason. Perhaps they were not admitted to these rites. Well, read on.)

“. . . the Scripture . . .”

(Another puzzle. What was the Scripture?)

“. . . moveth us in sundry places . . .”

(“Moveth,” that is old English for moves. How? Was the Scripture another kind of official or functionary, who went round and poked the brethren if they did not carry out their part of the ritual properly? If there were sisters there, did the Scripture prod them too? Dear me, Eleuthera wished she had someone to explain it to her. She wasn’t getting on very fast.)

“. . . to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness . . .”

(Sin again; evidently they meant to get it out of you somehow, perhaps they killed you if you refused to tell.)

“. . . that we should not dissemble nor cloke them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father. . . .”

Ah, that sounded beautiful! *Almighty God our heavenly Father.* Surely a title like that was not applied to a mere local deity. It was something vaster. This God, in whose honour the strange ritual was composed, must, in the mind of the unknown author, have been the Father of all men. Eleuthera was so excited she could hardly hold the book. She read on.

Long before, however, she had reached the end of Morning Prayer, her mind was lost again in labyrinths of phrases she could not understand. Her tired brain wandered off into mazes of speculation, stumbling over old-fashioned words, unknown ideas, curious commands. Every now and then her heart would leap up in response to some stirring phrase, and she felt the mystery was revealing itself to her, and then again the portal seemed closed in her face and she was not admitted to worship.

She laid the little book down, pushed back her hair from her hot forehead, and sighed deeply. Then she thought of scientists who worked day in, day out, for years and years in their laboratories to make a single discovery. Their admirable patience! And was she going to be discouraged the very first time she read this precious volume. Never!

A bright idea occurred to her. She would pretend she was the minister (elsewhere called the priest, unless, of course, the priest was yet another official). She would stand up, and, imagining there were dearly beloved brethren in front of her, she would read Morning Prayer with a loud voice. No one must know anything about it. Let me see. Had she got the house to herself? She pressed the hour-button, and in response Greenwich time signalled itself. Exactly thirty-six minutes past ten. Athena was at a meeting of the Open Spaces Committee, and would certainly not be back for another hour. Her father and the boys and Hebe were away. If anyone came to the front door they would just step into the hall and set the indicator to her name, when the notes which composed Eleuthera's call would summon her downstairs. In her own room she was safe from interruption.

Now!

Tingling with excitement, she stood up. Suppose she dressed for the part? What should she put on? She took a white coverlet and draped it round her in soft folds. A correct costume certainly helped. Eleuthera opened her book. No. She would not read all those mysterious quotations; she would begin right away.

Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places . . .

The girl read clearly and firmly, pausing every now and then to see whether she should stand or kneel, her body tense with eagerness, her mind on the alert for the revelation of meaning. Presently she became aware of the surpassing beauty of the language, and learned that there was amazing æsthetic pleasure to be derived from the stately sweep of measured sentences. There was a majesty and dignity about the words unlike anything she had ever known before. A hush, a peace descended on her. The act she was performing ceased to be a scientific experiment or even a solemn stage-play. She did not understand what she was doing, but she was quite sure she was doing something real. This was no revival of a dead superstition. It was an offering to something real, an exploration into a new land, unseen, it is true, but close at hand.

Now and then a phrase or a sentence jarred. Words like "unto whom I sware in my wrath: that they should not enter into my rest" were out of

keeping with the rest of the ritual. “Praise him, and magnify him for ever,” was glorious. “O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands,” was superb. It was hard to believe, too, that men who repeated every day in the year, “O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord,” should have killed each other in the name of this very God in whose honour the rite was carried out. Eleuthera began to think she had been misinformed on that point, anyhow.

The last paragraph but one was extraordinarily thrilling. It began by stating that two or three people—not more—were needed to make a quorum at the ceremony. But if there were two or three people there together, they would get two marvellous gifts. In this world, knowledge of the truth; and in some unspecified future world, everlasting life. . . .

Eleuthera closed the book, drew a long breath, unwrapped her draperies from her shoulders, and sat down in an armchair, for she was tired. It was all over now, the long-dead ritual, and for a few brief minutes she had believed in it. She had felt as though she were in touch with some reality more vivid, more permanent, than the material objects around her, or even than her own personality. What had she been doing? Play-acting? Her questions were unanswered, most of the ritual was unintelligible, and yet—something had happened. She was looking at conceptions she had never seen before. Never in all her life before had she come up against anything which so stimulated her wish to discover, to know, to feel. And yet how baffling it was!

If only Alaric were interested too, and would help! You wanted a man’s brain. . . .

Well, Eleuthera knew it was no good telling Alaric about the book. She would do a real hard *think*, on her own.

Taking some embroidery, for her brain worked better when her fingers were busy, she began to reflect.

First of all she was conscious of an obscure surge of anger against those who had cut her off from the heritage of the past. Why were children taught no history except post-Revolution history, no events but those of the last two hundred years? When she had asked, the reply had been, “It is better to look forward than to look back.” A few vague general notions had been offered to her. They were called “Evolution in Outline.” She reviewed them, and was disgusted at their insufficiency.

In the beginning, the ether. How it came there no one had told her. Presumably it made itself. Then, somehow—but how?—it began to move, whirling, clinging, rushing together and away in a wild infinite dance of atoms and electrons. In some puzzling fashion, nebulæ were formed. Huge

hot whirling masses of matter flung other molten masses into space. Out of chaos appeared the first law, the law of gravitation. By some inexplicable attraction, suns gathered planetary systems round them, worlds began to sweep in curves which, millions of years later, would become intelligible to astronomers, but which Eleuthera found merely bewildering and inconceivable.

Then the stage suddenly narrowed, and the drama was set on one little planet. As the molten mass cooled, what had been mere undifferentiated electrons and things, began—why?—how?—to arrange themselves into sea and land, metals and plants. A strange little being, which, having only one cell, might have been immortal, decided, for no known reason, to split up into two, and so reproduction, birth and death entered into the world. Life, having forced its way into inanimate nature, twisted and tortured itself into monstrous shapes. Over the broken surface of the world, vast animals crawled and flew, fighting to survive. Suddenly, with fear in his eyes, a little ape ran across the stage, gibbering as he ran. Turn the pages of ten thousand years, and he has learned to stand upright. Wielding rude weapons, he has faced and dominated the stronger beasts around him. Now he and his savage mate and rough progeny form the family. Presently tribal organisation emerges. Still the man is dominated by fear, fear of nature, fear of his own kind, fear of spirits. Hunger and terror goading him, he marches down the ages, and his blood stains every step of the way that he has come. Who guides him? No one. Has he a goal? None.

Yet civilisations emerge. Rome, Athens, Sparta, Babylon, Nineveh. Eleuthera knew their names, but little more. She knew that the man who had once tried to scratch the outline of a buffalo on the walls of a cave, had in the age of Greek culture learned to cut the human form in perfect marble. She had been told that each civilisation in turn had been shadowed by the dark clouds of some superstition. Priests and prophets had conspired for their own ends to hold the human intellect in fetters. At last the World-Revolution had struck off the chains, and mankind was free.

Eleuthera pushed her hair back from her forehead feeling a trifle peevish. It had taken her about five minutes to run through all the Ancient History she knew. She didn't think, if you wanted her honest opinion, that it was Reasonable to sum up all the events of all those millions of years in a few trite tendencious sentences. Of course, ignorance saved you a lot of trouble. History would have been a great bother to remember. All the same, she wished she knew more. The surest way to get a snub was to ask some

question about pre-Revolution days. For instance, people still said "Great Bernard Shaw!" and "Great Scott!" and "What the Dickens!" and "The Deuce you do!" If you asked what these quaint old exclamations meant, you were told that Bernard Shaw and Scott and Dickens were authors in the Age of Unreason, and the Deuce was a politician, who ought to have been called "Il Duce," as he was an Italian who originated the oft-quoted remark, "The State is the End, the Citizens are the Means." If you enquired further, you were told to mind your own business. Was it Reasonable? Why this conspiracy of silence? Suppose the authors in question *were* counter-Revolutionary—what then?

Of course, there was Revolutionary history and to spare. Eleuthera was sick of the details of the events of the last two hundred years. The World Revolution of the Proletariat made horrible reading. Still more horrible had been the civil wars in China and India, with the final annihilation of the victorious Chinese by poison-gas from Japanese aircraft. The great epidemic which followed had killed more than the wars had done. Great tracts of the world lay desolate. In China, for instance, only a narrow fringe of the coast was inhabited. Thousands of Indian villages were nothing but collections of deserted huts. South America had been sorely stricken. In some cities none remained alive to bury the dead. Altogether, the population of the world had been reduced to a quarter of its pre-Revolution figure.

After the Great Death, ten years of madness had supervened. Everyone had danced. By day, by night, in hunger, in rags, amid ruin and desolation unspeakable, men and women, old and young had danced. The streets and market-places, lit by garish light, showed, all through the hours of darkness, crowds of people, unable to sleep, dancing, dancing, dancing. . . . To eunatic music, one half of the human race had seized the other by the waist and whirled round in mad measure until they dropped.

Blank exhaustion followed. The mania ceased as suddenly as it had come. Then, very slowly, recovery set in. Sanity. Painful effort. Hope. Reconstruction.

Curiously enough, it was the architects who gave the impulse towards a new world. They called upon the populace to build anew amid the ruins, and, in a dull dazed way, the people had responded. As the edifices rose, the sight of stone and concrete piled mass upon mass seemed to bring a little confidence to tormented minds. Very timidly at first, the nations began to put forth their strength. Once more parliaments were convoked, laws were enacted, credit was re-established, the rivers of commerce began to flow. Mankind built, and built nobly. War was outlawed, Reason enthroned. Science, tamed and repentant, sought to teach men the Art of Living.

In England the Eugenist Party came rapidly to the fore, and dominated all the new legislation. By measures which many people thought far too drastic, the unfit were eliminated, and a strong healthy stock evolved.

Men were taught to live by Reason and to guide their private and public life according to what was best for the race. Everyone, thus instructed, ought to have been perfectly happy.

Eleuthera had finished her survey. The question remained: Why wasn't everyone happy now? Fair cities had been built, healthy men and women lived in them, and yet one had a feeling of being cramped and stifled. Why?

Well, the strange ritual had, as it were, discovered to her a door that led she knew not whither, and through the crack a light streamed, dazzling and lovely.

CHAPTER XI

"UNDER OBSERVATION"

ALARIC sat in the roof-garden of Bachelors' Buildings, a manuscript in his hand. The sun was beating down hotly on the little paths, the piles of rocks, the raffia grass and rubber flowers, and he was glad of the shade of the white concrete colonnade which spanned the north side of the garden. Beyond the bit of roof-garden stretched a wide space where moths were continually alighting and taking off. In one corner rose the landing-platform for the northbound air-bus, in the other for the southbound. It always amused Alaric to watch the air-bus. Drifting in from the horizon, the great creature glided gently up to the landing-stage. The station master turned on the current, and the bus, held by magnetic attraction, cohered firmly to the steel plate of the platform's edge. Out poured the passengers, disappearing a moment after down the escalator, while the upward escalator disgorged its freight at the bus's edge. The current was turned off, the signal waved and, almost without a sound, the stately monster glided away.

Alaric found watching the air-bus more profitable than reading the manuscript he held. Though this was first-day, Alaric thought he might as well do some work. He was not due at Eleuthera's till the afternoon, and he wanted to read through some contributions for his symposium on "What is Wrong with Contemporary Art." The chief thing wrong with modern art, Alaric felt, was that there was so little of it. The creative impulse was extraordinarily feeble just now. However, other people might have other ideas, so this week's *Æsthetic Review* was to be entirely devoted to a symposium on the question. So far, the manuscripts that had been sent in were utterly boring. No one seemed to have got any illuminating notions. It looked as though the *Review* would bring out an unusually dull number. Alaric yawned and stretched himself. Suppose he took his moth and went down to the sea for a bathe. It wasn't often so warm in September. Should he?

Another air-bus had just come in, and Alaric's idle gaze rested on it. Shaped like a giant pecan nut, shining all gauzy silver in the sunlight, with a tenuous cloud hovering in the blue distance behind, it was a lovely object. The men and women, black and tiny like insects, who crawled hurriedly out of it, looked singularly unimpressive. He was struck, as every now and then he was apt to be, with the insignificance and poorness of men compared with the magnificence of the things they had created. They knew how to rear

great palaces of metal and masonry, they rode the air with confidence, they tamed Nature, they imitated her, they triumphed over her. And yet—what were they, with all their achievements? They could not even write a decent article on "What is Wrong with Contemporary Art."

Alaric got up impatiently from his chair. He felt an unusual restlessness and depression. He was annoyed with Contemporary Art for being so unprolific. He was annoyed, as a conscientious editor will be, at the prospect of bringing out a tedious periodical. He was annoyed most of all, though he did not know it, at Eleuthera telling him she could not see him until the afternoon.

As he strode across the dry, artificial, odourless little roof-garden to get his moth, he became aware that one of the air-bus passengers had not gone down by the escalator but was walking towards him.

"Why, Big Brother!" he exclaimed. "This *is* a joy! Good man to come and see me here!"

Manlius shook hands. "Can we talk? I want somewhere quiet. Detestable place, this garden, isn't it? Dusty old pot-pourri!" He grunted.

"Shall we try the conning-tower. You get a marvellous view."

He led the way up a steep winding stair which they climbed in silence for a minute or two, emerging on a tiny platform, pillared and roofed in concrete. The view might have matched one from a low-flying aeroplane. At their feet the roofs of the city, their tiny gardens spread out in miniature patterns, symmetrical and neat. The great masses of buildings rose solid and heavy, intersected by the canyons of the streets, at whose base the roadways moved like steady-flowing rivers. Here and there public gardens and playing-fields broke the ranks of masonry, and the white tiers of the Stadium swept in shining ranks above the greensward. Beyond the south boundary, the trees of Pinehurst park, just near Eleuthera's house, fretted the horizon in dark outline, while, to the left and right, soft curves of hills and valleys holding mist shaded like Venetian glass, called the eyes of the beholder to rest upon their beauty. The air seemed almost more alive than the land, for it hummed and vibrated with life, while on the ground, at any rate in the distance, all was still.

"This is a fairly decent place for a chat," Alaric observed. "Take a seat."

They sat on a hard little bench, and Manlius began at once. "You don't imagine I have come all this way for the pleasure of your *beaux yeux*, do you, Little Brother?"

"No," Alaric admitted, "I thought something was probably up. Anything wrong at the office? Ministry of Reason turning out a bit unreasonable after

all?”

Manlius gave a short laugh. “Come along to the Ministry and see for yourself, before you jeer at us, my boy. There is still a place waiting for you whenever you like to give up your footling Æsthetics. My business this morning concerns your future mate.”

“Eleuthera!” cried her lover, turning very white. “She isn’t—isn’t—there’s been no accident—no—I mean——”

“Nothing of that kind. No immediate danger. The fact is, she is *under observation*.”

“Under observation! Inconceivable! Great Bernard Shaw, what can she have been doing? She’s as innocent as a rosebud.”

“These innocent-looking girls are often the worst,” remarked Manlius grimly. “The facts are these. You need not ask me how I came by them. Some aged relative of hers, living at the Melford Hundreds, has been in possession of condemned literature for some years. The matron of the Hundreds knew this, but took no action, as she reckoned on being able to destroy the book when the old man died. He never read it or showed it to anyone, and she judged it could do no harm. Recently, however, Eleuthera paid him a visit and he gave her the book. The matron, knowing the girl to have entered into a mating-engagement with the President’s son, took the rather unusual course of communicating with the President direct. He at once had Eleuthera put under observation by the secret police. Now you know as much as I do.”

“How did you hear all this?” Alaric demanded. He would have liked to doubt the incredible story, but Manlius was invariably to be relied on.

“That does not matter. What are you going to do now?”

“Burn the book at once!” he said promptly. “I am seeing Eleuthera this afternoon. I shall get her to give me the book and burn it.”

“She will probably deny all knowledge of it. Women think nothing of a good lie. She keeps it hidden away somewhere——”

“When I explain to her what danger she is in, she will give it up fast enough. Besides, she’d do anything I asked her.”

Manlius smiled a trifle incredulously. “The sooner the better,” he said shortly. “The danger is a very real one.”

“I find that a bit hard to swallow,” Alaric commented. “My father—giving my girl over to be electrocuted—doesn’t sound very likely, does it?”

“Justice is no respecter of persons, and in the modern state the citizen is nothing but the means to an end. If he is anti-social we destroy him

ruthlessly. Your young woman would probably not be electrocuted, she would be told to apply for euthanasia, which is said to be actually pleasant. Still, the result is the same."

Alaric was silent. His mind hardly grasped the possibility of such a disaster.

"It is a curious thing," Manlius went on, lowering his voice, though there was no possibility of his being overheard, "the President has a personal spite against God. I have noticed it more than once. Strange psychological trait, that—animus against the non-existent. Have you seen your father lately?"

"No. I thought he was ill."

"Ill? You haven't heard . . ."

"No. What?"

The older man looked at him intently, smiling a little wryly. "I seem to be responsible—indirectly, that is—for an indefinite prolongation of your father's life. We all knew he was doomed, for all his courage. One day I was at the Ministry when a Polish Jew turned up and insisted he must see me on urgent private business. I had him in—an unsavoury little worm, but as sharp as a needle. He told me he could cure—you know?"

Alaric nodded. The names of these terrible diseases were mentioned as little as possible.

"But that the cure was horribly painful. Would I introduce him to the President? The idea appealed to me somehow. Perhaps you saw in the papers that the President was taking a month's holiday. If you like horrors, I can give you some idea of what he went through in the course of that month, but he is back again now, perfectly well. Politics won't be as tame now as they have been for the last year or two."

"What an extraordinary thing!" murmured Alaric. His thoughts, however, wandered off to Eleuthera. "I wonder," he said, "whether I'd better go and see her now. She told me she was going off with her brothers, I forget where, but she might be back earlier than she thought. Is it very important I should get the book burnt at once?"

"Well," Manlius answered, "it is not a question of hours, but a delay of a day or two might be fatal."

He rose to go. "By the way, have you heard that the census results will be published to-morrow? The population of England is down by two million. Pretty serious, that."

Alaric frowned. "What silly asses politicians are! They make mating as difficult as they can, and insist on your having a special permit if you want

more than two children, and then they grouse because the birth-rate goes down. What are you all doing at the Ministry of Reason?"

"There will certainly be a Government bill brought in almost immediately. I expect the President is at work on it now. Probably the mating age will be lowered by five years, and there may be other changes too."

"Then if I'd waited six months, I could have mated five years sooner," said Alaric jokingly. "It's barbarous to make a man wait till he's thirty—simply barbarous."

"I have got on all my life exceedingly well without women," observed the older man. "You waste far too much thought on them."

Alaric did not reply. He felt a confused reluctance to explain, even to Manlius, that in mating with Eleuthera he expected a great deal more than mere physical satisfaction, more even than the pride of fatherhood. He could not tell anyone that he was expecting a certain liberation of vital energy which should enable him to see life clearly and in proportion. At present he often felt as though he were swimming under water. Once mated, he would lift his head above the surface and look out over the troubled expanse. Eleuthera understood.

He gathered his manuscripts up, and changed the subject. "I wish you would send me an article for my symposium on 'What is Wrong with Contemporary Art.' "

"What do *you* think is wrong?" Manlius asked.

"There is so little of it," began the editor of the *Æsthetic Review*.

"To my mind," said Manlius shortly, "that is the one thing that can be said in its favour."

Alaric felt hurt, and changed the subject again.

"I think, if you will excuse me, I will take my moth at once and fly over to Eleuthera's."

CHAPTER XII

THE END OF THE BOOK

HEBE and the boys had come back from their tour round the world, and now every room in the house seemed full of them. It was extraordinary what a difference three people could make. For the first few days after their return they wanted to do nothing but talk; and when they talked, they laughed. They had seen all manner of mirth-provoking things—crocodiles in the North African Federation; elephants in India; Siamese women in Siam; most thrilling and amusing of all, a game of air-polo in the United States of America. Air-polo must forthwith be introduced into England. Hebe and the boys were going to see to that.

As Eleuthera listened to their eager chatter, she was conscious of a certain weariness. These children were interested in nothing but speed. Speed was to them, apparently, the chief criterion of merit. Any place they did not care for, any individual who bored them, was voted "slow." Their terms of approval were "record-breaker," "pacer," and so forth. Where anything went to, or why it hurried there, did not seem to trouble them. The only important question was how fast it went. The boys both wanted to be International Airways pilots. Hebe was not quite sure what she wanted to be, though she was already a highly successful amateur ciné-photographer, but at all events her career must not be "slow."

So Eleuthera listened to their rapid stream of talk, murmured, "frightfully nice," at the right moment, and let her thoughts wander off to solitude and the Book of Common Prayer.

During the past week this magic book had somehow transformed her life. Whenever she could do so without being noticed, she spent her time alone studying its obscure and yet luminous pages, until she knew many of them by heart. Again and again she performed its rituals, assimilating the words into her unconscious mind when their full sense eluded her intellect. She began to know what worship meant. The cadences of the phrases, the postures and terms of adoration, the call to humility and praise, awoke in her a capacity for devotion which was a revelation of unknown possibilities. God became intimately, almost overwhelmingly real, though she could have formulated no adequate definition of God's nature. "Sin" must be anything that was contrary to His demands. The unknown author called Jesus wrote

the best and most wonderful things about God, but some of what Psalm—whoever he was—wrote was glorious too.

Sometimes, awaking on her balcony, when all the stars were out, Eleuthera would spring quickly out of bed, and, draping a white coverlet round her shoulders, look up at the serene sky and recite:

The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth his handy-work.

One day telleth another: and one night certifieth another.

There is neither speech nor language: but their voices are heard among them. . . .

Then the girl would feel as though some peace, infinite and eternal, lifted her out of herself and freed her from stress and limitation and mortality. God *was*. In the stillness of night she knew and felt it.

In the daytime, however, bitter puzzles assailed her. If God existed, why had He allowed men to shut him out of his own world? If people, living in the so-called Age of Unreason, had not only owned this amazing Book of Common Prayer but had, presumably, understood every word of it, why had they not been absolutely happy and altogether good? Had not their privileges placed them above all possibility of attack? Apparently not.

Eleuthera studied the Gospel for All Saints' Day, which tells who shall be Blessed; and learned the answers to the questions: "What is thy duty towards God?" and, "What is thy duty towards thy Neighbour?" (Children must have been, she thought, frightfully bright in the Age of Unreason, if they could understand everything in "A Catechism.") With such guidance as this, why had men and women lived, as she had been assured they lived, all wrong? They, lucky creatures, certainly had all the books from which these extracts had been made. *They* understood what all the hard words meant. *They* had ministers and priests and deacons and bishops and scriptures and godfathers and godmothers and dames and all sorts of people to teach them and explain everything to them. The children who could say the Catechism were inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven—it said so in the Book. Why did they, when they grew up, fight each other for God's sake, and let there be poor people who did not have enough to eat? It was simply baffling.

That first-day morning Eleuthera had promised to go to Cowes for the hydroplane regatta, but the longing to be alone with the Book was too strong to be resisted. She told Athena and the others that she was tired, and, feeling very guilty, saw them set off without her. The relief of solitude and quiet was, however, overwhelmingly delightful. She took her embroidery and the

precious book, and went and sat in the garden. The tall hollyhocks seemed to look at her benevolently, the golden-rod and michaelmas daisies nodded a grave and stately welcome, while the little asters smiled up from the borders. She put Jimmy's tortoise out on the lawn in front of her and let him bask in the sun. Then she opened the book at Day I, and began to read.

Eleuthera read differently now. The tiptoe expectation of curiosity was gone. The straining of the mind was stilled, though not satisfied. She read not to get, but to give, not to understand, but to worship. Experience had taught her that the more she lavished herself in devotion, the happier she felt. She could not grasp God, but she could love Him. When she had poured out adoration to Him, there remained with her all day a strength and a serenity which seemed to set her feet firmly on the foundations of the world. It was all too wonderful to be explained, but it was the most real thing she had ever known.

The garden was very quiet. The little breeze had fallen as the sun approached the meridian, and not a flower or a leaf was stirring. The tortoise, too idle even to crawl, twisted his grotesque snaky head sideways and enjoyed the warmth. Here and there in the shade a dewdrop still showed on the dazzling green of the grass. A mellow, rich, autumnal odour was already perfuming the garden.

All at once Eleuthera heard the front-door bells ringing her motif. She sprang up in dismay at being interrupted, and had barely time to thrust the book under her embroidery, when Alaric stepped out of the house and came quickly towards her.

"Oh," she cried, "how you startled me! I thought you weren't coming till this afternoon."

"I wanted to see you, and I had a sort of feeling you might be here after all. Why didn't you go with Hebe and the boys?"

She blushed faintly. "I don't know. They talk so much my head felt stupid, though of course they are dears. And it's frightfully nice here in the garden isn't it? I love September, don't you, and when you have natural flowers they agree with the time of year, don't they? We were over at Maids' Mansions yesterday, and they have got daffodils on their roof-garden. You can't think how silly they look, daffodils in September. Sit down, Alaric, when you've finished kissing me. No, not there, you're sitting on my work. Get another chair from the veranda."

He fetched a chair, sat down, took one of her hands, wondered how to begin. When he was near her, he found difficulty in talking of anything except his love for her. Only a few more days now, and after that——

“Say something sweet to me!” he commanded, “Or, if you can’t say it, look it. I love the songs in your eyes. Your eyes are like——”

And so the lovers’ talk drifted on. Eleuthera forgot the book, half-hidden under her embroidery. She forgot Captain Jones too, who, for reasons best known to himself, began quietly to crawl away. Five minutes later he had disappeared, and Eleuthera suddenly noticed that the lawn was bare of him.

“Gracious stars!” she exclaimed. “Wherever has Captain Jones gone to?”

“Captain What?”

“Captain Jones. The tortoise. He was here a moment ago, and now he has gone. I ought to have put him in his pen. Where on earth can he have hidden himself?”

She jumped up and began to look among the asters and violet plants, which grew thickly enough to provide lurking-places for a whole army of tortoises.

Alaric lost not a moment. He too sprang up, seized the incriminating book, and dashed with it into the house. Tearing it into fragments, he flung the bits on the floor and turned on the vacuum-cleaner. While he was bending and breaking and tearing the leather cover, the printed pages had already disappeared into the mouth of the cleaner. The cover followed. Alaric switched off the electricity and walked out again into the garden. He had accomplished. The book was destroyed. Eleuthera was no longer in danger.

She was standing by the chair, waiting for him. Her eyes flamed, her cheeks glowed.

“You’ve taken my book. Give it back to me this moment. It’s mine, and no one else has a right to it.”

“I am sorry,” he said, facing her anger resolutely. “It is half-way to the incinerator by now. You’ll never see it again.”

“Alaric!” she cried. “You *beast*!”

She raised her hand, and for a moment seemed about to strike his cheek. Then, quickly, she let fall her arm, turned and ran at full speed across the lawn and down the path between the trees. He heard the little gate in the wall slam behind her. She was gone.

He stood still for a moment. To tell the truth, he could hardly see for anger. Alaric had a strong sense of personal dignity. While he was violently tearing up the book and casting its fragments into the maw of the vacuum-cleaner, he had seen the ridiculous melodramatic side of his action, and was already indignant with his sweetheart whose foolishness had made

melodrama necessary. He had come back into the garden about to explain to her that he had saved her life. She met him with unreasoning anger, and his anger flamed to meet hers.

For a moment, then, he stood. The click of the garden gate shutting behind her roused him to pursuit. He ran. The tortoise, reinstated in the middle of the lawn, yawned as he passed.

Out into the open. Eleuthera was already a white speck, far away on the hillside, making for the pine-woods. Alaric gave chase.

A strange surging of delight welled up in him. It was good to be fleet of foot and running in the open; better still to be chasing a woman; best that the woman should be Eleuthera. She should know at last who was master. Modern civilisation said nothing about the woman being subject to the man, but he, Alaric—he knew. He would bring her into subjection. Her folly, her criminal rashness, had given him his opportunity. He ran, and, as he ran, he rejoiced.

Eleuthera too, was swift of foot. At the edge of the pinewood he thought he had lost her. Suddenly her dress gleamed white in the shadows. Alaric sprang. He saw her entangle her heel in the root of a tree, falter, fall. He caught her, and she bent all limp over his arm. She had fainted.

Alaric had never seen anyone faint before, and he was terrified. Having never looked on death, he wondered whether the girl might not be dead. There was an alarming greenish tinge round her nostrils which accentuated her natural pallor. Gently he put her down on a bank where the pine needles lay thick, and stood over her, wondering what he ought to do next. He shouted, and an echo tossed his cry back to him on a softened musical note.

Quite suddenly Eleuthera opened her eyes, sat up and pushed her hair back from her forehead. A flush of colour spread over her cheeks. She looked up at him in silence.

“Well?” he asked. “Do you feel better? Why did you go on like that?”

“I feel horrid. All shivery. Why did you run after me? Didn’t you know I wanted to be alone?”

Alaric sat down beside her and took her hand. “My darling,” he protested, “aren’t you treating me very badly?”

“Why?”

“Why?” her lover repeated, with a touch of impatience. “Sometimes I think you have lived so much among your flowers, and thought of so little besides elementary Æsthetics, that you simply have no common sense at all. Look here, Eleuthera, listen to me. I get to know that you are in possession of a dangerous book, and that you are liable to euthanasia. I know you——”

“Who told you I had the book?” she interrupted vehemently.

“Never mind about that. As I was saying—I know you well enough to be quite sure you will not see reason if I ask you to surrender the book voluntarily. I take it and destroy it, thereby saving your life. Instead of thanking me you raise your hand to hit me. Me—your future mate. I think you ought to beg my pardon, Eleuthera.”

The girl rose to her feet, stood a moment as if to make sure of her strength, and began to walk down the hill homewards.

“Eleuthera!”

She paid no attention.

“Eleuthera”—Alaric kept pace with her as she walked—“I insist on your answering me!”

She did not even turn her head “Of course, if you imagine I’m going to mate with you after what has happened, you are very much mistaken.”

This was too much. He stepped forward, barring her passage. “Eleuthera, you are utterly and completely mad. Directly we get in, I shall send for the nerve-specialist.”

“I’m as sane as you are. That book was all the world to me. You’ve taken it away. I don’t care about anything else now. I hate everything! I hate everybody! I wasn’t doing any harm. It was all so beautiful. I can’t live without it—I can’t, I can’t!”

She flung herself full length on the warm turf, hid her face on her arms and sobbed.

“Some people have funny tastes,” observed Alaric, considering her. “I’m not a bit like you. If you won’t mate with me, I shall ask for euthanasia—like Peter. What do *you* care? Who said women had any hearts? Look at the way I’ve heard you hold forth on never giving any pain to anyone. What do you care about my feelings? Nothing. Not a labour-unit! Give me a girl for sheer callousness!”

Making an exclamation of disgust, he turned away.

But Eleuthera was on her feet in a moment, and after him. Her face, pale and tear-stained, was not pretty at all.

“Oh, Alaric!” she cried. “Isn’t it all too dreadful for words! Do let’s try and straighten it out somehow!”

“It’s all the fault of that beastly book,” he said moodily. “You were all right till that came along.”

“Oh no, it isn’t *that*——” She broke off, unable to explain.

As she walked along by his side, she tried to think it out. Everything was in confusion, and she did not know where to begin. She seemed to hold a tangled skein in which there was no loose thread where the unsnarling might begin. Whose fault was the deep division that now parted her from Alaric? What had she done amiss?

One thing seemed clear. Her book bade you live in charity with all men, and quarrelling with your sweetheart was not living in charity with all men. She slipped her hand in Alaric's. He held it fast.

Ah, but she remembered! The fact that the phrase about living in charity with all men had come of itself into her thoughts, reminded her that she knew pages and pages of her book by heart. What did the mere print and paper and binding, precious as they were, matter, if she still retained possession of the essential? As she walked silently along with her sweetheart, she repeated to herself the opening words of Morning Prayer. Oh yes, she had it all. She had it where neither moth nor rust could corrupt, nor thieves break in and steal.

A great peace came over her tired soul. High noonday on the hills seemed full of serenity, of a wide brooding Presence, calm and majestic. Once you knew God and had worshipped Him, nothing could separate you from His love. He was everywhere, infinitely accessible, needing no book nor ritual of worship to lift the questing soul to Him. Wherever men sought Him, there was He to be found. God dwelt not in temples made with hands, nor was confined within the limits of words or of human imagination.

Yes. Even if she should forget the words of Common Prayer, she could not forget the way to God. Raising up her eyes to heaven, she worshipped Him in silence. A healing touch seemed laid on her heart. All, then, was well.

Alaric, holding her hand, felt the change of her mood.

"Better now?" he asked.

"Much better."

He had the wisdom not to ask any more.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRESIDENT AND HIS SON

The President and his son were walking together in the Residence grounds. Alaric had come to report his actions of the day before, and to beg that Eleuthera be no longer under the observation of the Secret Police. He had found the President playing tennis, and now, not a whit fatigued by his game, striding along the garden walks with keen vigour and enjoyment. Alaric could hardly believe that this was the sick man who had babbled to him distractedly of the fear of death. He wanted to know how the miracle had been accomplished, but spoke first of Eleuthera.

"Now that the book of ritual is no longer in her possession, you will not trouble about her any further?"

"No," the President agreed, a little grimly. "Not unless there is further reason, of course."

"But what further reason could there conceivably be? We are only a few days from our mating-day. Surely you can trust me to keep a sharp look-out over what she does then?"

"Ah—women——" The President made an expressive gesture, half-contemptuous, half-indulgent.

"Women," said Alaric firmly, forgetting that he had often maintained the contrary, "are reasonable beings, just as men are. They may occasionally be led away by impulse——"

"Exactly. Your mother was the most intelligent woman I ever met, but an impulse led her away—right off the rails."

Alaric was silent. He had no wish to be told anything about his mother.

"You have heard the new regulations for the mating-ceremonies?"

"No. What?"

"Oh, well, perhaps they are only issued this afternoon. From this quarter-day henceforward, all the engaged men and women will have to come up to London for the ceremony. Free transport will, of course, be provided. I myself will preside, and it will be in the Stadium if the weather is fine. A notice to attend will be served on you to-morrow at the latest."

"Rather a good move," Alaric commented. "I like pageantry. Just two or three couples getting mated is always rather a poor show. It looks finer in the mass. But what is the big idea? Whose is it, anyway?"

“Mine, naturally. We want to capture the imagination of the public and make them see that mating is an important matter. The fact is, Alaric, England is degenerating.”

“That is what Manlius says.”

“He’s an old croaker, but it is unfortunately only too true. You saw the last census returns?”

“I did.”

“Two million down, on a population of twenty million, with the expectation of life still increasing. Almost incredible.”

“Well,” said Alaric, “if you will have all these idiotic restrictions, what can you expect? I could have produced half a dozen babies by now if the law had allowed it.”

“So I should imagine.” His father surveyed him with a cool smile, which somehow annoyed Alaric acutely. “So I should imagine. As a matter of fact, the government will be forced to bring in a bill to remove most of the present restrictions. Even the most die-hard eugenists will have to bow to modern conditions. I tell you, though, I doubt whether it will have much effect.”

“Not have much effect? I don’t follow you.”

“The desire to mate is, in any case, so weak that the removal of restrictions may make it weaker. As a race, we are tired of life.”

“I simply can’t conceive such a state of mind,” Alaric observed. “It sounds too idiotic to be possible. I’m not bored. Why should anyone be bored? Are you bored, Father?”

“No,” said the President, “power is never boring. I might be bored, though, in an England bereft of children.”

“Oh, rot!” cried Alaric. “Absolute rot! Tosh! Balderdash! Eleuthera and I, anyhow, mean to have as many children as the State will let us. Besides, look at Miguel, Director of Euthanasia. He’d be a pessimist if anyone was. Well, what do we see? He mated with Katinka, a big woman with fuzzy red hair, last quarter-day, and she is pregnant already.”

The President laughed. “Alaric,” he cried, “you are great! There is nothing sophisticated or disillusioned about you. Leave the Æsthetics business, and go over and help your Big Brother at the Ministry of Reason. We have got an important campaign coming on. We could do with a few more men like you.”

Alaric shook his head. “I don’t want to do that. You see, I’m keen on my job.”

“Your job is all very well, but it goes by itself now. Æsthetics as a motive power for humanity is worthless nowadays. The human race may produce a few more charming lyrics, another pretty tune or two, but there is no strength left in Æsthetics.”

“I don’t agree with you at all!” cried Alaric vehemently. “To my mind, Æsthetics is the one really important thing for the human race. It is more important than organisation or morality or anything of that sort. Why? Because it is what differentiates men from the lower animals. Bees organise, and beavers co-operate, and wolves have herd-morality, and every bitch does her duty by her puppies, but when the first savage scratched the first picture on the wall of the first cave, man began to raise himself above the brute.”

“Very eloquent,” observed his father cuttingly. “Very eloquent indeed. You ought to do propaganda.”

“Certainly. That is what I am doing. I do want you, Father, to see that Æsthetics matters.”

“Where does it lead you to? It leads the human race nowhere.”

“Of course not!” Alaric exclaimed vehemently. “It is an end in itself!”

“I don’t know what you mean by an end in itself.”

Alaric was checked. What did he mean by an end in itself? “Something intrinsically valuable,” he suggested.

“That is no explanation. That is the same thing in other words. What is the purpose of the Beautiful?”

“Well,” retorted Alaric, “what is the purpose of anything, if it comes to that?”

“Exactly.”

There was something in the tone of that one word “Exactly,” which made Alaric feel that he had been trapped. His father was looking at him with a cool, cynical air, and Alaric could not quite see what he had done to deserve it. He scowled.

“My dear boy,” observed the President, “do not look so disagreeable. You are remarkably handsome, and a frown is not becoming. I was merely about to observe that you are a pessimist without knowing it. All the same, we shall be very glad of your help at the Ministry of Reason.”

“I’m going to stick to my job. If you and Manlius like making the world ugly, I don’t. I’m all for Beauty.”

“What *was* wrong with modern Art?” scoffed his father. “Did any of you clever young people find out?”

“No. We were waiting for you senile old grumblers to come along and tell us.”

The President laughed outright. “Very well. Have it your own way. Stick to Æsthetics as long as you can squeeze a drop of satisfaction out of them. Shall we go in now? My secretary is ready for me.”

They turned and began to walk back towards the house. Alaric came reluctantly. He liked talking to his father. Brought up, as he had been, in one of the State boarding-schools, he had had little or no experience of natural affection. It was his officially appointed Big Brother who had watched over his psychological development, who had helped him along the difficult paths of adolescence, taught him how to turn his virile life-force into sane and healthful channels, and explained to him what he could of the Art of Living. Alaric loved Manlius with a deep and rich affection and trust. Yet he was conscious of a certain kinship with his father, a tug of emotional warmth at his heart which was a new and delightful sensation.

As he walked along the path, he reflected on the two men, Manlius and the President. They were something alike. Both were big men, planned on noble lines. Both stood out from the ordinary run of little swarming antlike men and women, and both of them knew it. They were continuously conscious of superiority, of aloofness. They felt a certain contempt for bustling, squabbling, purposeless humanity. But Manlius, while he despised mankind, yet wished it well for its own sake. Cynical he might be, but he was Big Brother to the race. He had no ulterior motive in working for his country and his generation through the Ministry of Reason. If he looked on the mass of the public as something plastic, to be moulded according to his own ideas of what was seemly and beautiful, it was not for his own sake that he manipulated them, but for theirs. He was genuinely anxious that they should enjoy the fullness of life, genuinely concerned at their languor and loss of fire.

As for the President, it was another matter. He seemed to Alaric to be like an artist working in human beings instead of clay or paint or notes, caring only for them in so far as they could be used. To dominate them in order to express some obscure notion hidden in his own mighty brain—that was what he cared about.

Alaric spoke. “I often wonder what you are *at*?”

“What I am at? Governing the British Empire, I suppose. Pretty obvious, surely.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Alaric commented. “You’re all full of schemes and plans and ideas, but I don’t know whether it is one big scheme

or a lot of little ones. I wish you'd tell me."

"Perhaps I hardly know myself," said the President thoughtfully. "You see, a little while back there was no scheme possible except death. I have only recently taken a new lease of life. It is good merely to feel myself alive."

"How did they cure you?"

"A very interesting and original treatment. You know, of course, what the trouble was?"

Alaric nodded, and his father continued: "It appears that when the body is in a state of intense and prolonged pain, one of the glands, stimulated by the tension, releases something that is lethal to that particular disease. This was the doctor's own discovery, made as a result of experiments (said to be on animals), which he carried out in China, where, as you know, experiments without anæsthetics are allowed. The treatment merely consists in the application of torture."

"Father!" cried Alaric in dismay. "How unspeakably horrible!"

"It was."

"Whatever gave you the courage to go through with it?"

"I suppose I was less afraid of pain than of annihilation. Or else I, like you, was keen on my job. In any case, it is not a pleasant subject for conversation. Suppose we talk about something else."

Alaric could think of nothing else he wanted to talk about. His father had taken on a new majesty in his eyes. Alaric, like all other men of his generation, had been brought up to think that pain was the supreme evil. And here was a man—of whose flesh and blood, he, Alaric, was made—who had deliberately and voluntarily borne pain in order to obtain some greater good! Amazing! Euthanasia was so easy! Just a whiff of sweet-smelling anæsthetic, and all one's troubles were over. Whereas this—— Alaric shuddered to think of it.

"What did they do to you, Father?"

The President shrugged his shoulders. "Does it matter, now that the treatment has been successful? My doctor was extraordinarily ingenious, I will say that. It takes a Jew or a devil to imagine some of the things he thought of. He enjoyed it, even if the patient didn't."

"I simply can't grasp it," Alaric murmured. "I wouldn't tell Eleuthera about it for anything."

"Why should you? You will talk to her about the moon and roses and nightingales, and all the divine twaddle of lovers."

He gave Alaric a firm brown hand. “Goodbye, my son. I shall see you in the crowd on Mating-Day.”

CHAPTER XIV

MATING-DAY

In the chill of that September morning the great white marble Stadium looked more like a mating-place for spirits than for human men and women. A milk-white mist lay cupped in the vast enclosure, and through its vaporous depths the white seats, tier above tier, rose as with unsubstantial skiey architecture, cloudlike and still. All was deserted, yet one could have imagined the noiseless movement of ghostly pageantry, the unearthly mingling of sprites and airy beings, the dance of some strange progeny of the mist.

Presently, as the sun got up, the vapour took on a warmer glow, raised shadowy arms heavenwards to a sky of muted blue, lifted, dispersed. The outlines of the marble appeared, hard, geometric, massive. Out of a little hole, a tiny black being crawled uncertainly. It was a man—to be precise, Iolo 22, the Welshman, official Pageant-master to the Nation. Fussy, ambitious, preoccupied, always at every appointment too soon, he had come early to the Stadium to begin hustling round to see if everything was in order for the mating-ceremony.

This way and that he bustled, a small, tubby, preposterous figure, against the background of serene white marble. He fidgeted down the steps, rushed along the central tessellated track, peered into archways, stood poised with head ridiculously on one side observing imaginary effects, consulted a notebook and made several scrawls with an indelible pencil.

The city's time-signal rang out. Soon some of the performers would be here.

"Great Bernard Shaw!" murmured the busy little man to himself. "What a show it is going to be!"

Had he seen that the letters A and B were properly affixed to sections A and B? Had all the costumes arrived? Were they all correctly labelled and set out? Had the caterers brought provisions for persons coming from a distance? Were the ushers in attendance to show the audience into their seats? Had sufficient flowers and sheaves of corn and baskets of fruit been collected for the pageant? Was it quite understood that the flower-girls were to have bare feet? Had the horse actually arrived, and would it be of the correct colour? A black horse or a grey horse or a red roan would spoil the whole of the colour-scheme. Would the orchestra come in at the right

moments? Would the President and the members of the council be in time? Had they been notified that full official regalia was expected? Would—had—were—was??? Iolo opened a door, and plunged distractedly into the dark regions behind those quiet tiers of empty seats.

Now the sun rose higher, and people began to arrive. They filed in by twos and threes, decorous, vaguely inquisitive, vaguely bored. A new kind of mating-ceremony. Another of the President's odd ideas. Yet another pageant. . . . However, it was all made very easy for them. They had been transported with no trouble on their part, were to be fed at the conclusion of the ceremony, and mothed or bused or motored back. Now they had nothing to do but watch. The September sun was warm and pleasant. Cushions were provided to mitigate the hardness of the marble seats. Women began to make little buzzing murmurs of conversation. Who is going to be mated? Anyone from where you live? What are they going to wear? Which comes first, the pageant or the ceremony? How long will it last? Will it be on the International Teleflick? Has the music—ah, just beginning!—been specially composed for the occasion? Someone said the President made it up while he was ill. . . . Who said the President was ill? Well, he's all right now, anyway. There he is—a fine figure of a man in his rainbow-coloured robes with the gold staff of office in his hand! Have you got a programme? Programme? Of course not! All the items will be announced by radio. Didn't I hear the President's son was mating to-day? Yes, to be sure, there he is, first in the row, *there*, with the other young men, that big fair one with curly hair, and his mate is just across the gangway. Can't you see her—dark, with dreamy eyes. Pretty little thing, isn't she? Do we have to stand up for the President? How the people clap! Did you say it was his first appearance since his illness? His son's not much like him, anyway. Did you ever hear who his mother was . . . ? What's the radio saying? Oh, "Silence, please!" Why shouldn't we talk if we've a mind to?

Silence. The President was there, seated on his throne overlooking the oval arena of the Stadium. Massed at the other end were the bridegrooms and the brides, the men on one side, the women on the other. They were dressed according to their grades, the men in white with coloured scarves, girls in flower-petalled dresses of their grade colours. Sure of their beauty, they were quietly content.

And now the pageant began. Autumn in grape-purple and gold, riding on a bay horse, entered the arena, and, to do her homage, came all the spirits of harvest, each bearing gifts. They filed by slowly, laden with corn or fruit or flowers, and as each one passed she kneeled and placed her offering before the stately figure of Autumn. Then Autumn called for a dance, and rustic

youths and maidens, gatherers of the harvest, danced an old English measure to a jolly tune.

The audience seemed mildly bored. The horse, a fine animal, had been much admired, but folk-dancing was a commonplace and a nuisance. Air-polo, for instance, though quite irrelevant, would have been much more fun. Still, what does irrelevance matter in a pageant? A clever pageant-master can work in anything he wants.

Now there was singing. Quite pretty, but you couldn't hear the words.

Autumn had dismounted from her steed and was speaking. She had a full resonant voice, and was audible all over the Stadium. What was she saying? Yes, it was a lament. Summer was over, winter was coming, everything would die. . . . Enter the Spirit of Life, winged and garbed in gold. No, all would not die. Harvest was over, but a new seed-time was coming, winter was but a sleep of renewal, the inbreathing of the deathless Spirit of Life.

A dance now. A slow-footed soft dance, to muted sounds, a dance of the Power of Winter.

Autumn is comforted a little, but fears again. Though her barns be full of corn, and the brown earth holding the seeds of life in its womb, what avails if men and women do not love and mate? What if the earth give her increase, and there be none to garner and to reap?

The orchestra wails and calls. In troop some tiny children with misty white dresses. They dance—the dance of the spirits of the unborn. With voice and gesture they beseech men and maidens to give them birth, to call them from the land of shadows and give them form and name.

Silence again. Autumn moves away. The Spirit of Life beckons. Out into the arena comes Love, her face veiled. He kneels at her feet—the music rises, sings all round, then triumphs—the pageant is over.

During the time of waiting, before the actual ceremony began, conversation among the audience started again. There was something else to while away the time, too—the latest experiment in Æsthetics, a concert of perfumes. From various points in the Stadium, subtle and poignant odours were wafted, which, mingling together in a mass of perfume, as sounds from an orchestra blend in a bouquet of melody, delighted the senses—more pleasantly even than music, some people thought. With the inrush of the scents, dreams of romance were supposed to come stealing, and the emotions to be delicately attuned to the witnessing of the mating-procession. The people, sitting in little groups on the tiers of seats which they by no means filled, waited rather listlessly. They were accustomed to being shepherded and led. Their intellects, sensations, emotions were all somewhat

passive. Spoon-fed from their birth with habits and routine, thoughts and proper feelings, they were an inert lot. Physically strong they certainly were, orderly and decent unquestionably they must be, well-dressed each one of them indubitably was. And yet, taken collectively, they expressed nothing so much as vague, well-fed boredom. They had been brought into the world, apparently, merely to be alive, and did not look as though they were particularly keen on their job.

Here and there a face showed more vivid emotions. Athena with her husband and children sat not far away from her eldest, Eleuthera. Athena's noble features expressed a deep sympathy, a perfect understanding, a yearning hope, Hector's a quick, youthful curiosity. As for Hebe and the boys, they were frankly bored. The whole business was slow. As for this smell concert, it certainly was not worth sitting still for. It was really intolerable to have to remain motionless for so long.

Eleuthera and Alaric were placed next to each other, but with the pathway between them. He, the man, was restless and nervous with suppressed impatience. There was but one thing in his mind, one moment he was waiting for. . . .

Eleuthera sat very quiet, her hands folded in her lap. She felt a rich, overflowing contentment. These last few days she had been much alone. Most girls went on working right up to the eve of their mating-day, but Eleuthera had had nothing to do. Nowadays the bride-to-be has few tasks. Her official trousseau needs no choosing. The mating-bungalow is ready furnished, except for a few odds and ends that she may like to take with her. The old custom of wedding-presents has long fallen into disuse, so she has no letters of thanks to compose. The boys thought that it was very nasty of Eleuthera not to spend the days bathing or flying or playing tennis with them. Their mother, however, intervened. If Eleuthera wished to be alone, she should be. And when Athena spoke like that, everyone, even the most modern of children, obeyed.

Eleuthera was very happy. True, her precious book had been destroyed, and she missed it as one misses a loved friend gone into a far country. But when she knew that the presence of God was in no degree dependent on the presence of a book, serenity flowed back into her soul. She felt that she stood on the threshold of great wonder. She was going to progress in her knowledge and understanding of God. Then in some way at present unknown to her, Alaric would, because she loved him, come to share her knowledge. Best of all, a child would be born to them who would have intuitions concerning these high things, and who would, because of her love for him, be a messenger from God. As for the rest of the world, the people

who were ignorant of their very origin, she would not trouble about them. God, she was sure, knew His own business best. Perhaps the human race had misused and distorted the divine knowledge when they had it, and He had withdrawn it in order that they might prize it the more. When they became aware of their own poverty and their own lack, God would once more flood them with His light. After all, the world was millions of years old, and the disappearance of religion for the space of a century or so was no more than the passing of a cloud in front of the face of the sun. She, Eleuthera, had an inner certainty that all was well.

Hark, the orchestra plays again, and, darting into the arena from four points, come the flower maidens dancing in the sunlight, strewing petals in the path of the brides. The men and maidens rise and begin in grave measure to march down the marble path towards the President. There is a faint stir of interest now among the audience. Necks are craned, heads and shoulders lean forward, eyes try and recognise well-known faces. Here and there a quick sign of recognition passes.

Up the path they go, each man and his chosen mate. The President is standing now; each couple halts before him. There is a crash of triumph in the music. The President takes the right hand of the woman, and in perfect silence places it in the right hand of the man. There are no words spoken, no vows pronounced.

Last of all the file come Alaric and Eleuthera. He is very tall and dignified, concealing a certain nervous self-consciousness under a haughty manner—Eleuthera very happy, a half-smile on her lips and golden dreams in her eyes.

The President takes her hand and lays it lightly in the hand of his son. Then, swiftly, he bends his head and kisses the two joined hands. A responsive smile and blush from the girl are his answer. So Alaric and Eleuthera pass on, and the ceremony is over.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

AFTER THREE YEARS

ALARIC wished to be alone. It was the third anniversary of his mating-day, and he wanted to think things over. A cold wind was blowing along the valley, but he did not mind that. He climbed the hill behind his little home, and lay down on the grass, looking southwards to the Essex ridge. The gentle curves of the uplands, the green of the slopes, the old houses in the village to his right, even the not inharmonious block of the distant milk-factory, all looked peaceful enough.

Alaric, however, felt anything but peaceful. He had been had on, bamboozled, done, swindled—anything you like to call it. The psychologists were fools, cursed fools, the whole idiotic pack of them. Who first told him that physical union with a woman would unravel all the snarls in his personality, liberate his life-force, clear his brain, resolve his complexes, sharpen his understanding? Alaric scowled to himself. Certainly he had no grudge against Eleuthera. Nor against physical union, considered merely as an end in itself. It was remarkably pleasant, more acutely pleasant than any other physical sensation. Eleuthera had not disappointed him there. She had mated with him, simply, gladly, without fear and without reserve. She was extremely attractive. He was grateful to her for the strong sane beauty of her body and for the delight she so readily gave him. In other ways too she was an excellent mate. As a girl she had had certain petulant and whimsical ways with her, which made him fear that she might possibly be difficult to live with. She had, however, proved more amenable than he had expected. Always serene, always welcoming, surrounded by an atmosphere of content and happiness, she was an ideal companion.

Yet he felt that she eluded him. He possessed her body and he was sure of her affection, but all the same she was not his. Was it her love for the children, who evidently meant so much more to her than they did to him? He was rather annoyed about the children. With such parents, they ought to have been conspicuously beautiful and sturdy and intelligent, whereas they were below the average in physical health, and, as far as one could tell in the case of babies, not remarkable for anything in particular. The boy, Aristides, was decidedly peevish. Euphrosyne was a plain baby. Eleuthera thought them perfect. Alaric, though he did not know it, was jealous.

That, however was not the trouble. The trouble was that Alaric, being by nature not over-introspective and fairly docile, had put off his problems. He had believed that they would solve themselves, or that they did not exist and merely arose out of repressed sex-instinct. And now they gathered round him, threatening him with all manner of torment if he did not solve them and solve them quickly. To his intense annoyance, Æsthetics were no use in a crisis. Nor was Biology. Following Manlius' advice, he had attended a course of highly technical lectures on the structure of the living cell, but it had no more brought peace to his soul than had a colour-scheme or a perfume-concert. Worst of all, he felt himself invaded by the prevailing languor. He had always scoffed at the idea that he might be bored, bored literally to death, bored so that euthanasia seemed the only possible remedy. He knew he was losing interest in his job. Nothing of any value was being produced in any branch of Art. Children, especially little children, still took pleasure in flowers, in rhythmic movement, in song, but the older they got the less they seemed to care. The futility, the utter pointlessness of human existence hung over him like a cloud. Alaric could never have imagined he should feel as he did. What was the reason of it? He had mated, he had done his duty and begotten children, he worked his full allowance of five labour-units every day—and yet, he had no satisfied feeling of work well done, no consciousness that he had accomplished. There was nothing to look forward to. That was it. He realised now how persistently, how intently his subconscious mind had stretched forward towards his mating-day, which was to transform the earth. And now? The world looked very much as it used to, except that the colour had washed out.

Alaric sat up, and ran his fingers through his curls. His forehead was hot, his feet were getting cold. He had tried to find a way out, but he had only revolved drearily round the same old grievances. Nor were minor annoyances wanting. Miguel, whom he disliked more intensely than anyone else in the world, had got the bungalow next to his. Miguel's over-sized, over-blown mate, Katinka, had produced four children in the space of three years, thereby blatantly anticipating the Birth Regulation and Control (Amendment) Act of the previous May. Miguel and Katinka's children were larger and finer than Alaric's and Eleuthera's. Katinka was always peering over the hedge between the cottages, and letting the rival parents know it. Miguel was very inquisitive about his neighbours, and would hang round and watch and ask questions he had no business to ask. Damn Miguel!

The wind blew colder now, and Alaric decided that he would walk. A footpath ran near him, a footpath that had been trodden by the steps of those long-dead labourers in the Age of Unreason. Alaric wondered what kind of

thoughts they had had as they plodded along the little narrow track between the grass. Their lives, of course, had been sordid enough. They had milked cows with their own rough hands, and stuck knives into pigs' throats. They had cooked their own primitive meals over open fires or crude oil stoves. They had worn evil-smelling heavy garments of dark and unpleasant hue. They had been oppressed by kings and nobles and priests. They had not been fit to survive. Yet, with all their faults, had they felt as bored and dreary as Alaric did, that bleak afternoon in late September?

He walked. Presently the quick recurrent rhythm of motion cleared his brain, and his thoughts took on a more definite outline. He was bored because he had nothing to look forward to. That was it. He was quite sure now. All his life he had stood on tiptoe with expectation. He had been like a child waiting to see a parcel undone. First he had untied the string, and then he had unwrapped the paper, and then he had opened the box, and then he had taken out the paper shavings, and then he had unloosed the ribbon, and then he had lifted the lid from the casket, and then—there had been nothing inside. That was how life had treated him. And now he would go on living another eighty or ninety years or so. Unless, of course, he asked for euthanasia first.

Suddenly, at a bend in the path, he found himself face to face with Miguel, Registrar of Euthanasias.

"Hullo," said Miguel, smiling at him mirthlessly. "Going for a walk?"

"As you see," Alaric answered crossly.

"I may as well come too." The other turned back and walked with him. "How's the Ministry of Æsthetics?"

"Much as usual."

"It must be mostly routine-work."

"Well, what about yours?" retorted Alaric tartly. "Yours is nothing but statistics."

"So you think—so you think."

"What do you mean?"

Miguel caressed his chin, an irritating trick of his. "Anyway," he murmured, "euthanasia is booming. Some people say it is the new process. Others say—there are other causes."

"You look pretty pleased about it," cried Alaric disgustedly.

"Why not? Naturally a man likes to see his shop prosper."

"Well, it depends on what his shop is. Nothing but despair drives a man to you."

“Despair?” Miguel stroked his chin. “Oh no. Despair might send a man to the mating-dances, but not to ask for euthanasia. Curiosity, perhaps. Temper, maybe. Lack of interest in life. Nothing as violent as despair. No one has violent feelings nowadays, no one at all.”

“Haven’t they?” Alaric scowled. He wanted to say that he himself entertained violent feelings of dislike, but he reflected that the remark would be hardly neighbourly, so he changed the subject. “How are the children?”

“Ask Katinka. Personally I shall be glad when they reach boarding-school age. However, it is a good thing nursery-schools are compulsory nowadays.”

“Eleuthera has been qualifying in psychology so as to be able to keep ours at home till they are six. Otherwise, of course, if she was not busy at home she would have to go back to her work as flower-mistress.”

“I think I shall divorce next year,” observed Miguel. “Between ourselves, it is deadly dull out here. I only come back once a week now, but that is getting to be more than I can stand. There’s too much Nature out here. I hate Nature. If I had my way I would blot it all out as far as I could. It is you æsthetes who are responsible for boring us with all these trees and grass and stuff. The country is like the stare on the face of an imbecile. Don’t you agree?”

“Perhaps Nature *has* been a bit overrated,” observed Alaric thoughtfully. “Still, when you teach children to admire, you have to teach them to admire something, and Nature is the obvious thing.”

“Why teach them to admire anything? Admiring things is such a bore.”

“Is it? It is what distinguishes us from——”

“Oh yes, I know. I’ve heard all those platitudes before. You æsthetes never think for yourselves.”

Alaric was annoyed. “Well, your job doesn’t call for the exercise of much intelligence, anyway.”

“No, so some people seem to imagine. In that case, one can keep some for use after office hours. My powers of observation, for instance.”

There was something subtly cold and venomous in his tone which made Alaric shudder.

“What are you talking about?”

Miguel smiled. “Would you like to come round to my place some time and see the new Process?”

“Process of what?”

“Euthanasia, of course.”

“Can anyone come?”

“Absolutely anyone. Any adult, that is.”

Alaric felt that he would like to come. It would be interesting to see how the flame of life could be quenched in an instant. Why not go and look? He hesitated.

“The new process,” murmured Miguel “is, as a matter of fact, a gradual one. The subject, inhaling a mixture of exquisite perfumes, experiences the most delightful dreams. His mind appears to be freed from the body, to soar in wide and beautiful realms, and he obtains an illusion of immortality, just as he is at the point of death.”

“How on earth can you tell what the victim is feeling?” Alaric demanded, much astonished.

“I tried it myself and was brought round before it had gone too far. I have watched the patients’ faces too, and infer that their experiences are similar to my own. The effect on the onlooker is like that of running water or deep abysses—a silent call.”

Was it the cold wind that made Alaric suddenly shudder? The recoil he felt was almost physical. “Thanks, no. I don’t think I’ll come. Not yet, anyway.”

“Not yet,” Miguel repeated, caressing his chin.

They were striding down the hill now, and the lights in the windows of their houses were shining not far away. Dusk was falling, falling so rapidly that it seemed as if tiny dark particles were sifted down on them from on high. The ridge of the hills showed black against a stormy sky of sprawling cloud-wrack.

“Look at that!” Miguel waved his hand. “That sky! Hideous, you know —perfectly hideous.”

“No, it has a wild beauty of its own. To me, nothing in Nature is ugly.”

“Pure convention. Sentimentality of the worst kind. It is easy to understand how our perverse and distorted civilisation was built up by men like you. Look at all the silly old-fashioned sentiment Society still cherishes along with the few good things that civilisation has given us. Look, for instance at all the sticky business of mating, all that sloppy dancing and tin moonlight and false romance. The utter boredom of it! Look at these sort of birds-building-their-dear-little-nest bungalows, and the pretence that we want to see something of our mates out of business hours, so to speak! My idea of misery is being shut up alone with a woman in the daytime, especially if there is a baby anywhere near.”

Alaric quickened his step. The man was intolerably distasteful to him. Even the sound of one of Katinka's children, lustily roaring for its evening meal, was pleasanter in his ears than Miguel's voice. He ached with dislike of him.

"What a mistake the human race is!" continued Miguel. "How unattractive, especially when young."

"Why did you mate, then?" snapped Alaric. "No one asked you to. You pleased yourself."

"Man," said the other, a streak of genuine bitterness showing through his affectation, "is not even master of his own actions. He is a will-less fool, driven and goaded by his appetites. And yet this is supposed to be the Age of Reason!"

"You did not need to have any children. Surely birth-control is simple enough."

"Katinka refused. Women are the limit. I fancied her and no one else at the moment, after I got over my little fancy for Eleuthera—and there you are. What does reason or civilisation count for in a case like that? Pah! We are poor creatures, less beautiful than cats and dogs, and without a gramme more sense."

He paused on the threshold of his home, and Alaric left him gladly.

CHAPTER II

ALARIC TAKES A NEW JOB

ALARIC was sitting in his office at the Ministry of Æsthetics, which, in spite of the wishes of Manlius, had not yet been abolished. Outside, a dull drizzling rain fell, but Alaric had turned on the sunshine and was warm and comfortable. Nevertheless, he felt unaccountably peevish. That morning, at breakfast, he had even felt annoyed with Eleuthera. It was second-day, and he never liked the second-day breakfast from the public kitchen. There was a choice of three dishes, all equally detestable. And then the baby had cried, and Eleuthera, who ought to have known better, had gone to see what was the matter. Babies, perverse little wretches, did not seem to realise that they had been born into an Age of Reason and had no business to disturb their parents at meal-times. Besides, Eleuthera was so tiresomely contented. She seemed to have access to some inner source of joy which was denied to him. If only she would be cross and bored too, Alaric felt, he could have tolerated his own dark moods better. As it was, he was beginning to feel fed up with her. He was dead sick of his work. There seemed to be nothing doing. It was a dreary business, this perpetual beating up of copy for a publication that no one wanted to read.

Alaric turned over the typescript in his hand. There was his own editorial on "The Need for a Renascence in Art." He was surprised to find that he could have written anything quite so dull. Still, the report of the Conference of University Professors on the new Examination in Experimental Æsthetics—an idea of the President's, by the way—was duller still. They seemed, as a body, to be as devoid of initiative as they were of imagination.

"May humanity deliver me from professors!" murmured Alaric.

It was the Slade Professor of Fine Arts, Cambridge, who had written the next article—eighteen pages on "The Importance of Asymmetry in Æsthetic Emotions"—eighteen pages of print and five of diagrams. Alaric had to confess that he could not understand a word of it. Still, it had been written by a professor, and he supposed it must go in. Anyhow, it helped to fill up. Thank goodness, the editor did not need to read it all!

A poem, "Lassitude." Alaric felt a little vague interest. It might perhaps sympathetically echo his own mood. That was always comforting—when the poets expressed what you were feeling yourself and didn't quite know how to put into words.

LASSITUDE

A park bench . . .

O weary, weary, weary, and the world's wan wailing
Lower
lower
lower
the tired head droops.
Sleep.
Sleep. Endless. Eternal. Dreamless.
This alone is my desire.

"Not bad at all," Alaric commented to himself. He had certainly read many worse poems than that.

Now for correspondence. There did not seem to be any.

Alaric rang the bell.

"Oh, Rachel," he observed to his sub-editor, "you have forgotten to send up the letters."

"No, sir," she answered, in a quick, deferential way, looking at her chief with admiration the while. "There are no letters. That is, up to the present, none have come in."

"That is very annoying. Well, you will have to write some yourself, that's all."

"Yes, sir. What shall they be about?"

"Oh, anything you like. Don't bother me."

The young woman put her head on one side, opened her mouth as if to make a remark, thought better of it, and shut her mouth with a snap. Alaric stared at her, thinking idly how plain she was. Large and plain. If you had to be as plain as that, it would have been better to have been smaller.

"What about the cover?" he asked. "Have you got the design there?"

She handed him a drawing, which he held out at arm's length for inspection.

“What is it supposed to be?” he demanded.

“I think, sir,” she bent over him deferentially, “you have got it the wrong way up. There, that’s better!”

“Well, it looks like nothing on earth,” exclaimed Alaric crossly. “I can’t make head or tail of it. Is it a tone-poem or what?”

She consulted a paper in her hand: “ ‘Collision over the Azores between an autogiro and a helicopter,’ ” she announced.

“Nonsense! We had that last week. What are you thinking about, Rachel? You must be in love.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she blushed. “Perhaps the title is written on the back. No, there’s nothing there.”

“Send it back to the silly ass,” cried Alaric furiously, “and tell him the next time he sends me a design either to write the title on it, or to draw something I can recognise. Curse all the fools! What do they mean by wasting my time like this?”

Rachel bent and picked up the cover, which had floated to the ground.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Yes, you can go. Don’t forget those letters.”

“What did you say you wanted them to be about?”

“I told you you could choose your own subjects!” Alaric shouted at her. “I wish you would listen to what I say!”

The door closed quietly behind her, and Alaric felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Why was he in such a bad temper? Should he take a day off? But if he did, where should he go, what should he do? He could not think of anything he wanted to see, any occupation that attracted him. If only he were gifted with the power of self-expression, and could write or paint or compose! Objectifying one’s emotions must be such a relief. Why was it denied to him? Why could he appreciate but not create?

Alaric yawned, stretched himself. He wished it was lunch-time. Alaric, being A+ and young, worked the full five labour-units a day, except, of course, seventh-day and first-day, when all the offices were shut. From nine in the morning till three in the afternoon with only an hour for lunch. Great Bernard Shaw, what a grind! And at such dull and boring work too. It was positive slavery. Alaric yawned again.

Suddenly a bell rang. Alaric put the headphones over his ears and listened. He was being radioed from the Residence. The President was speaking. Would he come up for an interview? Yes? An express ’plane would be on the roof in two minutes. Good.

Alaric jumped up, all his listlessness gone. Taking the lift, he reached the roof in a few seconds, and there, hovering above him, like some grey seagull through the grey rain, was the ’plane from the Residence. The pilot, in red and white Government uniform, saluted. Alaric climbed in, and at once they were off.

The President was in his study, waiting for him. He looked extraordinarily young and vigorous. When he spoke, Alaric was struck afresh with the musical quality of his voice. It had a timbre which stirred some response in the depths of one’s being, and made one more alert, more courageous, more heroic. It was the voice of a leader of men.

“You wished to see me?” Alaric began.

“It is a long time since we met,” his father answered. “What does the world look like from the point of view of a mating-bungalow?”

“A bit boring,” Alaric confessed. “I must say I’m getting fed up with domesticity. It takes a baby such a long time to grow out of the animal stage. Eleuthera rather enjoys wallowing in all that sort of thing. I suppose women are different.”

“Are the bungalows full?”

“Our next door one is full enough—Katinka had two pairs of twins. The others are mostly empty, though. It’s a dull neighbourhood.”

The President looked at him keenly. “How are you getting on at the office?”

“I don’t know,” Alaric answered dejectedly. “I fancy I must be getting a bit stale. Perhaps it isn’t good for a man to stick at the same job all his life. Nothing but Æsthetics is beginning to get on my nerves. There’s a deadly sameness about it, you know. And, say what you like, modern Art is frightfully uninspiring. If one could only find a new medium of expression—the whole field has been worked over so many times. I feel it is all a bit played out.”

“Exactly.”

“Why do you say ‘exactly’ in that tone?” Alaric demanded suspiciously. “What are you driving at?”

“Tell me,” said his father, “what you think of the state of England now. Has it altered at all in the last three years, since you were mated?”

“It looks pretty much the same to me. Quite prosperous, isn’t it?”

“It is a curious thing,” mused the President, “that a nation always tends to think of itself as stable. Anything out of the common appears to the public mind as a temporary crisis. Progress is generally spoken of as

‘reconstruction.’ As to degeneracy, decay, ruin, disaster—*that* is utterly inconceivable.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

The President put out his hand and took a pear from a dish. It was large and golden-tinted, ripe and luscious. He cut it open, and the two halves fell apart, rotten to the core.

“England,” he exclaimed, “is like that fruit. My country is in decay. Soon the corruption will be visible on the surface. If I cannot save her by desperate remedies, England, and perhaps the whole of the civilised world, is doomed.”

“I can’t see any signs of it,” Alaric remarked.

“I hardly expected you would,” was his father’s contemptuous reply. “You live your own personal life, wrapped up in your own feelings, devoid of civic sense. Listen to me. Take the question of our trade. England is now doing barely enough to keep herself alive. Ten years ago we were a very wealthy nation. In another ten years, granted that we exist at all, we shall have to lower our standard of living all round. Why? You can’t get people to do the necessary amount of work to keep the country alive. The average day’s work is just under four labour-units—not excessive, you will admit. It is only the President who works at least double that amount. However, with all our modern appliances and fatigue-saving devices, four labour-units ought to be ample. But what do we find? The work simply is not done. The vital energy is lacking. Nobody cares. We are becoming a race incapable of effort.”

“That’s bad,” Alaric commented.

“Take any department of human activity,” the President resumed, “and you find the same lack of enterprise and ambition. The race seems satiated with achievement. The conquest of the air was its last great feat, and now it attempts nothing more. Why should it invent?—it has invented enough. Why should it build?—there are more huge edifices than a dwindling population needs. Why should it create?—it has no vitality which clamours for expression. Why should it make more laws?—the docile rabble are over-governed already. As I see it, the body-politic is afflicted with a kind of creeping paralysis. My realm is dying before my eyes.”

“Well,” said Alaric, running his fingers uneasily through his curls, “how do you account for it?”

“There seem to me,” returned the President thoughtfully “to be two causes, the one natural, the other artificial. Manlius agrees with me as to the second, but violently contradicts my opinion with regard to the first.”

“Manlius!” cried Alaric. “What has *he* got to do with it?”

His father did not answer the question, merely continuing his remarks. “I am beginning to believe that we made a mistake at the Revolution in cutting ourselves off so entirely from the old tradition. The operation was too drastic. Some things—religion, for instance—had to go, but we got rid of too much. A man is not only himself, he is also his ancestors and his nation’s past. Deprive him of those, and you deprive him of some vital nourishment without which he dies. At least, so I am coming to believe. It is a bitter thought. A bitter thought indeed that swine need their old swill and garbage or they will die.”

“Father,” exclaimed Alaric suddenly, “why did religion have to go? It mayn’t have had a word of truth in it—I daresay it hadn’t—but it was one of the finest sources of artistic inspiration we ever had. Couldn’t we have kept it with the folk-dances and the old costumes as a harmless picturesque survival?”

The President turned on him with a kind of cold rage. “You young fool! You do not know what you are talking about. Religion was the source of all the basest superstitions in the world, and caused more wars, murders, lies and obscurantism than all other evils put together. How can a man ever grow to his full stature if he believes that he is a plaything in the hand of a monstrous all-powerful Deity, before whom he is but dust and ashes. No, no, a thousand times no! I would rather see my people dead at my feet than that they should grovel before a God!”

“Well,” said Alaric, “if you do feel like that, you needn’t shout so, Father. You make me jump. What’s the other reason?”

“The other reason,” answered the President more quietly, “is the damnable organisation of the Skoutchniki.”

“Who the deuce are they?”

“Where have you been living, my child, not to have heard of them? Their network extends all over the world. They are versed in all the most modern methods of publicity and penetration. You say you have never heard of them, and yet I should not be in the least surprised to hear that they had wormed their way into the *Æsthetic Review*.”

“Oh rot!” cried Alaric. “Why, I’m the editor! They’d have to get past me, you know.”

“Probably they have done it already. Have you published any poems or essays on Weariness or Lassitude, or life not being worth living and death the only desirable end, or anything of that kind?”

“Great Bernard Shaw! I passed one for press this morning!”

“Exactly.”

There was a silence for a minute, broken by Alaric saying thoughtfully: “I believe I *have* heard of the Skoutchniki. Big Brother mentioned them to me years ago. I remember now I told him he paid his agents by results, and so they had to dish up something spicy for him. I simply didn’t believe a word of it. It sounded the most utter drivel.”

“The Skoutchniki,” said the President, “originated, like the World-Revolution, in Russia. They are a society of men and women who believe that, as nothing but boredom is waiting for us in the future, the race had better die out. You can become a member and pledge yourself to ask for euthanasia at any moment the society calls on you to do so, or earlier if you prefer; or an associate merely pledged to have no children. The society works secretly, but no one knows how many million adherents they now have. They are increasing by leaps and bounds. Manlius thinks half the population of England belongs.”

Alaric was too much surprised to speak. His father went on: “You can imagine the effect that such tenets have on the character. The object of the Skoutchnik is to escape from immediate boredom by any means at his disposal. Vice, speed, drugs—these are some of the methods. In this country, however, the Skoutchnik is rarely vicious; he is merely idle and bloodless. All the same, he infects his neighbour. It is a horrible disease—unspeakably horrible.”

He bent forward and spoke in a low voice: “You remember, Alaric, when I was afraid I should be taken away from my people. Now it is infinitely worse. They are dying, and I do not know that I can save them.”

“You are going to try something, though,” Alaric suggested. “You aren’t the man just to let things slide.”

“The idea,” said the President, “was, to tell the truth, suggested to me by something your father-in-law told me. You know he is chairman of the Backward Races Standing Committee. He was talking about the exuberant vitality of the black-skinned races. The South African States is the only country where the population is increasing, and the will-to-live is strong. Very well. We must get the League to undertake the crossing, on a gigantic scale, of the white races with the black. That is the scheme. Manlius agrees—that is to say, he has been forced to admit that I am right. He will go as our chief representative to the League Council next week and lay the proposal before them. It will involve compulsion, of course. Will you accompany him as his private secretary? Now you know why I sent for you.”

The President leaned back in his chair, put the tips of his fingers together, and waited.

“Am I obliged to agree with your scheme?” Alaric asked.

“By no means, though I should prefer it if you did.”

“I don’t think Eleuthera will like my being away at Geneva.”

“You can have an express ’plane and go home every sixth-day evening for the week-end. That gives you three nights and two clear days at home. That ought to satisfy both of you.”

“What does Big Brother say?”

“Need you enquire?”

“Why do you want me to go, Father?”

“Need I be suspected of any ulterior motives? Manlius wants a secretary. I offer you the job. Take it or leave it.”

Alaric sprang up. “I take it. Great Bernard Shaw! How sick I was getting of the Ministry of Æsthetics!”

CHAPTER III

LETTERS FROM ALARIC

Geneva.

My dearest mate

Here we are at Geneva, as you see, and a posh place it is too, and no mistake. We landed in the "Square International," on three sides of which all the league buildings are grouped, with the other side open to the lake. There is a whole Quartier International. Great big concrete apartment-houses for the delegates, with a special block for the experts—experts in Fuel, Finance, Transport, Medicine, everything you can imagine—who are kept there, and sent for when wanted. Big Brother and I have got rooms on the 14th floor, with a balcony overlooking the lake. We feed downstairs in the big dining-room. I thought one would have heard dozens of different languages, but ever since the Emperor of the United States of America said he would not join the League unless American was the sole official language, everyone tries to talk American. You are provided free with a phrase-book of Americanisms for political and social use, and can get lessons at a reduced rate in American pronunciation and intonation. I can already say "Good-afternoon, pleasetermeetyou," and "Wall, lovelylady," just from hearing it so often said around me. I will teach Phroso when I come home.

Big Brother has had our motion put down on the agenda, but there is a lot of other business to dispose of, and he thinks it won't come on for a week or two yet. Meanwhile we are to get to know people and try and gently propagandise our views. (As for me, I am real glad I am already mated to the sweetest woman ever, for a black woman, however hefty, would be not at all to my taste.) We started off this afternoon by calling on the French delegate, de Charleroi, whose wife receives every second-day. He and his wife talk American with a strong French accent, so when they say "Gone vest" and "ouvérisation" (i.e., *Houverisation=cleaning up bad social conditions, same as one cleans up a dirty room, one of the words one most frequently hears here), it isn't easy to understand what they say. However, they were very pleasant and*

all that, and gave us iced maté and caviar sandwiches, and de Charleroi held forth to me about the League's neglect of Æsthetics. He said Art in France died when the French government made painters salaried officials on small fixed incomes, but he could never get the League to take the matter up.

Poor Big Brother got buttonholed by a Batavian who was explaining to him a new process of making rubber trees grow by means of electric shocks. Suddenly the delegate from the Central African Federation was announced, a great big brute of a man, seven feet high and as ugly as an ape. I noticed that our hostess did not seem over pleased to see him. However, she gave him his cup of maté and set him down near Big Brother, who was glad enough to be quit of his Batavian bore, and welcomed the opportunity of making friends with one of the Coming Race.

While they were talking, a small child, about five years old, who had been eating her tea at a little table in a corner, came and planted herself down in front of the African delegate—I could not catch his name—and stared at him in silence. I suppose she was de Charleroi's little girl, a pretty fair-haired mite. She stared and stared, and presently the black man got uneasy and asked her "Why are you looking at me so, my dear?" "I was wondering," she said, very slowly and distinctly, and all the visitors stopped talking and listened: "I was wondering whether you were a man or a monkey." There was an irresistible outburst of tittering and laughing, followed by a very awkward silence. De Charleroi's wife said: "Let me give you another cup of maté," and Big Brother got up and said he must be getting along now.

I had a good laugh when I got outside, but Big Brother was frightfully put out, because the story is sure to get round, and he says it will do incalculable harm to our mating plan. He is very grumpy this evening, so I am glad to write to you and not listen to his growls.

By the way, he says my father has altered a lot since his illness. He thinks he really does care for England now, and not only for power. I said I never understood the President, and didn't expect to. These complex people are beyond me. Anyhow, I'm glad you're not one of them.

Well, I'll be back for the week-end. Till then think of me as often as I think of you, and send me an answer by airmail as quick as you can.

Your loving mate,
Alaric.

My dearest mate

It was hard to leave you and the children, especially as there is nothing much doing here yet. Big Brother goes round whispering things into people's ears, but is a bit reticent about the kind of answers he gets. The big black man, Janus, is, of course, frightfully keen on the scheme. He has radioed home to his government to send over a dozen of their most attractive females, ostensibly to give displays of folk-dancing, in reality to show the delegates what fine young women Africa can produce. I doubt whether it will have the kind of effect he intends. The fact is, I am beginning more and more to think that men are not governed wholly by Reason, even after they have been psychoed and mated and all the rest of it, as we used to be taught they were. It may have been a kind of pious pretence on the part of our schoolmasters and Big Brothers—who knows. Anyway; it sounds the most reasonable thing on earth—mate the highly evolved but languid white races with the backward but vimmish black races—and yet it is a bit hard to swallow. Some of the delegates here will make wry faces before they get it down, you bet!

Things here are a bit of a surprise in many ways. I imagined the Swiss were the most international nation on earth, that they were, in fact, so international that they had hardly any characteristics of their own left, and merely existed for the sake of other nations' convenience. Far from it. Your genuine old Genevan, for instance, doesn't care a labour-unit about Internationalism. He refuses to learn American, never goes into the Quartier International at all, never asks a foreigner to his house, and spends his time shivering in the old quarter of the town and grousing that the world isn't as good as it used to be. Most unreasonable!

However, Big Brother was at school with one of them, a man called Georges Bauverd—they have two names, in the old style—just like the French! He took us out in his hydroplane this afternoon, just dipping along the blue surface of the lake in the most charming way. It was so clear, we flew along over our own reflection all the time. Old Bauverd did nothing but grumble—in French too—all the time. He says the League is simply ruining the

world and making everything about as fit to live in as a white-tiled bathroom. Everything clean, everything hygienic, everything orderly, no romance, no adventure, no Beauty—of course, people are getting most hideously bored. My French isn't up to much, but I chimed in and said would he like the Age of Unreason back again with wars and poverty and people dying when they were sixty or seventy. He said he would indeed. In Switzerland, he said, there is no such thing as voluntary euthanasia. You just have to go on living until the State says it has no use for you, but as long as you are reasonably healthy and able to work two labour-units a day, you may go on till you are 180 or more, and he, for his part, does not know how he is going to endure it.

We saw one awfully interesting thing. When the revolutionaries pulled down all the churches and castles and all that sort of thing, they spared an ancient edifice called the Château de Chillon just to show how beastly men were to each other in the olden days. It is the mouldiest old place you can imagine, right on the very edge of the water, and there are kind of cellars called dungeons where they used to shut people up. They used to chain them to the wall and feed them on bread and water in the most barbarous way. It seems absolutely unthinkable to us nowadays. The castle, which is not built of concrete at all, but some sort of stone, manages in some way to achieve beauty. I wanted to stay a long time and look at it, as it kind of fascinated me, but there was an awful female there, all painted up, talking American with a Paris accent, who took my arm and said:

"*Say, be my man, will you? I dropped my last six months back, and I'm getting the blue tics, showing folks round this depressing old pile, and I guess I'd like a mate again.*"

I told her, thanks, I was mated already, but she persevered, and wanted to know my name and job and your name. When she heard you were called Eleuthera she vowed she was a sort of cousin of yours. Her name is Geneviève, and she says she came over from Paris to hear about your mating and met me at your house. Anyway, I'd clean forgotten her, but she is as detestable as they are made. I hate women who run after men like that. Still, I suppose some men like it, judging by the number she has had—or says she has.

I may be a bit late this week if our show comes on, but do not worry, my dearest. You know I will come the first moment I can.

Your loving mate,
Alaric.

My dearest Mate

It seems your father will be along here soon. He's been sent for from Africa, and will be called as the First Expert the day Manlius brings our motion in. That is the procedure now. A delegate brings in his motion, then the most important expert gives his opinion, then the question is debated, then the proposer can call more experts' opinions if he likes, and then the motion is either voted on at once or referred back to a committee. Big Brother thinks ours will come on next week.

Your cousin Geneviève is a tiresome woman. She has chucked her job as curator of Chillon and got a secretaryship to the delegate from Korea, a nasty slit-eyed little beast who wears a queer kind of hat. She says if I don't want to divorce we could get a temporary companionate-marriage permit, the kind that is issued for visitors only, and why not, she asks, and you never need know. The little cat comes rubbing against my sleeve and says Englishmen have no feelings, and you should see the Bantu, now, how they make love! It is all very well talking about the equality of the sexes, but when I meet a woman like that, it turns my stomach.

Fortunately Big Brother has some interesting friends here. He seems to have been at school with half the celebrities of Europe! Yesterday we spent the afternoon with a doctor from Prague—which you either call Praha or Prague with an American accent to rhyme with vague—named Urbanovitch. He's the illicit drug-traffic expert, and, I can tell you, it is an eye-opener to hear him talk! I thought hardly anyone took drugs, but he says there is the most elaborate international organisation for the sale and purchase of all sorts of vile things, chiefly heroline. The odd thing is, he tells me, most of the victims don't want to go in for it, but they just can't help themselves. We were strolling along the lake, everything as beautiful and peaceful as you please, hydroplanes dipping about like swallows, soft autumn light on the hills, and the three of us talking, when all at once a man rushed up, threw himself on his knees, caught Urbanovitch by the hand, kissed it, and shouted "Save me! save me!" Urbanovitch knew the man perfectly well, in fact he had had him under his care at some institution in Prague, an absolutely hopeless case. He had come

forward voluntarily for treatment, and then, all the same, had smuggled in six months' supplies of heroline. The man has only three fingers on his left hand, and had had a glove made with an artificial finger stuffed full of the drug. Urbanovitch scheduled him for euthanasia, but he escaped somehow. This time he just called a couple of gendarmes and handed him over. He's a good sort, though, is Urbanovitch, and seemed pretty cut up about it.

"What these poor creatures want," he said, "is something to reinforce their will, some force stronger than themselves. They can't be psychoed or hypnotised to any advantage, and yet I feel there ought *to be a way*."

He went on to give us all sorts of details about heroline and what happens if you get the habit, which I will spare you, as it is not a pleasant topic. Big Brother asked at once whether the black races were free from it, and Urbanovitch answered "Yes, for the present—yes," as though he could not say what might be round the corner.

I have bought a new white overcoat, as the weather is getting pretty chilly here. Most of the women here wear tunics and shorts as they do in England, but the Indian delegate, who is a woman, always wears a thing called a sari, a kind of drapery affair over her head, rather becoming than otherwise. The one she has is an heirloom from the Age of Unreason, when her family were sort of princelings. I fancy in out of the way corners more things have survived than one imagines. This one has an exquisite pattern, quite beyond anything you see nowadays.

Well, expect me on fifth-day, my pet.

Your loving mate,
Alaric.

My dearest Eleuthera

This must be a short letter, just to catch the midday airmail, for our motion is down on the agenda for this morning, and I must be ready in a moment to start off with Big Brother. It has come sooner than we expected now, and I feel tremendously thrilled. Manlius wants me to back him up and speak when the discussion opens. He's as cross as an unoiled machine, with the feeling of his undelivered address on his mind.

I saw Hector last night—he's in fine form, full of vim and pep, and sends you his love. He's glad Athena gets over every third-day

to see you and the babies.

I feel I haven't told you half the things I have done since I came, nor half the people I've met, though we get a good deal of talking done at week-ends, don't we? I hope you have remembered to turn on the teleflick and not be bathing Aristides or something just when Manlius is making his big speech. I warned you you could always get the League sessions if you tuned in to the Geneva G X 333 station.

Expect me when you see me, for I shall have to stay and see this through, but of course there is no sitting on sixth-day anyhow.

In haste,
Your loving mate,
Alaric.

CHAPTER IV

SHALL BLACK AND WHITE MATE?

ALARIC put down his pen, rested his tired head on his hands and waited. Yes, he had spoken truly, he had not told Eleuthera everything. An impulse swept over him to confess, to have it out, to rid himself of the evil thing by laying it at her feet.

Well, later on, perhaps. Now, at any moment, Manlius might call him, and they would have to go together to the great Assembly Hall of the League. This was a time when Alaric would need all his alertness, all his intelligence. And yet here he was with brain buzzing and fogged as he stooped inertly over his letter, wondering whether he should tell his mate what he had done.

It was not that he had been unfaithful to her. Alaric was not a man of wanton physical desires. In any case, Geneviève's crude appeal was merely calculated to disgust him. In another way, however, she had tempted him and he had succumbed. All that he had heard about drugs, drug-traffic and drug-taking had stimulated his interest enormously. Everybody seemed to be whispering something about it. The immense ingenuity and resource that had built up the secret organisation, the danger involved, the wild, dazzling effects of heroline, which seemed to promise a hitherto-undreamt-of expansion of consciousness, all these appealed to Alaric's sense of romance. He wanted to escape from ordinary life, and drug-taking offered it. True, he was not, at the moment, as bored as he had been. It was quite interesting to watch Big Brother at his task and to wonder which way the dice would fall. Still, the weeks at Geneva were only an interlude. Soon he would go back to England and be bored again. As for the Ministry of Reason and his work there, he felt pretty sure it would not be much of an improvement on the Ministry of Æsthetics. Reason was as much of a swindle as Æsthetics.

All the same, Alaric did not want to take drugs. He was exactly and vividly aware of the risk involved. He had heard of the slavery, he had seen the victim given over to the gendarmes as an utterly worthless creature to be put quietly out of the way. Despising himself from the depths of his heart, knowing that he had not the shadow of an excuse for his conduct, Alaric asked Geneviève to let him know how heroline might be procured.

If anything could have stopped him then, it would have been the wicked snap of triumph in her eyes. He marked it, but could no more pull up than

can a brakeless car running downhill.

It was surprisingly easy to obtain the drug. You went to a certain street corner, and there, in broad daylight and in full public view, you bought a bunch of black grapes. Taking them home, you broke the stalk, and there lay a tiny tube of white powder, enough of the drug to last a week.

Alaric had taken his first dose on the previous night, and now was feeling the bitter depression and nausea of the reaction.

The question was, should he tell Eleuthera? While he remained there, still feebly debating with himself, he heard his name called. Manlius came in.

"We must be off now. Have you everything ready?"

Alaric folded his letter, flung it hastily into the post-chute and got up.

"Anything the matter?" Manlius asked, staring at him.

"Excitement, perhaps," Alaric suggested. "I shall be all right soon."

They hastened out into the sparkling December sunshine. The city lay under snow, the hills were frosted down to the water's edge, the air was cold and pure. Alaric felt sorry when they reached the crowded Assembly Hall. He would have liked to walk far over the mountains across the snow, not elbow his way into this concourse of uninteresting human beings. In the dreary mood which followed his drug-taking, he saw all men as ugly, with perverse, hideous, distorted faces, loose-lipped mouths and sodden eyes leering at him. He sat down, put his hand over his brow and waited.

The President of the League was in his place. He was a Swede from the northern provinces, tall, very fair, with something chill and icy and imperturbable about him. Some men loved him for his serene impartiality, others hated him because the clash and noise of their conflicting interests left him utterly unmoved.

Manlius was ready for his great speech. Every now and then he glanced down at a half-sheet of notepaper which he held in his right hand. It did not contain the points of his discourse, but a few Americanisms, *e.g.*, "to hat-around to the up-hike of the etarnal toadstool" = "to contribute to the world's progress," which he intended to work in, lest the chairman should pull him up for not using the official language. He was not nervous, only tense and prepared. The microphone was waiting for him, the teleflick ciné stood prepared to shoot him from across the hall, the delegates had settled in their places, finished polishing their glasses or picking their teeth, and would be glad that he should begin.

The chairman named him, and Manlius rose. His grave, dignified voice easily filled the Assembly Hall. He made no gestures, used no tricks of

rhetoric. Disdaining to persuade, Manlius made his appeal to Reason alone. The older European civilisations were growing weak. They were over-refined, and, now that they felt they had pushed progress almost to its farthest limits, their will-to-live was dying down. The dark-skinned races, on the other hand, were full of vigour and enterprise. In the vast lands where they lived, Nature was still a wild beast evoking the courage of man to tame her. Yet the negroes were, to a great extent, shut out from the noble heritage of culture which the white people so jealously guarded as their own. This was so generally recognised that the League did not hesitate to refer to them as Backward Races. In all the amenities of civilised life, they were centuries behind the English and the French, and there was no doubt that they felt their inferiority keenly. They possessed, however, something that was of more value for the progress—he would even say for the very continuance of mankind—than mere scientific achievement or artistic culture. They possessed the vital impulse, strong and unimpaired. What then, was more reasonable than that mating on a huge scale should be arranged between the white nations and the black? He asked the League to supply the necessary funds, and to fix a time during which the mating might be carried out voluntarily. If, after ten years, sufficient progress had not been made, he asked for power to compel.

The English delegate resumed his seat. The half-sheet of notepaper remained unnoticed in his hand; he had forgotten his Americanisms, after all, and had spoken throughout the speech in his native tongue. What he had said, seemed, on the whole, to meet with the approval of the audience.

Janus sprang up, waving his long arms. A massive figure, over seven feet high, huge and ugly and powerful, he looked strange and monstrous in his excitement. All the floodgates of oratory were opened, and the African, famed for his rhetoric, poured out torrents of hot words in support of the motion. He made out that the negroes valued intensely the purity of their race, but they valued the future of humanity still more, and that they were willing to sacrifice their instinctive prejudices for the good of mankind. Eloquently he dwelt on the excellencies of the coloured men and women, their industry, their capacity for affection, their superb physique. He scorned the idea that miscegenation produced a lower type of individual. On the contrary, mixed mating liberated the finest characteristics of both races. In the name of the whole human species he welcomed the noble proposal of his white-skinned friend.

There was no doubt that Janus would look fine on the teleflick, much finer than Manlius, who had stood like a statue. Nevertheless, his rhetoric mildly bored the delegates. Perhaps they were prejudiced. Who knows?

The chairman called the First Expert, and Hector, smiling and boyish, rose to address the assembly. Eleuthera's father did not make a speech, he chatted. His quick, youthful manner, his way of saying, "Don't you think so?" with his head a little on one side, was rather charming. It was not his business to speak for or against the motion, but merely to give his opinion of the African negroes amongst whom he had spent most of the past ten years. He liked them, but then, Alaric reflected, as he tried hard to listen to the speeches, Hector liked everybody.

The chatter flowed on. It was something like a drawing-room conversation, something like a popular lecture.

All at once Hector made a point that arrested everyone's attention. There was, he said, one thing that nobody seemed to have noticed. "It's tremendously important, all the same, don't you think so? You see, when the revolutionaries destroyed all the churches and things all over the world, of course they smashed up the ones in Africa too. Over here, in Europe, I mean, they seem to have smashed up the wish to worship too. No one thinks about that sort of thing much in Europe, do they? I mean, they are quite satisfied it was all superstition, don't you think so? It's quite different over there. They all worship——" Hector made a curious clicking noise, difficult to transliterate—"which you can roughly translate as *Power*. Wherever they find it, they worship it. They worship the Power that makes the thunderstorm, the power that germinates the seed in the ground and causes the unborn child to grow in the womb. They think it is in machinery, too. You will find them adoring motor-cars on the sly, and wireless and the teleflick. You heard the tale about my 'plane . . ." Here followed Hector's favourite story of how his aeroplane came to be garlanded with flowers.

"Well," he continued, "there it is. They've got the instinct to worship, just as strongly as the instinct of procreation. You've got to take it into consideration, don't you think so?"

Alaric glanced at his big Brother. Manlius was looking very grave indeed. However, he made no movement.

Hector sat down, and the chairman called on the League Statistician to give the figures of the progressive decline in the white population of the world. He did so—a dull, drab little man, speaking in a dull, drab voice. In a thousand years the British Empire would have disappeared. In about seven hundred years, at the present rate of decline, there would be no more Germanaustrians, Scandinavians or Hispano-portuguese. In three hundred years the Yugoslav republic and most of the Mediterranean littoral would be bare. And so on and so on. In less than two hundred years there would be no more Frenchmen.

With a cry of anguish the French delegate leapt up. “Ah!” he shouted. “You say our beloved nation is doomed! I say, better it should go, than that it should mix its pure blood with the blood of black monkeys. I tell you this—when the good God looks out of the window of heaven and sees that there are no more Frenchmen, He will say to His little planet: ‘*Go!* I have no more use for you! *Go!*’ ” He flung his arms wide with a superb gesture of dismissal. Then, dropping to his seat, he bent his head on his folded arms and sobbed aloud.

In a moment all was confusion. The Germanaustrian delegate shouted at the top of his voice that the Frenchman had pronounced the illicit word God, and everyone else began calling out something. The chairman rang his bell. Nobody heeded. Janus, sensing an insult, shook his fist in the face of a gentleman from Armenia. The French delegate screamed “*Cochon! Cochon!*” at the delegate from Germanaustria, and rushed hysterically from the chamber. Several delegates got on the benches and began declaiming against the negro races. The Korean protested that it was all a slight on the Asiatics, and waved his knobbed hat violently. The Indian lady from behind her sari shrilled like an offended parrot that the West cared for nothing but money, while Reason dwelt only on the banks of the Ganges, but no one listened to what she said. A stout female from Finland urged that the Frenchman should be made to withdraw the offensive word, but, as he had already withdrawn himself, her suggestion was ignored. Everyone had forgotten the teleflick operator and the microphone, not remembering that their grotesque behaviour was, at that moment, being broadcast to the four corners of the earth.

Alaric looked again at Manlius. All that he himself felt was a vague physical annoyance at the row, and a wish that it would all be over and he could get out into the fresh air and cool his burning head. On Manlius’s face he saw the look of the most bitter scorn and contempt that human countenance ever exhibited.

“So this,” said Manlius, “is the Age of Reason.”

For some minutes more the tumult raged unchecked. Attendants, bearing rods, came in and made as if to clear the hall. There was a lull. Suddenly, as it had come, the tempest died down. Delegates resumed their places, furtively straightened ties and rearranged collars, looked at each other as much as to say, “*I* was sitting still quietly all the time, weren’t you?”

An old man, with a flowing beard, large nose and very bright eyes, rose. The chairman named him Abraham, delegate from Palestine. He was generally accepted as spokesman for all the scattered Jewish race. Everyone

knew and respected him, and when he stood up to speak there was an instant hush.

“Gentlemen,” he said in a deep voice, “you have heard statistics of the decline in population. Is this decline so great a misfortune? What have we, any of us, to live for? You have heard to-day a forbidden Name. Let me repeat it. In the olden days the Jewish people worshipped in the Temple of Jehovah. They had an object in life, namely to keep alive a pure monotheistic belief. ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God.’ Now that all these things have passed away, and the scientists and politicians have proved to us that our age-long belief was an illusion, why should we continue to exist? Take away worship, and you take away the very essence of life itself.”

There was a long silence. Then the chairman proposed that the English delegate’s motion be referred back to a committee.

CHAPTER V

THE RUINED CHURCH

THAT winter was a bitter one. Snow fell thick, and covered England from end to end. More than half the mating-bungalows were deserted, for their tenants declared that the country in winter was too slow to be endured. It was a disgrace to civilisation that you should need to put on snow-shoes if you wanted to get to the underground motor-station. Of course, something went wrong with the teleflick. It was quite dangerous to take your moth out. At one time it looked as though the bungalows would be covered right over with snow, so fast and close did it fall. Huge drifts rolled up to the doors, and on the roofs the white covering was over a foot deep.

Eleuthera loved the winter. For one thing, her children, who were peevish enough in hot weather, rejoiced in the cold, and became so rosy and lively that it was a joy to see them. She herself thought the world amazingly beautiful in its unfamiliar guise. There was something primitive and yet fresh about the snow which exhilarated her. Buckling on snow-shoes in the style of long-dead Red Indians, and pushing her children's little sledge in front of her, she wandered on untrodden ways, across meadows and over hills. Sometimes she floundered into a ditch or upset her passengers in a drift, but she would extricate herself again and make the children laugh with her at the misfortune. When Alaric came home she would tell him proudly where they had been and what adventures they had had, and what fun it all was.

One morning towards the end of the year, Eleuthera determined to go for a long expedition. She would pack food and milk for the children and herself, into the sledge. They could cross the valley and climb the hills and look over to see what lay beyond. Everywhere field and slope sparkled in the sunshine. The keen sweet air was a delight to the breath.

Eleuthera signalled to London for the latest weather forecast, just to make sure, and watched the dial for the answer. The indicator moved to *fine*, then on to *change at sunset*. Well, that was good enough. They would be back by sundown.

Phroso considered the preparations with quiet pleasure. She was a serious child. The baby gurgled delightedly. He loved the gliding motion of the sledge, and quite understood that it was being got ready. Eleuthera, too, felt a little thrill of excitement at the thought of a picnic on a winter's day. It

was glorious to go out with no one but the children. No need to talk unless she wanted to. Phroso liked to be silent, Aristides merely gurgled and asked for no response. Yet if Eleuthera felt that the beauty of the white shining world was almost oppressively poignant, she could say, “Look! Look! Isn’t it lovely!” and the children would look. Though what their childish eyes saw, no one, of course, could possibly tell.

Giving Phroso and the baby a bit of milk-toffee to keep them warm, Eleuthera lifted them into the sledge. She tucked the rug round them, patted their bare heads, half to see that their hair was tidy, half for the love of touching them; and started.

She had barely pushed off, when a voice at her elbow made her turn. There was Katinka, one of the few tenants still left in the bungalows.

“Where are you off to?”

Eleuthera felt a sudden fear lest Katinka should ask to come too. She wanted her snowy hills and her sunshine to herself. It would be intolerable to have a companion.

“A picnic,” she answered briefly. “Goodbye.”

Katinka looked annoyed. “Stuck up little thing,” she murmured, and turned back to her own house. Katinka had no luck that day. Her own mate had gone for a walk with a friend of his, refusing to listen to her when she said she was dull. Very often Miguel never came home for the week-end at all, and when he did, he always brought a visitor. What a bore life was!

Meanwhile Eleuthera was travelling swiftly downhill. She passed the village, crossed the square where the church once stood, followed the main street along which the old houses seemed crouching under their burden of snow, and struck out into the country again. There was nobody about. The little bridge over the frozen river looked as though no one ever came there. The Priory gardens were a white mass of untrodden snow. In the hedges not a twig was visible under the rounded covering of white. The birds were silent, except where against the milky blue of the sky a wandering seagull called.

Uphill now. Eleuthera tracked the main road up the ridge. In the village a snow-plough had been out, and ever and again the runners of the children’s sledge grated against bare earth, but here nothing had disturbed the white expanse. She felt that it was almost wicked to mark the surface, spoiling its perfect freshness with the pattern of runners and shoes.

The countryside, she reflected, must look now just as it had done hundreds and hundreds of years ago. She was not thinking of the times when there were forests everywhere and wolves lurked there. But just as it was

long ago, when men wore smocks and women spun wool and flax by candlelight, and sat round fires of blazing logs and told fairy stories, and worshipped God. She wished she knew about it. Where were they all buried, those long-dead men and women? In those days people were not cremated so that there was nothing of them left except an entry in the official record of deaths. Their bodies lay under the grass and under the snow, gathered for company—strange cold company of the dead—round a building where in their lifetime they had met and worshipped. And the other part of them? Did that hover round the place too, joining silently in holy word and song, or did it fly right away and begin its everlasting life in some distant planet? And, in the olden days, was death a familiar thing, a white sleep, covering your tired self as the snow covers the countryside? Were life and death simpler then?

Eleuthera's thoughts ran on lightly, her feet kept time, and the sledge moved rapidly over the snow. Now they had reached another village. A man stood in front of the Institute pasting up a notice about a dance. Here the road forked. "Which way does that go?" Eleuthera asked, and pointed to the right.

"Nowhere," replied the man. "Out into the fields."

Eleuthera thanked him, and took the road. Out into the fields was what she wanted. She must find some sheltered lonely spot, and there she and the children would rest and eat their lunch. The midday sun was quite hot on her bare head, and, oh, wasn't she hungry!

The road did seem to lead somewhere after all. For a while it wound in and out between the hedges, past a grove or two of leafless trees. Then, sloping abruptly upwards, it reached the crest of the hill, and stopped. Across a bare white shining field, lay a number of mounds. Eleuthera pushed her sledge towards them. "Pretty! Pretty!" cried Phroso.

The mounds looked like sleeping monsters buried in the snow. Here and there, however, a great stone emerged, upright or aslant, streaked with snow. Lesser mounds lay about, as though other stones were hidden there. And there was one strange thing, as tall as Eleuthera's shoulder, a giant bowl of stone, brimful with snow, and set on a stone stem.

In a flash Eleuthera understood. Here was a ruined church. In this remote place, when the revolutionaries had destroyed the sacred building, they had not troubled to take the stones away. They had left them there, lying one upon another where the explosive had flung them. Round about were the gravestones, crosses and slabs, with half-obliterated lettering. And the great stone bowl—what was that? What did that mean?

Phroso clamoured to come out of the sledge and to run about, while the baby signified his opinion that dinner-time had arrived. Eleuthera let both of them have their way. Then, brushing the snow off a flat slab and spreading a waterproof mat, she sat down and ate her own lunch.

"Run about!" urged Phroso, munching a biscuit and plunging in the snow.

"Mother wants to sit still," Eleuthera answered. "Mother has walked a long way."

"Mummy in sledge," Phroso suggested.

"Mother is too big."

"Make Mummy little."

"Can't be done." Eleuthera shook her head. "Would you like an apple?"

"Would." That meant yes, and Eleuthera handed her one, which she proceeded to eat while sweeping snow off gravestones and making snowy spray.

Here and there some lettering emerged. Eleuthera strolled across, bent down and tried to decipher the carven words. One inscription began with R.I.P., another with a cross. One was quite clear and sharp, cut in a small marble monument.

Sacred to the memory of
ELIZABETH PRICE
Died December 24th, 1929
Aged three years.
Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

December 24th, 1929. Exactly two hundred years ago to the very day. Eleuthera drew a long breath. In the Age of Unreason, two hundred years ago, babies died. Three years old. Phroso would be three next birthday. Nowadays it was an unheard-of thing for a child of three to die. How terrible for the mother of Elizabeth Price! When her baby died, she must have asked for euthanasia at once, for she would be too sad to go on living. Unless, of course, she had other children. All the same, those were beautiful words to put on a gravestone. Elizabeth Price was evidently one of the pure in heart and—oh, perhaps her mother felt a little comforted if she knew that her baby was seeing God. That happened two hundred years ago. Was Elizabeth Price still seeing God? Was her mother there too now, seeing God too? How she wished she knew.

All at once Eleuthera had an inspiration. Ever since her precious book had been taken from her, she had not dared to say Morning Prayer aloud. Certainly she had repeated it to herself, over and over again, lest she should forget it, but she had never dared to perform the ritual. Here, however, was a splendid opportunity. She could say the precious words as loud as she liked, fearlessly, and no one would hear. What a chance, what a glorious chance! What a place too, for communing with God! The white hill-top, the ruined church, the clear sunlight, the sky where scarcely a distant 'plane moved in the fathomless blue, all seemed to invite her to worship. Eleuthera felt so free, she could have shouted for joy.

"Phroso!" she said. "We are going to play a new game. You get into the sledge and listen to me. Every time I stop singing, you must say Amen."

"Mummy sing," the child agreed, climbing into the sledge. "Toffee, please."

Probably dearly beloved brethren used not to suck toffee in church, but Eleuthera could not stay for that. She hastily unwrapped two large bits of toffee and gave them to her daughter. Then she looked round for the place where the minister or priest ought to stand. Some fifty paces away from the stone bowl was a great block of masonry, rectangular in shape. Eleuthera stood, very upright and dignified, beside it, and began to chant in a loud voice.

"I will arise and go to my Father, and say: Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Dearly beloved brethren, the scripture moveth us in sundry places . . ."

Yes, yes, she remembered it all. Without doubt or hesitation she chanted, sending the words clearly out into the air. In the perfect stillness her voice carried far. So happy and eager was she that she could barely pause for Phroso to say Amen. God must be duly worshipped. There, in that sacred place, with all that beauty round her, the rite must be in its entirety performed. The music, maybe, was incongruous enough. Eleuthera invented the recitative as she went along. The "Venite" she sang to "Newcastle," her favourite folk-tune, fitting in the words as best she could. Phroso, however, thought it grand, and shouted "Amen" with her mouth full of toffee every time Eleuthera paused for breath. And Eleuthera was quite sure that the hills and the snow and the bare trees, even the lonely seagull circling above the ruins, did really and truly declare the glory of God. She poured out her soul in worship, rejoicing that no one saw or heard.

But did no one see or hear? Along the road, following in the track that the sledge had made, came two men. They were approaching; nearer and

nearer they came. The voice died in Eleuthera's throat. Her heart stood still with fear. Miguel and Augustus—the Registrar of Euthanasias and his friend, the head of the Municipal Abattoirs. They had followed her here. What did they want?

Eleuthera began hastily to tuck the children up in their sledge and to start on her return journey. She decided that she would boldly go past the two men, wishing them a brave good afternoon.

"Good afternoon," said Miguel, stopping as she came up to him. "What have you been doing here?"

"Having a picnic."

"You choose a strange place."

"I just happened to come here. I've never been before."

Miguel opened a notebook. "May I trouble you to sign this statement?"

"Can't I do it some other time? I ought to be getting back now."

"No. Now, please."

Eleuthera took the notebook. Her hand did not tremble as she held it and read. It was a confession that she had on the 24th of December, at the ruined church of Ovington, in the County of Essex, performed a ritual in honour of God.

"Correct in every particular, I think," said Miguel. "My friend Augustus can vouch for its accuracy."

Eleuthera went very white. She saw with perfect clearness what she had done, and knew what the penalty would be. Death. And she did not want to die.

"Quite correct," she answered, and signed.

"Thank you." He shut the pocket-book with a snap and turned away.

Eleuthera went down the hill homewards. What else, after all, was there to do?

CHAPTER VI

THE FLIGHT

THE way back seemed interminable. Eleuthera was thankful when she reached home at last. There she rang for one of the nurses, who were always available if wanted, gave the children into her charge, and went out on the porch to be alone.

The sun was just setting. As it rested there on the rim of the horizon it looked like a hole in the sky through which one saw fire. And from the fire came red-gold light which touched the snow and made it glow into semblance of life.

Eleuthera let the radiance dazzle her eyes. The scene was so beautiful that it made tears well up suddenly. Ah, she thought to herself, if to-morrow my eyes are nothing more than a pinch of burnt ashes, at least they will have had their fill of beauty to-night. Beauty, she mused, is of God. But why did He, who made earth so lovely, make men so cruel?

A wave of self-pity swept over her. She seemed to herself to be two distinct individualities, the one suffering at the thought that she was to be snatched away from her mate and her children, and rebelling that her life must be cut short, the other, passionless and unmoved, watching. The first self cast about in its mind, this way and that, frantically, as a trapped beast will, for a chance of escape. Could she run away? But how? Whither? Should she appeal to the President? Alas, she had tried before and failed. Radio to Alaric? What could he do if he came? He was powerless as she, before the dictates of the law. Oh, and her children—she could not, *could not* leave them! They would grow up without her. Every day some fresh sweetness would unfold, and she would not be there to see it. They would love other people instead of loving her. Perhaps whoever tended them would be clumsy and stupid and not understand. She had always understood. With a proud thought, she declared to herself that she had been quite perfect as a mother. And now it was impossible that they should so much as remember her. Or would, perhaps, a dim, very dim, memory linger in Phroso's mind of the picnic on the hill-top, and Mother standing up by the big square stone and singing . . . ?

Eleuthera looked out over the snow and wondered how long she had to live. Half idly she noticed that the air was warmer now. A puff of softer

breeze blew in her face from the south-west, the first drip-drip from the house's eaves told her that the frost was over.

She looked up in the sky. Would Alaric come that evening? She knew the big debate in the League Assembly was pending. Could he get away? Perhaps he would not come till the morrow, and by then she might be gone. No, it was too bitter! That, at least, would be granted her—one more sight of her mate.

Eleuthera remembered that she knew little or nothing of the procedure in such cases as hers. She was aware that she had incurred the sentence of death. It might be, however, that there would be the slow agony of a trial, even when the outcome was a foregone conclusion. If death had to come, let it come quickly!

Death. Eleuthera considered it. What she had been thinking about had been the negative side of it. She had watched her own reluctance to leave the beauties of the material world, and the anguish of breaking the strands of love. There, indeed, all was pain. She was happy; she loved life; she rebelled at having to leave all she cared for.

Nevertheless, death had a positive side. She had read of it in her dear book, and it must be true. The dead were sown in corruption and reaped in incorruption. They put off mortality and entered on everlasting life. They were given new eyes, and with those eyes they saw God. A thrill of intense aspiring curiosity vibrated through her, and she seemed to leap forward to meet the unknown. No, for herself, she had no fear of death, not even reluctance to step down into its mysterious stream. All that had been dark and difficult and sorrowful in this life would be over and done with. Like a dragonfly coming out of its prison and emerging free and winged and beautiful, so she would enter on a more glorious state of existence. Of that she was absolutely sure.

Suddenly an aeroplane whirred in the air above her. She looked up. Alaric had come home. He veered, dropped, landed in the meadow below the house. She saw him emerge from the cockpit and come tramping through the snow towards her, pulling off his cap as he came. It was good to see him.

"Hullo!" he shouted, when he got within earshot. "You see, I came home early to-day after all. The motion's referred back to a committee, so I got off early. There's going to be a storm to-night—it's thawing already."

How splendid and tall and fair he looked as he tramped up the slope! His curls shone gold in the gathering dusk, and there was strength in every line of his body. Truly, a magnificent mate!

Eleuthera did not move or speak a word to greet him. Now that he was there she felt that she could not tell him her terrible news. However, he caught sight of her pallor, and questioned her quickly enough.

"What is the matter?"

"It is my fault," she answered. "I took the children for a picnic up on the ridge. We found a ruined church there. I thought it would be a good place for worshipping God, so I said Morning Prayer. Miguel and another man came up secretly and heard me. Miguel made me sign a declaration that I had done it. I suppose he has gone and informed against me already. I know it means euthanasia. Oh Alaric, I thought I was alone and that no one would see."

Alaric was a man of quick decisions. He had the faculty of grasping the essential in any given situation. One thing presented itself to his mind—flight. And at once.

"Wrap yourself and the children up as quickly as you can. I'll get some food, and refuel. It's an express 'plane, you know. We'll give them a run for their money, anyway. There's not a moment to lose."

"But where?" Eleuthera wavered. "Where could we possibly hide?"

"Central Africa—an island in the Pacific—anywhere. I'll think when we get started. Make haste, you little fool."

He was fairly dancing with impatience. Eleuthera ran to obey. A minute or two later she brought him Phroso, all wrapped in blankets. Then, carrying the baby, she hastened down towards the 'plane.

"Curse this soft snow!" muttered Alaric. "We may have trouble in starting. She's a jewel, though, once she takes the air."

The sun had gone. The whole world lay steeped in grey and black. Across the sky, still deeply luminous, great jagged clouds sprawled, menacing and sinister. A wild gust blew suddenly up the valley, and passed with a long low wail. There was a storm coming.

Alaric lifted his mate into the machine, settled the children as comfortably as he could, and opened the throttle. The 'plane, responsive as if alive, raced along the ground, breasted the air and soared. They were off.

"Let's go out over the sea," urged Eleuthera. "We shall be safer there."

As they hummed along through the night, one of the conning towers guarding the metropolis threw out its fan-shaped searchlight. The light raked the sky, east and west, south and north. Then paused, alighted on them, withdrew again. A minute or two later, another 'plane rose from the South London aerodrome. The chase had begun.

They had not been going more than half an hour before they plunged into the storm. Alaric was not a particularly experienced pilot. He was accustomed to take the airway from Geneva to England, following in the track of the great liners and trusting to them for direction and weather-wisdom. Of atmospheric strata, air-currents, levels of pressure and the rest, he was almost completely ignorant. Nor had he ever handled his ’plane in a storm before.

Eleuthera was hardly aware of the extent of the danger. She knew that there was an aeroplane, more massive than theirs and better manned, pursuing them. She saw that the black clouds were round the machine, heard the crash of thunder, which was so loud that it seemed as if titanic masses of metal were clashing together and must crush the tiny human beings between their surfaces. The roar of the wind and the drumming of the rain on the wings mingled with the ceaseless hum of the engine and the whirring swirl of the propeller through the resisting air. Sick with the motion of the ’plane, dazed with the unaccustomed noise, and dizzy with the sensation of being poised over space, Eleuthera could only collect her thoughts sufficiently to hush the frightened children to sleep. If she had spoken to Alaric, he could not have heard her. He was too intent on the task of guiding his machine to turn his head in her direction. She could soothe the children and she could pray—no more.

Up there in the sky, away from the friendly earth and the reassuring touch of solid ground beneath the feet, there seemed to be a terrible monstrous annihilation of time and space. As they fled from their pursuers they had no idea how far they travelled nor whether minutes passed or hours. They fled through timeless, spaceless night, with a breathless roar in their ears—that was all.

Suddenly they became aware that the pursuing ’plane was close on them. A shot fired after them passed through a slot in their right wing. Almost at the same moment, lightning leapt out of the night, and the enemy ’plane, as if touched by the sword of an avenging angel, dropped. It fell headlong, and, if it crashed into the sea or came to wreck on land, no sound of its end rose upwards again to tell the tale.

Alaric flew on. Presently they emerged from the storm. The stars sparkled overhead. Beneath them there lay, like a black coverlet spread over the sleeping earth, some continent or land unknown.

“Where are we?” Eleuthera called out.

“Haven’t the foggiest!” he shouted.

He was wondering how long the petrol would last. He had filled up before leaving home, but he did not even know how long it was supposed to last. At any moment, then, the machine might drop like a stone. It would be safer perhaps, to fly lower. A forced landing would be better than a crash. He volplaned down. As he did so he noticed that the land was receding. He passed cliffs, and dim waves gleaming like pewter at their edge, and out over the sea again.

Dawn came, struggling up over the horizon through pale greys and muted yellows, emerging at last in a triumph of orange and saffron. It was good to see daylight again, and to hail the sun as he started his journey up the huge vault of the sky. With the passing of night, fear seemed to have gone too. It was good to skim along above the sea, whose waters took on a deeper, more lucent blue as the sun got up. The sky was clear, the sea was clear, and between the two, tiny and swift, the ’plane hummed on its way.

The children woke and demanded breakfast. Eleuthera gave it to them, and took some herself. She asked Alaric if he would eat anything, but he only shook his head.

She felt happier now. The machine went steadily, and she felt no longer sick. The baby laughed and crowed. Phroso wanted to get out and run about. Eleuthera made her look out and see how, in the clear waters beneath them, you could catch glimpses of fishes and sea creatures moving about. A bird, bright of plumage, flew by.

“There’s land there,” Alaric called, “if we can but make it!”

The ’plane had slackened speed. Land was there straight ahead. The waves broke white on a reef, palm trees reared their graceful heads. It might be a tiny island where there was no mortal either to welcome them or to oppose their coming. It might be the edge of some continent. Alaric had completely lost his bearings. He did know, however, that the petrol was giving out, and that they must either land or drown.

It was an island that they had sighted. In a few moments they were above it, hovering, looking for a place to land. The island was encircled by a coral reef. Then came a stretch of low-lying country, covered with palm trees, then a cliff rising abruptly to a tableland some three hundred feet above sea level, where a green expanse sloped very gently to a tiny lake. Here they could alight. The engine stopped and Alaric glided down. A bump or two, as the ’plane ran along the uneven surface—halt! They were at their journey’s end.

CHAPTER VII

THE ISLAND

ALARIC climbed stiffly out of the cockpit, lifted out his children, and gave his hand to Eleuthera to help her emerge. Phroso ran hither and thither on the grass, pleased to be released from the confinement of the ’plane, while the baby stretched out his hands and gurgled.

“We may as well have breakfast,” said Eleuthera. “Hand me the baskets. Let’s sit under this tree.”

“What about a bathe first?” Alaric suggested, looking at the lake, from whose surface light vapour rose into the air. “I feel more like a swim than breakfast.”

“Is it cold?” Eleuthera asked.

“Just the right temperature for baby’s bath.”

“*What?*”

“You come and see. It’s almost too hot. Must be volcanic.”

“Is it dangerous?” Eleuthera raised her voice, for Alaric was swimming out beyond his depth.

“No, not a bit. Come along.”

“Me swim, me swim!” urged Phroso delightedly.

They went down into the lake, Eleuthera carrying her baby and stepping carefully. The water was hot to her feet, but not unpleasant.

“Well,” she laughed, “whatever else we don’t find here, there’s the children’s bath all ready!”

“Doesn’t it seem odd,” she observed presently, when they had finished their bathe and were sitting under the shade of a tree with breakfast round them, “that yesterday I was picknicking in the snow in England, and now I’m here in this lovely warm place, and not knowing a bit where we are. It’s rather fun, don’t you think?”

Alaric was busy unwrapping the food which had been taken hastily from the parcel-chute the evening before and thrust into the ’plane unopened. There was milk for the children in two flasks, and enough solid food for one good meal each. Alaric was very hungry, and quite ready to eat more than his share. When it was all gone, where was the next meal to come from? However, it was not worth while saving up anything from so little. They might just as well eat it all up and have done with it. He was pleased, at any

rate, that Eleuthera seemed to be taking matters so calmly. She was attending to the children's wants as composedly as if they were all sitting under an apple tree in the garden at home.

An apple tree. He looked up. Surely he knew an apple tree if he saw one. Weren't they sitting under an apple tree?

"Do you want an apple, Phroso?" asked Eleuthera.

"Do."

"Here you are. Eat it slowly—I don't know when you'll get another."

"It's an apple tree you are leaning against," put in Alaric.

"Oh, nonsense," she did not even bother to look up. "It's a baobab or a plaintain or something romantic like that. Don't you spoil my fun, Alaric. This is the first time I've had a picnic on a Pacific island, and you're not to go spoiling the local colour. More milk, my precious? Look at Aristides blowing bubbles. Isn't he sweet?"

Alaric laughed and shook the tree. An apple fell straight into her lap.

"Alaric! Stop it!" she cried. "It might have hit him on his precious nose. I won't have you showering tropical fruits on your only son. Why"—her voice changed—"it *is* an apple! How in the world did it get here?"

She took up the fruit in her hand, weighing it pensively. It was red and gold, but a little wrinkled in texture as though the sun had been too hot for it. She put it down, covered her face with her hands and burst out crying.

"In the name of humanity, don't!" cried Alaric, much dismayed. "Whatever is the matter?"

For a while she could not answer, sobbing with deep-drawn, despairing breaths. Phroso, who had watched her, puzzled, for a few minutes, began to cry too, whereat the baby lifted up his voice in a dismal wail. That checked the mother, and, half laughing, half crying, she drew the children to her and kissed away their tears.

"What *is* the matter?" Alaric repeated.

"I don't know. It came over me suddenly. I thought of the apple trees at home, and the garden, and Mother not knowing where I was, and that I should never see her again. I'm sorry, Alaric. I'm all right now. I promise I won't cry any more. It was a silly thing to do, anyway."

"It was rather," he agreed, "but you are always governed by sentiment and not by reason, aren't you?"

She took the reproof meekly, stroking Phroso's hair the while with an uncertain hand.

“The question is,” Alaric observed, “what had we better do now? Would you like to wait here while I explore a bit?”

“Oh, *please* don’t leave us—please! If you went out of my sight, I simply couldn’t bear it. Let’s rest a minute or two, and then all explore together. It’s frightfully nice here, anyway, isn’t it?” and she smiled up at him wistfully, trying to be brave.

They looked about them. In front lay the warm lake. The vapour drawn up by the increasing heat of the sun hung in a light veil above it. Beyond, dimly seen, was a rim of low hills. To right and left, green slopes and plentiful fruit trees. Some tiny channels of water, evidently artificial, carried the water from the lake out into the land.

“This place is certainly inhabited,” said Alaric decidedly. “These little streams didn’t happen of themselves.”

“Perhaps this is New Zealand. There are plenty of apples there, aren’t there?”

“My dear!” jeered her mate. “New Zealand! An island we flew over in half a minute! Try again!”

Eleuthera jumped up. “You carry baby. Phroso, my pet, give mother your hand. Let’s explore. Put the basket and the flasks back in the ’plane.”

He did so, and then proceeded to look inside the petrol tank. “It was a near thing. Another ten minutes and we should all have gone west. Blown out the last match, as the Americans say.”

They walked slowly away from the lake, following one of the irrigation runnels until it ended abruptly as the ground rose. Eleuthera pointed out a tiny footpath going round a mass of rock and then leading down the cliff to the palm trees and the beach below.

It was pleasant enough strolling there. A soft mist, drawn up from the lake, veiled the fierceness of the sun. A murmur of waves on a white beach came softly to their ears. Blue sea and blue sky met at the ample curve of the far-off horizon.

“Are those huts?” Eleuthera asked, “or only a funny way that the palm trees grow? Some of them look as though a giant had tied their tops together for a joke.”

Alaric had not such long sight, and could not tell. They must wait until they got nearer.

The path curved and ran along under a steep cliff, bare and grey. They passed a cave mouth, then another. All at once Eleuthera burst out laughing, raised her arm and pointed. Alaric looked. There, neatly set up in a crack in

the rock, just against the wide entrance to a cave, was a bit of wood with the inscription painted on in black letters:

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

"Great Bernard Shaw!" shouted Alaric. "What next!"

"Are you quite, *quite* sure we are awake?" Eleuthera asked. "We shouldn't both be dreaming the same dream, should we? It *is* Fitzwilliam Museum, isn't it?"

"Well, let's go in and look. Isn't it too funny?"

They went in. The inside was more surprising still. There were a number of roughly made wooden tables, and on these lay a variety of objects each with a palm-leaf label. First came an old dark-blue jersey, faded and torn. This was labelled, "Costume of sailor, British Mercantile Marine, 1951." By it lay a shapeless object of some soft material trimmed with ribbon, "Lady's hat, 1950." A cup without a handle, a chipped jug, a brown pot without a lid were carefully grouped together: "Specimens of British pottery. Probable date 1940."

Further on were half a dozen books. Eleuthera picked one up. "Oh, look!" she cried in delight. "They are books from the Age of Unreason. Here is one by Dickens—you know, the 'what the Dickens' person. Oh, what funny little print, and what hideous pictures. Here's another, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. I never heard of him, did you? *The Imitation of Christ*—I know what Christ is, it is Jesus' surname, in the days when they used to have surnames everywhere, like they do in France and America still. *The Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*—oh, lots and lots of poetry. But, Alaric they are all *English*. What does it mean?"

"I don't know any more than you do."

They wandered around, touching the miscellaneous objects in the odd collection. Here were a few silver spoons; there an axe with the edge all turned, useless now for further work; side by side lay combs and hairpins, hatpins and thimbles, a jumble of little things such as women no longer use. In one box which Eleuthera opened were a few visiting-cards with quaint-sounding names printed on their yellowing surface; and many more curious trifles besides. Hanging up at the far end of the cave was a flag, which had once been red, white and blue.

"I suppose," mused Eleuthera, "years and years ago some English sailors were wrecked here, and their descendants are still living on the island. Perhaps they have never communicated at all with the outside world, and we are the first people to come here. Isn't it frightfully thrilling?"

Having thoroughly explored the quaint little museum, they came out again into the sunshine and pursued their way along the path. They had not gone many steps, however, before their attention was caught by another notice-board stuck up near the opening of another cave:

UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Underneath was something painted in faint characters on a palm leaf. Eleuthera read it aloud.

> "Last day for returning books, December 24th.
> The Library will be closed until January 4th."

If the library was closed, there was, nevertheless, no barrier to oppose the ingress of anyone who might like to go in. The cave had no door across its mouth, and, like the museum, was without human occupants. Eleuthera and Alaric went in. The baby lay fast asleep in his father's arm, but Phroso tiptoed beside them gravely, wide-eyed and content.

The cave was a vast one. Along its walls, tier upon tier of ledges had been roughly cut, and on these lay bundles of palm-leaves neatly tied up with some kind of cord. Eleuthera took one and examined it. In the half-light she could with difficulty read the lettering, but it ran *History of England*, and she saw that there were names and dates and short sentences filling the long spear-shaped leaves.

"Alaric," she cried, "here's a funny sort of book all about the Age of Unreason. Isn't it lovely? Do you suppose I shall be allowed to come here and read anything I like? But where are all the people? You don't think they have sailed away again, and left all this, do you?"

"Don't ask me. What I want to know is where our next meal is coming from."

"I know. Sightseeing makes one frightfully hungry, doesn't it?" Eleuthera agreed whimsically. "Well, let's explore the next cave. Perhaps that will be the communal kitchen. I'd love to look at all these funny manuscripts, though."

Alaric was staring at one of them which bore the title, *Cambridge in 1950*, by a Trinity Man.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "The men who were shipwrecked here were Cambridge men. Fitzwilliam is what the Museum used to be called before it was Marx Museum. That is why there is a University

Library. Let's hurry up and find the inhabitants. We've struck a bit of primitive civilisation—what a joke!"

Feeling as if she were in a dream, Eleuthera followed her mate as he hastened down the path. This time, as they came out into the open air, they could hear something. A noise of singing, yet not such singing as they had ever heard, faintly reached their ears. It was a grave, slow, modulated sound, suggesting worship.

They entered another cave and saw that it was full of people. In the far distance a light gleamed, throwing a glow on a bronze cross. A man wearing a worn and patched white garment was chanting. Between him and the intruders were rows and rows of men and women, all kneeling. A sweet and pungent odour of spices filled the air.

Eleuthera and Alaric came in, and stood there, listening to what the man was saying.

"Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live; and hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins: He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent——"

"Oh!" cried Eleuthera, quite loud, "it's Morning Prayer."

And, leading Phroso with her, she ran forward and fell on her knees.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING ACQUAINTED

WHILE his mate knelt among the strangers, Alaric stood stiffly, anger and bitterness in his heart. It was not that he minded being left there, tall and conspicuous, holding his sleeping son in his arms. No. What hurt him was the feeling that the hated religion which had made it impossible for him to remain in England and which had nearly cost Eleuthera her life, was here in this remote island, waiting for him and for her. The gods he had fondly believed were dead had received Eleuthera into bondage. It was intolerable.

Nevertheless, he looked about him and observed. His artistic sense was struck by the unfamiliar beauty of the scene. The dusk of the cave was lit by lights fixed into carved pedestals of wood. Their flickering glow hardly penetrated the vault of the roof, but threw dark trembling shadows on the stone walls. The bronze cross impressed him as beautiful. He liked the flowing white robe of the officiating priest. Incense was sweet to his nostrils.

The men and women who knelt with their backs towards him looked very different from the people he was accustomed to meet in England. For one thing, they all had long, long hair. The women wore theirs in heavy plaits, the men had it flowing loose, to mingle with their uncut beards. The dress of the women consisted of a skirt of fine grass and cape of the same material, while on their heads they wore wide-brimmed hats of plaited straw. The men were all bareheaded. Their dress approximated more to contemporary dress in England, but it was woven of grass. Alaric stood head and shoulders above the tallest of them.

He hated to see the way they behaved. Sometimes they stood with bowed heads, sometimes they sat, looking reverently up at the priest. And then again they knelt—that was the worst of all. That rational beings should so grovel before God, before a vain figment of their imagination! Alaric longed to shout “Stop!” and drag them up from their knees. He did not move, however. The men and women were so much in earnest, he could not interrupt them.

Now the priest mounted a carved wooden block, rudely-fashioned, with a rail round it, and began to talk. Alaric listened. Everyone was listening, so it was easiest to listen too. The man was telling a story, painting a word-

picture of an incident that had happened a very, very long time ago. He spoke as though the people had heard it before, not once, but many times, and yet as though he expected them to be deeply interested.

Considered as a narrative, it was picturesque enough, and Alaric liked listening, because it was all new to him. The priest called it the Christmas Story—whatever Christmas might be. It seemed to have three parts. The first was about shepherds watching their flocks by night: and these shepherds imagined they heard angels singing, and spoke with them and heard tidings of great joy. Those shepherds, Alaric reflected, certainly had the makings of poets in them. From that kind of vivid dramatic intuition comes the fabric of true poetry. He could quite visualise the scene—the sudden radiance, the awe-struck peasants, the prophetic words and the song of the winged messengers.

The second scene had less of remote grandeur. It showed a crowded courtyard in front of an Eastern caravanserai: a tired traveller elbowing his way through the throng and asking for shelter for his wife, who was great with child; a harassed innkeeper saying he had no room left, except, maybe, for rich men who could pay an extra charge; and then a stable where oxen turned their mild eyes to watch a new-born babe cradled in a little straw. That child, the priest said, was the Son of God.

In the third part of the story there came three wise men from the east to worship the heavenly babe. Crazy astrologers, Alaric commented to himself. First they sought him in a king's palace, but it was in the lowly stable that the King of Kings was to be found. And there, weary after many travels, they adored Him, as we, dear people, on this Christmas morning may adore Him too.

"Queer stuff," thought Alaric. "Remarkably queer." On the whole, however, it was not as bad as he had expected. It was certainly superstitious, but it had a certain beauty about it. It would pass as Poetry if not as Reason. Nor were there, in this simple tale, any of those elements of cruelty which he had associated in his mind with the religion of the Age of Unreason. The song that the angels were supposed to have sung had nothing ethically wrong with it. The idea of the Lord of Heaven coming humbly to be born of a peasant maid was, in some ways, admirable. The astrologers who had followed the star were foolish and misguided, no doubt, but they must have been inspired by some kind of not-too-despicable ideal to bend their heads before a new-born child. No, take it altogether, the remarks of the priest might have been a good deal worse.

Suddenly the priest swung round, faced the bronze cross, and mumbled something which seemed to begin, "Now to God the Father . . ." The people

rose too. Evidently the ritual was not over yet. Alaric wondered how much longer he would have to stand there. His child felt heavy in his arms. He was getting very hungry. He looked at Eleuthera. Her profile was turned towards the priest, and suddenly it reminded him of her at the mating-dance supper, when he had sat at a little table with Katinka and had watched Eleuthera's delicate profile and thought how lovely she was. The scene came before him with almost incredible clearness—Katinka stolidly eating her supper, Eleuthera receiving the admiration of Peter and Miguel and looking elated and a little flushed, fresh and exquisite as a flower. And now Peter was dead, and Miguel had mated with Katinka and had got tired of her, and he and Eleuthera were flung down in the midst of this strange dream from which there might be no awaking.

The ritual continued. A boy was singing. He had a voice like a flute, and like a bird, and like spring-time, and like dawn singing to the glory of God.

"Oh, come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. . ." he sang, and the assembled people took up the song:

"Oh, come, let us adore Him,
Oh, come, let us adore Him,
Oh, come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord."

Eleuthera had bowed her head and was weeping. Alaric might feel himself a detached spectator, but she, at any rate, had taken her place among the worshippers. She was pouring out her soul in devotion and love. To see her thus, made Alaric feel as though she were thousands of miles away from him.

Would the ritual never end? Phroso was gravely attentive to it all, but Alaric's impatience and distaste increased every minute. He had almost reached the limit of his patience, and was about to make some move, when he saw that the ceremony was over. Some dignitary or other, preceded by two men carrying carved wooden batons, walked down the cave and out into the open air. As these men passed, the rest of the audience began to stir and prepare to emerge. A young woman, seated next to Eleuthera, put her hand on the stranger's. Alaric heard her murmur.

"Oh, can it be that you are from home? You *did* understand it, didn't you?"

The people surged out into the sunshine. In a moment they had all crowded round Eleuthera and Alaric, asking them who they were and where they came from. They all spoke English, a little archaic, but perfectly intelligible. The only difficulty was that they all talked at once and all

wanted to shake the strangers by the hand. Eleuthera, who had dried her tears, laughed and smiled and answered and shook hands. But suddenly the baby awoke and set up a shrill scream, whereat the island-women pulled their menfolk away, and urged their own children to be quiet and not to frighten baby. Only the young woman by whose side Eleuthera had knelt remained, holding her guest by the hand.

"You must come back with us to lunch, and then you can tell us about everything. I've plenty of milk for baby, and a hammock for him to sleep in." She raised her voice, addressing the crowd. "Tell the vice-chancellor the visitors are staying with me. They will call on him when they are rested."

"Come!" she said, turning to Eleuthera.

They followed her down towards the sea, through a long row of huts set some fifty paces apart. The inhabitants evidently lived mainly out of doors, for there were stone ovens, rude tables, hammocks slung from tree to tree, and blocks of wood for seats, grouped near the huts. Each dwelling had a name. Eleuthera could not help smiling as she read them: "York Cottage," "The Cedars," "Pembroke Lodge," and so forth. Their hostess stopped at "Wayside," with a proud "Here we are. I'm so glad you've come on Christmas Day. Do sit down. This is my husband. This is George, and this is Hal, and here is Dolly. Oh, I forgot. My name's Mary Adam. Do sit down. Lunch will be ready in a minute. Baby shall have his milk first. Is he used to goat's milk?"

Their hostess was so simple and so friendly that a good deal of their sensation of strangeness had passed off when they found themselves seated at the table eating roast kid and maize bread, goat's cheese, and fruits of various kinds. Mr. Adam, a handsome man of thirty or more, was as friendly as his wife. The three children were politely attentive to Phroso, speaking gently so as not to disturb the baby, who slept peacefully in a little hammock. Alaric liked the people. They were gay and yet serious, unaffected, serene, charming. He had had a moment of annoyance when Mr. Adam bent his head over the food and said: "Accept our thanks, O Lord, for these and all Thy blessings, for Christ's sake, Amen," but he was too hungry to be very critical. After all, the 'plane might have landed them amid unfriendly members of a backward race. Here, at any rate, they had a welcome.

Dinner had hardly begun, when a lad came running up and, a little out of breath, delivered his message. "Please, sir, the vice-chancellor presents his compliments, and will the gentleman call at the Lodge at three o'clock, that is, the vice-chancellor says, sir, if the gentleman isn't tired?"

“Are you tired?” Mr. Adam asked.

“Not a bit. Thank whoever he is very much, and say I’ll come along. What about you, Eleuthera?”

“She’d better rest,” Mrs. Adam interposed. “You’d rather rest, wouldn’t you, darling? Besides, you can’t leave the children.”

Eleuthera smiled at her. “Thanks, yes—I’d rather stay here. It’s frightfully nice here.”

Mr. Adam addressed the messenger. “Say that Mr. Alaric will call on the vice-chancellor at three o’clock,” and the lad ran off.

“That means,” observed Mrs. Adam, as soon as he was out of earshot, “that the vice-chancellor wants to tell you himself the history of our island. He is very particular about people getting the facts right. He lectures in History, you know, and he’s a great dear.”

“Yes,” chimed in her husband humorously. “and he has a fine white beard and the most beautiful manners. And he goes to sleep in committee meetings and wakes up with a start and says: ‘May we have the resolution read *just* once more.’ ”

At that Mrs. Adam laughed dutifully, and Eleuthera laughed, and George and Hal and Dolly laughed. Phroso, turning grave enquiring eyes from one to the other, finally decided to clap her hands and laugh too.

“Oh!” exclaimed Mrs. Adam, “what fun it will be telling you things, and what heaps and heaps and heaps you have got to tell us! Do you know, you are the first people from home who have landed here for over two hundred years!” She lowered her voice. “We’ve been praying—and of course you have come in answer to our prayer. I will explain presently. Oh, dear! However shall we get all the talking done? Everyone will want to hear everything too.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Alaric will have to give courses of lectures,” observed her husband. “I expect the vice-chancellor will arrange for it as soon as possible. May I offer you anything more, sir? Do try some of this cheese. I can thoroughly recommend it.”

CHAPTER IX

ISLAND HISTORY

ALARIC was in a thoroughly bad temper as he walked beside his host towards the residence of the vice-chancellor. He felt as an examinee might feel who does not want to be examined, knows his subject imperfectly, and is not particularly concerned with the result. Alaric knew he would be subjected to detailed questioning with regard to modern civilisation, and was bored at the prospect. Nor did these long-haired good-natured islanders interest him much. They looked so contented—curse them!

As he and his guide pursued their way, men and women kept darting out of their huts to talk to them. The men would shake him by the hand and say some words of welcome, the women would smile at him and add some gentle phrase. They had evidently no doubt that he was as pleased to be among them as they were to receive him into their midst. Alaric wanted to scowl at them for a pack of tedious importunate fools, but he found he was not able, and smiled instead.

He had already gleaned a few facts with regard to the island. The inhabitants called it Cambridge, and there was the town of Cambridge, where he now found himself, and another settlement, Chesterton, at the far side of the island. The population amounted in all to some five hundred souls, descendants of the handful of refugees who had reached these shores some two hundred years previously.

"What I can't make out," Alaric observed, "is why you have never been discovered."

"If mankind still sailed the seas in ships," his companion answered, "we doubtless should have been long ago. But look up!"

Alaric looked. Above his head floated a light cloud, pleasantly tempering the heat of the sun.

"That cloud," Mr. Adam explained, "is always there. The vapour from our lake hangs perpetually over the island. We have had aircraft over us more than once. We assume that they have looked down on the cloud and never guessed that there was land below. It is probably just as well."

"Do you mean to say," cried Alaric, "that you *like* living here?"

The man smiled. He had beautiful dark hazel eyes, dreamy, but by no means lacking in intelligence. When his mouth smiled his eyes smiled, and sometimes his eyes smiled while the mouth remained grave.

“Preferences imply comparison,” he reminded Alaric. “I can assure you, though, that we are absolutely and completely happy. We are all trained from our childhood to know God; and that, of course, is the one essential.”

Alaric scowled. God again!

“Of course,” laughed the other, “we lack a good many other things on the material side. I expect we look somewhat queer to you, with our long hair and outlandish clothes. I assure you we would trim ourselves a bit if we could. We have no metals, you see, and the knives and scissors and the couple of axes brought by our ancestors were worn out long ago. However, we all look alike, so we don’t bother, and there isn’t a mirror in the whole island. Æsthetic standards you know, are a matter of habit. Our women like us shaggy!”

They walked on. Alaric, reflecting, was struck by the tact of his host. He asked no importunate questions about present-day conditions in England, expressed no surprise at any of Alaric’s remarks, did not stare at him, did not criticise. There seemed to be little in his mind beyond a naïve friendliness and a readiness to help his guest to feel at home in unfamiliar conditions. Mr. Adam might be a bigot, a superstitious and credulous ignoramus, but he was certainly a gentleman.

Presently they reached a building that looked to Alaric little more than a glorified shed, though it bore the proud inscription “Trinity College.” Near by was a hut, labelled “The Lodge.” In the doorway sat the bearded dignitary whom Alaric had noticed in the cave marching out preceded by two men with carved rods.

“The vice-chancellor,” Mr. Adam explained. Then he added in a low voice, “God be with you! This is a great day for our island. Remember that you and your dear wife and children came in answer to our prayers.”

He led Alaric forward, introduced him: “Vice-chancellor, this is Mr. Alaric from home; Mr. Alaric, our vice-chancellor, Dr. Archer, master of Trinity,” and walked away.

Alaric sat down on a block of wood as he was bidden. He faced an elderly man of mild, dignified countenance, who peered at him with rather short-sighted blue eyes. He felt angry and defiant. Well, if this relic from the Age of Unreason, this inquisitive, priest-ridden old despot asked him questions about the modern world, he would tell him that he, for his part, was well-satisfied with it. The Age of Reason had abolished Poverty, War and Religion. He would hold forth to this old man, this survival from an inferior era, on the glory, the splendour, the achievements and so forth of

modern civilisation. He would like to see anyone trying to patronise him

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"Welcome," said the vice-chancellor. "Welcome. You come in answer to our fervent prayers."

"I certainly am not aware of the fact," Alaric answered.

"You will be interested to hear an account of the events which led up to this happy consummation. May I offer you some refreshment? Pray take a little fruit while you listen to my narrative."

The fruit looked remarkably tempting. Alaric thought, if he had to sit there and be bored, he might as well eat. He helped himself liberally. Dr. Archer had a suave voice, not unpleasant to listen to. In former days the English language must have been more modulated, the "a" and "i" sounds purer, the consonants clearer. There was a certain amount of æsthetic satisfaction to be derived from hearing Dr. Archer talk. Alaric listened.

"I must ask you, my dear young friend, to carry your mind back for nearly two hundred years, to the early days of the year 1950. Thoughtful people were then generally of the opinion that a world-revolution was pending. Whether or not it ever took place, I am not in a position, of course, to say."

"It did," Alaric interrupted, with his mouth full.

"Ah, it did," repeated the vice-chancellor. He considered the fact in silence a few minutes, and then continued: "Our ancestors were under the impression that the uprising of the lower classes would be chiefly directed against religion. There seemed to be a conviction abroad that Christianity had been on the side of oppression, and that believers in Our Lord had helped to maintain the masses in subjection. This appears to us to-day as almost incredible. Still, our forefathers may have thus deeply sinned."

"Perfectly true," Alaric interrupted again. "It was the business of religion to keep men down. Everybody knows that."

Dr. Archer made no protest. Merely opening his blue eyes a little wider, he went on: "We have no record here of how the vast majority of Christians acted in the face of the danger that threatened them. Our historians have made numerous conjectures, but we are not in possession of the facts. All we know is that in May 1950 a Conference was held at Cambridge between Oxford and Cambridge divines. Nominally called to consider some trivial matter of theological teaching, it was in reality a secret conclave to decide what measures were to be taken in case of world-revolution. The Oxford men unanimously decided for martyrdom, which they esteemed the greatest crown and glory of the followers of Our Lord. The Catholic priests of Our

Lady and the English Martyrs, Cambridge, concurred. All honour to their memory. Doubtless they all perished."

"I expect so," confirmed Alaric indifferently.

"Ah, you expect so." The vice-chancellor paused again, considering the statement. He bent his head, murmured a prayer for these glorious dead, and continued: "Our ancestors, on the other hand, concluded that they could better serve their Master by flight. Like the Pilgrim Fathers of old——"

"The who?" interrupted Alaric.

"The Pilgrim Fathers who sailed to the New World in order to find a place where they could worship God according to the dictates of their conscience."

"Their what? What's that?"

"Conscience is the voice of the Holy Spirit admonishing our hearts."

Alaric was none the wiser. However, he merely helped himself to more fruit, and the vice-chancellor proceeded.

"I understand that the imminence of the peril was made known to the Christian congregations in the town of Cambridge. The majority of believers refused, we conjecture, to believe in so terrible a possibility. However, some fifty persons in all, clergymen of the Church of England, ministers of the Free Churches, a few laymen, together with their wives and children, decided to flee. One of the party owned a motor-yacht, lying at anchor in some secluded Cornish bay. It was hastily equipped, and the party fled away by night. Few records remain to us of the voyage. All we know is that the owner of the yacht found himself comparatively ignorant of navigation. We do not know what course was steered. Finally, however, the little craft was wrecked upon these shores. We believe that the hand of God guided it."

"And here you've stayed ever since, absolutely cut off from civilisation!" Alaric commented.

"We have our own culture," observed the vice-chancellor suavely. "I, for one, believe that it is not without merit. Our physical wants are few and easily supplied. Our forefathers brought with them seeds of various kinds, and one mother, with singular good sense, insisted on a billygoat and three nannies being included in the vessel's cargo. We have thus acclimatised many English plants and trees, while from these first goats sprang the fine herds which roam our enclosed pastureland. Except that we have no metals, we lack for little. Since the early settlers came from a University town, they made the University their model. We are governed, *mutatis mutandis*, as a University is governed. In the old days, at home, higher education was the

privilege of the few. Here, our best culture, such as it is, is within the reach of all."

"It isn't likely to take you very far, is it," Alaric suggested, "since you can't possibly know anything of modern science?"

"Our culture," replied Dr. Archer, "leads us to God. We distinguish four chief spheres of human activity. Labour, which makes provision for physical needs; Learning, whereby the mind is furnished; Social Intercourse, which includes games and amusements; and Religion, the end and aim of human life. All our people have their share of these. All work, even the children. All study, think, and attempt some form of creative art. No one is lonely. All in this island, have—God be praised—the gift of communing with their Maker. We enjoy all our activities, but our greatest joy is Worship."

As he spoke his voice sounded so tender, so reverent, so joyous that Alaric felt unkindly criticism die away in his heart. The newcomer was in the presence of something that he did not understand, but which he recognised as significant. A pang of envy smote him. Then his upbringing reasserted itself. He squared his shoulders as if to withstand the onslaught of superstition, and said curtly:

"The world to-day has abolished God. The idea of a deity is completely exploded."

Dr. Archer bent his head. "Alas," he murmured, "it is, indeed, as we feared!"

There was a long silence. Presently the vice-chancellor in brisker tone began: "I must tell you, my dear sir, of more recent happenings. Our history on this beautiful island has been extraordinarily peaceful. We have, it is true, our different schools of thought, but these have but served to enrich our national life. You may remember that I told you the first settlers numbered Anglicans and Free Churchmen among them."

"You did," put in Alaric, "but I did not understand a word you said."

This was muttered somewhat sullenly, and perhaps the vice-chancellor did not hear, for he volunteered no explanation, merely continuing: "For the purposes of organising public worship, it was found convenient for the Anglicans to reside in this part of the island which we designate Cambridge, and for the Non-conformists to take up their abode in the settlement of Chesterton. The utmost friendliness has, however, always been maintained between the two. We have even a custom that before we admit our young people to Confirmation we should send them to stay some time with Free Church families for them to see whether they prefer worship with or without a liturgy. We also practise Inter-Communion. This arose originally from

there being no bishop among us and doubts having arisen with regard to the possibility of Apostolic Succession being maintained."

Alaric was getting terribly bored. His host's remarks were full of words which conveyed no meaning at all to his mind. What was a Nonconformist? What was Confirmation? Liturgy? Inter-Communion? Apostolic Succession? These bigots had their mouths for ever full of jargon. No wonder the proletariat had risen up and slain them. He scowled.

"Our last interchange of young people," proceeded Dr. Archer, "produced an unusual result. After their return to their homes, our young people held a conference. Here they passed a resolution to the effect that they were not satisfied to worship God here in this little island, while England, which we still speak of as home, had possibly relapsed into barbarism. They came to me and besought me to find a way whereby some of them might go to England and preach again as St. Augustine and St. Columba had preached."

"What did you say to that?" Alaric was more interested now. His imagination put before his eyes, as on the teleflick, a vivid picture of these savage folk with their streaming hair and their clothes of plaited grass, holding forth on the long-dead superstitions to an audience of up-to-date Britishers. It was very humorous, and, in spite of himself, he smiled.

"Alas," replied the vice-chancellor, "I was forced to say that, as far as I could see, it was humanly impossible. We have no ships, and no means of making any, neither can we construct an aeroplane. We do not even know how far distant the nearest land may be. All that I could do was to command that prayer should be made in our churches that communication be somehow re-established with England. Everyone was instructed to offer similar prayers during his private meditations morning and evening."

"How long have you been at it?" Alaric asked. It seemed to him a very odd proceeding.

"The first prayers were offered last Easter Day."

"How long ago is that?"

"Roughly speaking, nine months."

"Nine months! Do you mean to say you have kept it up all that time! And what are you going to do now?"

The vice-chancellor did not answer for a moment, and Alaric, looking round, saw that George, Mr. Adam's eldest son, was standing there, waiting for permission to speak. He was a handsome boy, with his father's deep, dreamy, hazel eyes and his mother's tender mouth and rounded chin.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said. “Mother would like to know whether Mr. Alaric may come back to dinner with us, because Grandpapa and Grandmama will be there, and she thinks Mr. Alaric would like to see our Christmas tree, so may he come with me now, sir?”

Alaric got up eagerly. Dinner and something to look at afterwards suited him much better than a lecture on Island History and Religion.

Not only Grandpapa and Grandmama, but numerous uncles and aunts and cousins assembled at the hut named Wayside for the dinner. Evidently these islanders kept up the tiresome tradition of family gatherings, and still nourished the illusion that people must want to see each other because an accident of birth had connected them. However, Alaric could not help noticing that this particular family seemed happy together. Grandpapa, a vigorous man of fifty, who was introduced as Librarian of the University Library, was a famous raconteur, and told funny stories which, as he proudly assured his audience, had amused Noah in the Ark.

“We value our traditions,” he explained to Alaric, “even our traditions of humour.”

They were finishing their meal with some kind of honey-sweetmeat, when young Mrs. Adam slipped away, beckoning George to follow her. Dusk had come almost imperceptibly. The great palm tree under which they were gathered showed its feathery leaves in black fringes against the perfect calm of the evening sky. Below them, the white curve of the beach lay passive to the touch of the sea. Eleuthera, sitting by her mate, took his hand in hers, and whispering, “Isn’t it lovely?” made him look up and see how the stars were beginning to sparkle in the deep blue distance above.

All along the way that led up to the caves there were tiny lights showing, and here too, close at hand, lights were lit, clustering on a tiny tree. At the same moment, George began to sing, and Alaric recognised the voice as the one that had sung the song in church.

> “Hark, the herald angels sing,
> Glory to the newborn King. . . .”

There was a hush. Men and women rose to their feet, and stood with bowed heads, listening reverently. How incomprehensible, thought Alaric to himself, that these people here in this remote island should still celebrate the birth of a baby of an alien race, who lived and died more than two thousand years previously, and who, for all he invented or produced, ought to have been forgotten long ago. And yet here were grown men and women, adolescents and small children, remembering this infant and celebrating his

birthday with more emotion than when they thought of England, and with a good deal more joy than ordinary people showed on mating-day.

Grandpapa took a book from under his arm and read. “And it came to pass that in the days of Herod the King . . .”

The same story again, Alaric commented to himself—and yet no one seemed tired of it. Look how little Dolly was listening, as she held Phroso protectingly by the hand. Look at those two or three young men and girls, how completely their attention was absorbed so that they did not even glance at each other. And Eleuthera—alas, she listened more eagerly than any!

Suddenly quick lively questions. “Oh, mother, may we give the presents now?”

George and Hal and Dolly were running hither and thither distributing presents. There were palm-leaf books for the elders, kites and rare shells and other trifles for the boys, quaint brown dolls of coco-nut fibre for the girls. Alaric and Eleuthera found that parcels wrapped in palm leaves were being thrust into their hands, and that everyone was eager for them to unwrap and find and be pleased.

Young Mrs. Adam had her arm round Eleuthera’s shoulder, and put her cheek against hers.

“My dear, have you enjoyed your first Christmas?”

CHAPTER X

ELEUTHERA'S CHOICE

PERHAPS women are nearer to nature than men, and that is why they are happiest when they are doing the most natural things. To suckle her infant, to tend her house, to teach her child to pray—these are the actions which give a woman the deepest feeling of contentment. There may be more exhilaration in seeing one's play staged and acted, in pleading for the votes of an electorate, in riding one's aeroplane across sky and sea, and it is fine that women should thus achieve. Not there, however, lies her most intimate satisfaction.

It was, at any rate, Eleuthera's experience that baby-minding and keeping house was much more delightful on the island than it had ever been at home. In England you tended your own offspring, with the knowledge that when he was two years old he would have to go to a nursery-school, and later on very likely to a State boarding-school; and that the forming of his character was entirely taken out of your hands and given over to experts. As for keeping house, Eleuthera, like all her contemporaries, had been deprived of the fun along with the trouble. Having never done anything beyond open the parcel-chute when she wanted a meal, she was ignorant of the simplest processes of preparing food, and found learning to cook one of the most amusing occupations in the world. Of course, she could embroider—fine embroidery was a means of artistic self-expression—but she had never made or mended a garment for herself or anyone else. Now she would have to learn, or she and Alaric and the children would go naked when their clothes wore out.

She named the hut which had been allotted to her "Clare Cottage." Some rough furniture had been included in the gift, but Eleuthera had to learn to weave the flat-bottomed hammocks which were used as beds, and to plait grass quilts stuffed with sea-birds' feathers for use in the rainy season when the nights were cool. Mary Adam was usually her teacher, but there was not a woman on the island who had not promised to teach her something.

Phroso and Aristides grew and throve. George and his younger brother Hal were the most wonderful nursemaids. They taught the little girl that most absorbing of all games, "helping mother." All the children at Cambridge began to try and help their mothers almost as soon as they could crawl. And as soon as they asked to be allowed to learn, they began lessons.

Everyone learned, and everyone taught. Mr. Adam was professor of mathematics, and might be seen on the beach drawing geometric figures in the sand with his pupils squatting round him. Mary Adam was an authority on Ornithology. She would take her children bird-watching, and had already compiled a palm-leaf catalogue of the birds of the island. They both lectured and attended lectures. “In our intellectual life,” as Grandpapa facetiously explained, “we make an excellent living by taking in one another’s washing.”

Eleuthera was much gratified and not a little amused when she and her mate received a message from the vice-chancellor saying that they had both been appointed lecturers in the Faculty of History, and would Mr. Alaric give a course on European History since 1950, and Mrs. Alaric on Contemporary England with special reference to Education? Eleuthera clapped her hands, and declared that nothing would please her better. Alaric, aware that the family food-supply might be dependent on his acceptance, also agreed, though with a bad grace, to lecture.

The lectures, nevertheless, proved a relief to his mind and helped to soothe his vanity. Though no one had criticised him or laughed at him since the day he landed, he was keenly aware of inferior usefulness. He had never worked, as these men understood work. Left to himself, he could no more have got milk out of a goat than out of a block of concrete. Though he had lived all his life in the midst of apparatus, he had never had the vaguest notion how the apparatus worked. In modern civilisation, no one trespasses on the domain of the expert. You turn on your artificial sunlight, but you never enquire how it comes there. You turn on the milk-tap and fill your glass, but you are completely ignorant of the process whereby raw grass is turned into the finished article. When the teleflick and the ’plane were first invented, clever boys wanted to know how they were made, but the interest has long since evaporated. Alaric could not fashion a pot, make a candle, turn the soil, bait a line for fish, and had never even cast a handful of maize into the ground.

As far as the islanders’ learning went, he was almost equally ignorant. Of history before 1950 he knew next to nothing. Theology was non-existent in Modern England. The literature they cherished, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Bunyan—not a hundred volumes in all—was unknown to him. They had some odd notions of Geography, with the boundaries all out of date, which he enjoyed correcting. He knew he was two hundred years ahead of them in culture, but he had few means of making them feel it.

Only where sport was concerned was the gulf bridged. Alaric soon established himself as the champion runner of the island. He knew the

dances too, and could go on dancing long after everyone else was tired. There, at least, he could exact the admiration that was his due. To tell the truth, however, the islanders did not attach as much importance as they should have done to physical prowess. And Æsthetics, as he understood it, they practically ignored.

So it came about that the ways of the husband and wife—as the islanders called them—diverged sharply. Eleuthera was happy. Alaric was unhappy.

She was overwhelmingly conscious of one thing, which he never so much as noticed, namely the presence of God among the people. He was not present as king or judge or as any being before whom men and women must be stiff and formal and ill at ease. He was present as Father, and His children could be perfectly natural.

All the day's work was done to God's glory. Lectures, like meals, began with grace. God's name, the doings of Jesus of Nazareth, phrases from the Psalms, entered alike into the familiar conversation of the people. Everyone, adults and children too, began and ended the day with worship. The little boys and girls were taught silent prayer so young that no one quite knew when they started to understand it, but they seemed to acquire the art naturally, just as they learned to walk and talk. Eleuthera saw around her a community steeped in religion—a religion without fear, though not without reverence or without awe. This religion had its familiar aspect, but it also had its seasons of deeper emotion, its mysteries, its threshold into infinity. Eleuthera understood without effort how every day and eternity could alike be glorified by the same belief.

One evening Alaric was sitting dejectedly at the door of his hut, watching the sunset. The sun was dipping below the horizon, a half circle of fire that leaned on the rim of the waters and sent a molten pathway widening shorewards. The white beach, the palm trees shone in suffused ruddy light, while, inland, the cave-cliffs glowed, hewn from fire.

Eleuthera came up quickly, and paused, looking too. Then she spoke.

"Alaric, I've something to tell you."

"Well?"

"I am going to be baptised."

He got up, faced her with angry decision. "Very well, if you do that, you are not my mate any longer! You must choose between me and God. No woman I have anything to do with shall make such a fool of herself!"

"Alaric!" Her eyes filled with tears. "Please, *please* don't talk like that. You might as well say I must choose between you and sunshine or you and air. I'm not going to be anything different or think anything new. I only want

to be one of these dear people here and take Holy Communion with them and——”

Alaric interrupted her. “Exactly. You want to be one of them. You don’t want to have anything to do with me. My wishes and my opinions have no weight with you.”

“But, Alaric, I couldn’t disbelieve in God if I tried. I’ve always known Him, ever since I can remember, only I didn’t know what He was called. Of course, I know more *about* Him now——”

“I have no doubt,” he observed sarcastically, “that you are uniquely well-informed about the ultimate nature of the universe. Your enlightenment forms a striking contrast to my ignorance.”

Eleuthera’s lips trembled, but she spoke up. “I will tell you how I know God. I know Him in three ways. First of all, I know Him in the world around me. I see Him in the wonderful and beautiful things that He has made. Then I know Him in the life and person of Jesus Christ, who was good all the time, not only sometimes, like the rest of us. And I know God in my own heart, because there is something in me that wants to do right, and that loves beauty and truth. God is in other people’s hearts too, because they are happy when they do right, and miserable when they do wrong. Now you know!”

“Very glib,” commented Alaric bitterly. “You have been well taught.”

“It’s my own thinking!” she cried. “I put it like that to have my own thoughts clear.”

“As for right and wrong,” Alaric continued, “there is no such thing. Right is the convenience of the majority, nothing more. What you call ‘the moral law’ is pure imagination. God has no existence save in the minds of the superstitious. Science has progressively explored every corner of the universe where a Deity was supposed to operate, and found that He was not there. When you talk the nonsense you do, you are wiping out the discoveries of our most acute intellects and putting the clock of civilisation back two hundred years. I tell you, you little fool, the human race has tried religion and thrown it aside. It’s a sucked orange, and you can’t get any juice into it with all your ‘first, second, third.’ ”

“Alaric,” she asked, very earnestly, “aren’t the dear people here happier than the people at home?”

“What if they are? What may be good enough for a pettifogging little community like this is not good enough for five continents. You might just as well ask me to look at an earthworm and say, ‘Look at its beautiful simple inside. Earthworms never have tummy-ache. Let’s all have beautiful simple insides like the earthworm.’ ”

Eleuthera could not be amused. “You won’t admit that they are happy because they know God and worship Him, but it is true all the same. It isn’t theory, it is ‘plain fact.’ ”

“Were the nations happy in the Age of Unreason? They had this superstition, I tell you, and were only the worse for it. They were so busy mouthing their prayers and kneeling before their gods that they never noticed that children were growing up with repressions and full of disease, and that half the world hadn’t enough to eat. Look how they quarrelled, too! You simply can’t see things straight, Eleuthera.”

She looked troubled, and her eyes filled with tears again.

“I know,” she said. “I found it terribly hard to understand at first, but I’ve had it explained to me. That did puzzle me more than anything—how it was that the people who had the ritual-book I had, and who knew what it all meant, weren’t perfectly happy and perfectly good. It is all rather complicated, but a kind of allegory my teacher told me made me see——”

“Teacher?” Alaric interrupted sharply. “What teacher? What have you been doing behind my back?”

“I would have told you all about it if you had been interested. You *know* I’ve wanted to, only you wouldn’t listen.”

Alaric frowned angrily, and a strained silence fell between the two. Then Eleuthera went on timidly:

“I was going to tell you about the allegory. It was like this. Once upon a time there was a musician who composed a perfect symphony, and so, of course, he wanted to have it played. He had heard of a number of very musical people, so he sent them the score, with the request that they would practise it and then he would come and hear the performance. Unfortunately, the people didn’t understand a bit. Some said the music was far too modern and must be altered in accordance with the old tradition. One or two snatched up their parts and went off into corners and played all alone, which was not at all helpful even when they played very well. The men who did get together and try to play, knew nothing of orchestration, and got furious with each other because the drum thought that the flute ought to be making the same noise that he did, and so on. Everything was in a terrible muddle, when the composer sent a conductor to teach the orchestra their parts. But that didn’t make things right, because only a few of the men were teachable or had any idea that the music of an orchestra is something more than the sum-total of its parts. Still, the symphony *was* performed in a sort of way, and, even so, was a revelation of how beautiful music could be. But the audience said it was horrid, and drove away the conductor of the orchestra,

and since then musical people have never agreed on what the composer really meant, and——”

“My dear Eleuthera,” Alaric interrupted impatiently, “your tale is as dull as it is unconvincing. If it proves anything, it proves that the possession of religion made mankind quarrelsome and intolerant, and that the human race is better without it. Your pious ancestors sound simply detestable, and I am glad they were wiped out.”

“I know they weren’t as good as they ought to have been, but they were only children growing up. The race isn’t very old yet, you know, Alaric. Of course, it is a pity when children are naughty and tiresome, but one mustn’t be too hard on them. We are dreadfully sorry, all of us here, for the sins of our forefathers. In fact, there is going to be a special service about it, and we are going to ask God’s forgiveness. All the same, the *best* happiness that people had in the Age of Unreason *did* come from their believing in God. They didn’t believe enough, and they didn’t love Him enough; but it was much better than nothing at all.”

“So you say.”

“Besides, all the good things the nations have done since have been inspired by God, though they don’t know it. Just as you can see a picture and think it lovely without knowing the name of the artist, so the nations have done right often without knowing where the good ideas came from. Lots of people like the feeling of a kind of harmony between a good idea in their minds and rightness outside, and then putting it into action—if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t in the least.”

His words chilled her. What was the use of talking? “I can’t help it,” she said desperately. “Anyway, it is all settled now. There is going to be the service of repentance for the sins of our forefathers, and after that I shall be baptised and the children too, and oh, Alaric, I love you so much—do, do, *do* be baptised too! Let them teach you—you don’t try to be teachable, you only try to find fault. For my sake—because I love you!”

She flung her arms round his neck and drooped her head on his breast. She could feel the strong beating of his heart and the rhythmic movement of his breath. An overwhelming sense of her need of his understanding swept over her.

“Alaric,” she murmured, “my dear, dear mate! We are so far away from England—you brought me here—you saved my life—I love you more than words can tell—for my sake——”

He pushed her away.

CHAPTER XI

ALARIC'S SICKNESS

ALARIC sat alone on the seashore, looking out over the unbroken expanse of water. He was the only person on the island not present at Eleuthera's baptism. From the farthest corner of the domain they had come, men, women and children. There were no criminals in the little community to be debarred by their own actions from mixing with their fellow men; no lunatics; no sick. If some of the aged were too feeble to walk, they would be carried. As for the babies in arms, they were always taken to church, and if they cried, their mothers brought them out, that was all. So it happened that all the people were at worship, and Alaric was alone.

He gazed out over the sea, and hated it. It was so blue, so vast, so unruffled, so impassive. Not a ship broke the smooth surface, not a cloud sent its shadow on the water. He looked up at the sky, loathing it. It too was blue and vast and impassive. How many hours had he not spent there watching for aircraft! Once or twice he had seen a 'plane floating like a dragonfly in the distance, but it had come and vanished again so swiftly that he hardly knew whether it was reality or hallucination. How sick he was of the changeless monotony of the scene! The bent rim of the horizon, the inverted bowl of the sky, the smooth white beach—day after day until he died he would have to stare at them with ever-increasing disgust.

He was homesick, terribly, terribly homesick. He thought of London, and the picture of it rose up before him so vividly that he caught his breath for the clearness of it. London—the great concrete buildings, the deep canyons of the streets where the moving platforms rolled on their majestic ceaseless way, north and south, east and west; the parks, trim and cared for; the Stadium with its shining tiers of seats and its crowds, its dear huge crowds; and the air above the city all whirring and alive with 'planes and moths and the giant air-liners that came in from the capitals of the world—how different from this still, lifeless sky where nothing stirred, nothing breathed, day in, day out.

Oh, but he was homesick! Bachelors' Buildings and his own room—how he longed for them. He loathed himself as he was now, unkempt and savage, his beard grown, his hair falling about his shoulders. He wanted to be back in Bachelors' Buildings, with his own electric shaving-apparatus, and the artificial sunlight, and the shower-bath with the indicator you set to

any temperature you liked, and the washing-box into which you flung your tunic and shorts at night to find them clean and warm and neatly folded the following morning.

Here he had to trudge up to the lake to wash his clothes. He had to comb his hair and beard with a rude bone comb to keep them from getting matted. He forgot that in England he had ever been bored or out of temper or baffled. Only remembering that there life was easy and ample and civilised, and here it was sordid and primitive, he flung himself face downwards on the sand and wept.

Presently he sat up again and considered the sky and sea once more. The thought struck him that the air was all vibrating with messages, could he but hear them. If only he had radio he could know what London was saying. London speaking to Berlin and Paris; Moscow, Prague, Vienna calling; Canberra and Capetown sending their messages to the world—the air alive with songs and music and messages, and he unable to hear! All the news that he wanted to know must have been racing and quivering around him, could he but have picked it up. News from Geneva—what had become of Manlius' mating-project? News from England—what were Parliament and the President doing? News from Africa—how was the Backward Races Commission getting on? Had his young brothers-in-law been playing air-polo? Who had won the International Air Races? Had anything new been invented? Had anyone any theories about what was wrong with modern Art? Oh, anything and everything he would listen-in to if only he had a chance!

And all the time the quiet sky, blue, so blue, so still, kept silence.

Alaric got up and began to walk about. His desire for England was unbearable. He had never in all his life experienced such pain and such utter loneliness and longing. Eleuthera did not in the least understand. His was a solitude which no human being could penetrate, a frantic yearning unshared by anyone. How it would end, he did not know. He would probably go out of his mind.

In the weeks that followed, his sickness for England grew into an obsession. By night all his dreams were of home, and when he woke, he wept that they were not true. He became incapable of work, and would leave his occupation to steal away to the shore and there wander up and down alone, wringing his hands or stretching his arms out seawards. Sometime he would talk to himself rapidly and incoherently; memories of England, memories of the green hills and pastures near Clare, memories of grey skies and soft winds and smoke-white clouds drifting across the milky blue. Then sleep left him, and desire for food, and one day he lay in his hammock and told Eleuthera he would not get up.

Trembling, she ran to Mary Adam. “Oh,” she cried all in a panic, “Alaric is ill! What ever shall I do?”

There were, it seemed, doctors on the island. Their skill was scarcely ever needed. Still, they had the knowledge of their craft, and maybe could help.

A doctor was sent for, and came. He laid his hand on Alaric’s head, and put his finger on his pulse.

“This sickness,” he said, “is not of the body, but of the mind. The patient must get up, bathe, dress and eat, and go and consult a soul-doctor.”

“What is a soul-doctor?” Eleuthera asked.

“It sometimes happens,” the doctor explained, “that, in spite of our careful education, the souls of our young people do not develop perfectly harmoniously. They experience difficulties in the spiritual life. More rarely still, grown men are similarly afflicted. We send them for treatment to soul-doctors. Your husband must consult one.”

“No,” said Alaric. “All I want is to be left alone. Please go away, everybody.”

They left him. When they had gone he got up, bathed, dressed and helped himself to food. He felt curiously weak and light in the head. Stumbling down to the shore, he sat and gazed out to sea. Pictures began to move before his eyes—London—the Essex ridge—clouds, grey clouds, black clouds, clouds all torn and dark and stormy. . . .

“Yes,” he said aloud. “I am going out of my mind. Do I want to?”

He wondered what it felt like to be mad. If one lost one’s sense of personal identity, it would certainly be the thing to do. If he ceased being himself, that intolerable longing for home would go too. Crash! What a liberation? Could one, though, be sure that the sense of identity really went? He would ask Eleuthera. He got up. To his surprise, Eleuthera was standing a few paces off.

“Alaric,” she said, “where are you going?”

He answered by another question. “When people are mad, do they still know they are themselves, or do they get freedom? I want to kill the part of me that thinks, and make it keep quiet.”

She faced him bravely. “Madmen are not free. They are shut up in their own minds and their own delusions, and cannot get away. You had better not think about such things.”

For a moment he stood silent, looking down at the water. Suppose he walked in, and waded seawards, deep, deep, further still, further, out towards

the horizon, until the water reached high, high above his head, till it closed over him, filling his mouth, his nostrils, shutting his eyes, shutting them fast so that they could not see the cruel blue sky any more, shutting them for ever; he would go into the water till it surged in his ears and drowned his thoughts, and at last there would be peace, peace, peace, for ever, for ever. . . .

"Death is better?" he said, looking questioningly at his mate.

Before she had time to reply, but when her startled eyes showed that she had guessed his intention, Alaric had sprung away from her, and was out in the sea, breasting the water with wild vigorous movements. She cried aloud to him to stop, and waded out after him.

"Alaric!" she cried. "Come back!"

"Death! Death!" he shouted. "How does one die?"

Suddenly his purpose seemed to fail him, and he stood, the water up to his shoulders, and drops gleaming on his long hair, staring at her.

"You are to come back at once," Eleuthera commanded, speaking sharply as one speaks to a naughty child. "Alaric, do as I tell you! Give me your hand!"

"How shall I die?" he moaned. "Help me."

"Don't talk such nonsense." She took his hand and tried to pull him shorewards. As she held him, she wondered whether it would not be better to let him go, and let Death lead him away. For if truly he were mad, what could she, Eleuthera, do? If there were no cure possible, death was indeed best. Then her instinct of love reasserted itself.

"Alaric," she repeated, "don't be so tiresome. Come back, when I tell you. We were going to see the doctor, and it's silly to have a bathe instead."

He was passive now, and followed her in complete docility. As they emerged, dripping, on the beach, she felt an impulse to hysterical laughter, and with difficulty restrained herself. It was no time, however, for an attack of nerves. She controlled herself, and, when the sun had dried their clothes, they walked together inland.

Alaric would not explain to the doctor what was the matter with him. "You talk," he said wearily to Eleuthera.

The doctor looked grave enough as Eleuthera proceeded. However, he would do his best, and prayers should be asked for Alaric in the churches. The patient had better come daily for a little while. Meanwhile he should not be left alone.

Alaric followed his wife back to the hut and sat listlessly while she prepared a meal. During the weeks that followed, she was to know that listlessness only too well. Some spring of vitality and of power seemed to have snapped in Alaric. He had become completely passive. He ate the food that was set before him, and came when Eleuthera told him to come. When, however, she asked him to help her at some task, he would look at her with eyes full of tears, shake his head and sit by mutely, with his arms folded. Nor could his children rouse him. He displayed neither pleasure nor annoyance at their caresses; indeed, he hardly seemed to notice that they were there.

Every day Eleuthera took him to the soul-doctor. He refused altogether to talk about himself and his troubles. While the doctor spoke, patiently expounding the Christian faith, God's guidance of his people, the growth of grace in the human soul, Alaric sat with folded arms and eyes downcast. Did he listen? Eleuthera did not know. She thought he liked to hear passages from the Gospels, but that may have been merely that the cadence pleased him. When she questioned him, he only answered, "Don't ask."

Sometimes she led him for long walks in the island. He came, but seemed to notice nothing. Only when she would have turned his footsteps to the shore, he said, "Not there."

There came days when he would not speak at all, and his face was expressionless like a mask. She questioned him and he did not answer, she kissed him and he neither responded nor repulsed her.

"Alaric," she said, "shall I go away?"

"No," he answered, rousing himself. "You are never to go."

"Why not? What is the good of my being here if you never speak to me?"

"I like crowds. I wish you were thousands and thousands of people."

"Then let us go and see some of our friends. They are always asking us."

"No. I shall not go."

"Why not?"

He did not answer.

One day the soul-doctor called Eleuthera aside. "I am afraid, my dear lady, I can do no more. Your husband is like the branch of a tree, severed from the parent trunk—he has cut himself off from God, and I am powerless to heal his sickness. As you see, he will make no effort. All we can do is to pray for him."

"Can't you think of anything else? Will he be like this always?"

“I cannot say. I have no experience of such cases. Are they frequent at home, do you know?”

“Of course, quite a lot of people ask for euthanasia in England,” Eleuthera replied. “I suppose that is what he would do if he were at home.”

The doctor thought for a while. Then his brow cleared. “I have an idea. A hundred years ago one of our great teachers suddenly became troubled in his soul. I do not know what manner of doubt or darkness afflicted him. He left his pupils and his family and went away alone to a peak on the north shore”—he raised his hand and pointed—“that way—you see—and kept fast and vigil there. They say God spoke to him on the mountain. Will you send your husband there?”

Alaric had stepped up and was listening. “What are you saying about me?”

The doctor repeated what he had said. “What you want,” he added, “is to resolve the conflict in your soul. You are as it were a ravaged battlefield between the forces of good and evil. You need to unify the divided self.”

Eleuthera looked doubtful. She thought what her husband wanted was to love God quite simply and, because he would then join with the islanders in worshipping Him, not feel lonely any more.

“What is there on the mountain?” Alaric asked.

“As far as I know, bare rock, and a spring of water. Nothing else.”

Alaric turned away. “Take me back to the hut, Eleuthera.”

Three days later he astonished her by saying, “You might as well take me to that mountain and leave me there. I want to see the spring of water.”

Glad enough to hear him express any wish, she confided her children to Mary Adam’s care, and told him she was ready.

As they walked, she noticed that he was less dejected. He made a few remarks about the fields they passed, called her attention to a fine goat poised on a rock, and pulled down a bough of a tree till the fruit was within her reach.

It was dusk when they reached the foot of the peak. The ground had been sloping up for a long while, and here the tree-line ceased.

“Now I must go on alone,” said Alaric.

She flung her arms round his neck. “Do you really want to? Shall I wait? How long will you be?”

“How can I tell? Do you suppose it looks beautiful—a spring, coming up out of the ground?”

“Very beautiful,” Eleuthera assured him, speaking to him as one speaks to a child. If only she could guess, even remotely, what was in his mind—his poor clouded mind. “Hadn’t I better come too?”

“No, thank you, dearest—my dearest mate! Eleuthera, have I been very tiresome lately?”

“Of course you haven’t.” She held him fast. “You know I love you—I could never, never find you tiresome. I want you to be quite well again, that is all.”

“Goodbye, dearest.”

He went into the dusk.

CHAPTER XII

THE VIGIL

ALARIC walked slowly up the peak. The air was cool and fresh, and his head felt clearer than it had done for many a long day. He rejoiced as he walked. It was good to be away from the soft sweetness of the lower air, to come far from the shore and the unforgettable blueness of sea and sky.

The moon was rising now and casting chill light on the rocks. The air had an edge on it, bracing and invigorating. Alaric felt strength return to his limbs and intelligence to his brain. He climbed alertly upwards, then stood still as he reached the top.

There in front of him, bubbling silently out of the rock, was the spring of water. It gushed up, rising out of the ground, pure and very cold, and ran away in half a dozen tiny rivulets gleaming in the moonlight. Alaric knelt down, made a cup of his joined hands, and drank. He bathed his forehead, and dipped water over his shoulders, shivering with pleasure at the icy trickle down his back. Looking round, he saw that the peak on which he stood was near the sea. A few yards to his right, the land broke away suddenly, and there was a sheer drop into the ocean. The water was black as the depths of a well, in the black shadow of the cliff. It would be the easiest thing in the world to slip swiftly down. . . .

He turned and looked further. It was good to be high up, dominating an expanse. He could see that the lake lay far below him, its perpetual cloud silvered by the moon. Beyond, the land curved and rose and fell again, and in the distance a light twinkled and the shore shone pale in pale moonshine.

Alaric sat down, clasped his knees with his hands, and composed himself to think. He felt perfectly lucid now, and could see his task clearly before him. He was a son of The Age of Reason. He would, by means of Reason, clearly examine the claims of the deity in whom these islanders—yes, happy people, he knew they were happy, though he had denied it—believed. If Reason decided that God existed, he would go down and join them in their worship. If there was no God, he would take euthanasia in the sea.

It was not, however, so easy to think. The moon here seemed different from the moon at home. It was larger, brighter, clearer, not pallid and dead, but strangely luminous. The stars were different. In England the stars seemed to stud the vault of sky; here they hung down poised in deep-blue

infinite space. In England they were still and far-off; here they bent over the world, glowing and sparkling. How could he think?

His thoughts drifted away. He found himself recalling Geneva, and how he had taken heroline. If he had some of the drug here now, how eagerly he would swallow another dose! Why had he done it then? Why would he do it again if he had the chance? He had known the consequences. Heroline aroused passion, first natural, then perverse. Its end was madness and death. Knowing this, why had he taken it? Why? Curiosity. The desire for a new sensation. Weakness. Why had he never told Eleuthera? Because he could not bear her to see him as the weakling he knew himself to be.

Then he saw the truth. He saw the picture of himself that he had always believed in: Alaric the proud; Alaric, high-born and well bred, noble, intelligent, self-sufficient, beautiful, strong of body and of will; Alaric godlike, owning no master save himself. And, by the side, Alaric the weakling, who knew no force strong enough to save him from his own weakness.

Fear gripped him. He flung himself on the ground and covered his eyes, while a shiver trembled through his frame. He was being judged. Something was condemning him. He feared exceedingly.

He felt that he had transgressed by his arrogance, not the arbitrary laws of a capricious deity, but the fundamental harmony and beauty of the universe. Now he appeared to himself as a cancer on the body-politic, a few poor cells who, pushing their way to separate growth, had become monstrous and malignant. What right had he to live at all?

As if trembling with him, the earth on which he lay shuddered and groaned and rocked. The fire imprisoned underground sent long tremors through the heaving ground. Looking round, startled, he saw that the stream was changed into a fountain. No longer bubbling up a few inches only, it flung its spray high into the air.

As he gazed at the beauty of it, his terror passed. The spray was silvered by the moonlight; there was silver on the sea, and silver between the shadows on the land. Such silence as he had never known or dreamed of was brooding over the world. His consciousness narrowed. Weak he might be, but, anyway, he was tiny. So small was he that an angry deity, filling the wide spaces of the night with offended majesty, would never notice so puny a creature.

Anyway, he might look—look and wonder. Alaric held his breath and gazed up at the beauty of the sky. Surely the universe held its breath too before such loveliness. Who could so gaze and not adore?

He bethought himself, with sudden insight, of the distorted demi-god he had disbelieved in. All these years he had disbelieved in a God who presided over the strife of factions, who connived at war and oppression, who was gratified by ecclesiastical vanity and academic word-twisting. Against this he had fought—and, so he told himself, most rightly fought. But such a God had never existed. Here, alone with the night, he could feel the presence of a very different Deity.

The stars had swung round, the moon was sailing lower in the sky. Alaric's reaction to beauty intensified. Could a fortuitous conglomeration of matter have wrought that starry loveliness out of atoms and electrons? Some master artist was at work, still poising the stars and sending the suns spinning on their way. The same artist who had given him, Alaric, eyes to see.

Could it be, he wondered, that the world was not, as he had passionately disbelieved, ruled over by some monstrous tyrant-king, but that its very basis was spiritual? Spirit is God. Beauty is God. Inner integrity is God. He had sinned when he had failed to conform to his own inner standard of purity and right. He had not sinned when he had refused to believe.

Ah, that was it! He sprang to his feet. Now he knew, now he saw. No mean conception of the deity, perverted by the misapprehension of stupid men, should claim his allegiance. Yet there existed a God whom he could adore, a God inescapable, universal, infinitely majestic and adorable, before whom he would bend the knee. Oh, if he had not sinned too deeply—if he had not fallen too low! If there had remained the great noble Alaric of his illusions and not the puny creature that he really was! Must he shrivel like a leaf in the fire of God's exceeding greatness? Now that he dimly felt the infinite God, how dared he approach Him? Small, ugly, perverse, how should he endure the blazing light of God's perfection?

Alaric looked towards the fountain, and there, where the spray caught the moonlight, was the figure of a man. A man with face infinitely tender and strong, stern and yet full of love. He held out two scarred hands to Alaric. At the same time, words came into Alaric's ears. Hearing them, he knelt, bowed his head and listened:

"A certain man had two sons."

The sound was crystal-clear, and yet Alaric knew that he only heard it with the ears of his soul. Like the cool sweet waters of the spring to his parched throat, the words flowed to his understanding. Fear passed, abasement and shame, self-consciousness vanished. Here beside him stood

Jesus, He who carried the eternal into the temporal and brought the mysteries of infinity into the grasp of all who wanted to know God.

"When he was yet afar off . . ."

Alaric had stood afar off, and God had come to meet him. Alaric must leave off spending the substance with the Self of his own imagination, and, knowing himself for the poor prodigal that he was, stumble back to his Father's house.

Suddenly a great chasm seemed to break the eastern sky, and through the crack came the sun. Long streams of light like trumpet-sounds heralded his approach. Stars paled, the moon whitened, and over the land faint colours flushed into sight.

Alaric still knelt by the spring. His ear caught its faint, faint singing sound as it rose from the earth and fell again in a shadowy cloud of spray. Here he, Alaric, would be baptised, and the priest should be none other than the Son of God. He bent his head and the cool drops touched his brow. The soundless words spoke in his heart.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

Beside him Alaric could still feel the presence of the Christ, though his eyes no longer distinguished His form.

"Stay with me," he prayed, "O Son of God, even unto the end. . . ."

When he came down from the peak, he found Eleuthera waiting where he had left her. She was asleep, her long hair drifted across her cheek. He stood looking down at her, thinking how beautiful was a woman's hair. She stirred, sat up quickly, and pushed her hair back from her forehead.

"Have I been asleep? I'm sorry! I'm hardly awake yet. I meant to watch and pray, and then just before dawn I must have gone to sleep. How stupid of me!"

She sprang lightly to her feet and came to put her arms round him. "Are you better?"

"Much better. Only very hungry."

He linked his arm in hers and they went homewards together.

Neither then nor at any other time did Alaric say much about his night on the peak. The only remark he made was: "I expect the revolutionaries got hold of the wrong end of the stick about religion in the Age of Unreason. I daresay a lot of it wasn't half as bad as it was painted. Anyway, the best

thing is not to pay much attention to propaganda on either side, but to think things out for oneself. Don't you agree?"

Eleuthera did, most enthusiastically. She would have agreed to anything within reason, when she had him restored to her sane and well. Now he was ready to work, and play with his children, and make new friends, and laugh, and enjoy life. She was well content to ask no questions.

Something told her, none the less, that his experience of God was very different from her own, and that through sharper pain he had gained realisation of some aspect of truth into which she could not enter. She had never been aware of any obstacle between her and God. The words of the old ritual speaking of sin and estrangement had puzzled her, it is true, but worship was as natural to her as breathing. If she had asked the soul-doctor, he would have said that she belonged to the "once-born," and Alaric to the "twice-born," but she never thought of asking.

Nor did Alaric speak to the soul-doctor of his religious experience. He said briefly, "Thanks, I'm feeling much better. I've been baptised, and I should like to be confirmed as soon as possible. Only don't let anyone make a fuss about it, that's all. Everyone has been frightfully kind while I was ill, and now the less said about me and the silly ass I've been, the better."

So the islanders, like the true gentlemen that they were, kept their rejoicing to themselves.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AEROPLANE

Of course, the ’plane in which Alaric and his family had landed on the island had created an enormous amount of interest among the inhabitants. None of them had ever set eyes on any form of machine, though their records contained accounts of many of the machines of two hundred years ago. The professors of the University met together to decide what must be done with this unique and priceless specimen of human ingenuity. It was carefully pushed under some trees, a roof was woven to protect it from the rains, and there it stood.

Often when Alaric was working in the fields he would see a professor with a group of eager students round him, lecturing on the ’plane, or visitors from the other end of the island approaching to view it. He was sorry that he himself was so ignorant of its mechanism that he could explain nothing of the principles on which it worked. All he knew was that you did so—and so—and so—and it went. Professor Thomson, the senior Science Professor, was very anxious to take it to pieces and examine its structure more closely. This, however, Alaric would not allow, for he felt quite sure that if it were dismantled, no one would have the skill to put it together again. The professor and his students were obliged, therefore, to content themselves with making elaborate measurements and executing palm-leaf drawings to scale. And this, fortunately, took them a very long time.

Meanwhile Alaric had other preoccupations. One of the first results of his experiences on the mountain peak had been the liberation of his creative energy. Ever since he could remember, he had longed to excel in creative art, but he had never succeeded in producing anything but the most feeble pictures or poems or tunes, and that only after great and tedious exertion. Now he had something to express, and the urgency of the vision forged its own medium. First of all he wished to represent in painting the figure he had seen beside him on the hill-top. Provided with such colours as the islanders were wont to use in their frescoes, he painted on the north wall of the church-cave the most beautiful picture among many works of art. True, the face of Christ was so lightly sketched that the exact features could not be clearly distinguished, but there was something of radiance about it which suggested what no human brush could delineate. By Jesus knelt Alaric.

Poetry, too, came easy to him now. While he worked, the words used to sing themselves in his head, so that when he transcribed them he felt less that he had made them up than that he was taking them down from dictation. Sometimes the words brought their own music with them, and then he had a new song to sing.

The islanders had the custom of meeting together for story-telling. Writing down their tales on palm leaves took a long time, and so they had revived the art of the troubadour. Sometimes the tales were told in verse, sometimes in prose. They might be traditional, or made up as the author went along. Alaric soon became known as the foremost storyteller of the island. He could tell of the past, or of contemporary England, or, flinging his imagination forward, speak of the world as it would be in years to come.

Now Eleuthera's happiness was perfect. Now she and Alaric understood each other as never before. The days were hardly long enough for all that there was to do in them. There was the pleasant work of every day to be performed, lectures to be given and attended, new friendships to be formed, and, in everything and through everything, God to be worshipped and adored.

In life these gracious interludes come, but they do not remain.

One fair warm evening, Alaric was sitting by his hut transcribing a poem, when Eleuthera came up softly.

"I've got some news for you."

"Good news?"

"I hardly know. The professors think they have succeeded in making some spirit for the 'plane. They are bringing a specimen along now, and they want to arrange a time for you to try it."

Alaric rose and faced her. "If they have succeeded—if I can fly the 'plane again—you know what I must do?"

"You mean you will go away and leave me? Oh, Alaric"—she flung herself into his arms "take me, too!"

As she lay against him, the curve of her body showed plainly that she was with child.

"Better not," he said, gently caressing her, "better not."

"Are you quite sure you must go—that it is right to go? It's frightfully nice here, isn't it? I think the world was too big for me before. I like a little world like this best, don't you?"

"No," he answered decidedly, "I like it big. The bigger the better. It isn't that, though. You know that if I can go, I've got to. What's the good of

talking?”

She sighed, a tiny sigh. “I know you’re right. But perhaps the ’plane won’t go. I wish it would wait till after the baby is born.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of the two professors, Thomson and James. These two scientists were much excited over their discovery. All the summer they had been experimenting, and now they thought they had achieved. One of them offered Alaric a gourd full of some liquid, and asked his opinion on it.

“I’m afraid I haven’t the foggiest,” he said. “The only thing is to try it in the ’plane.”

“Certainly,” agreed one of the professors briskly. “The empirical test will be the most satisfactory. At what hour shall we say?”

“Any time you like. It is all the same to me.”

“Shall we say two hours after sunrise? Will you allow my students to be present?”

“Anybody you like,” Alaric replied amiably, “as long as they keep out of the way if I get the thing going.”

The professors shook hands and departed. If they were a trifle disappointed at his lack of curiosity in the nature of their experiments, they did not say so.

Someone must have rumoured it abroad that a test-flight was to be made, for the following morning, at the appointed hour, a crowd of people had gathered to see the attempt. Half the inhabitants of the settlement of Chesterton were there, and every one of Alaric’s friends. The two professors, excited and a little nervous, were wandering about exchanging remarks with their students. Nor was the vice-chancellor absent.

Alaric had put on his white tunic and shorts, garments which he now rarely wore, preferring to dress as did the islanders. He lifted a lid in the ’plane, took out his airman’s coat, which had lain there forgotten, and donned it. Eleuthera, holding a child by each hand, smiled at him, a smile full of memories of their flight together.

“Better push her out into the open,” Alaric suggested. “I can’t take off properly here.”

Everyone wanted to push. However, the professors and the students claimed their right, and slowly the ’plane emerged from her rustic hangar and out on to the grass.

“You’ve filled her up?” Alaric asked.

“Yes, yes,” chorused the two professors in a breath.

Alaric climbed in, waved back the crowd, opened the throttle, pulled the lever. There was a tense silence.

Nothing happened.

“Give her a shove!” shouted Alaric.

A shove was given. The ’plane moved a few yards and stopped again.

“Has she been oiled?” Eleuthera asked.

“Anyone oiled her?” repeated Alaric.

No. No one had thought about oil. The only oil the island possessed was a crude form of coco-nut oil. Would that do? Should the students fetch some?

“Half a sec,” cried Alaric, “there may be some left in here!”

There was. He got out slowly and proceeded to oil his machine. Everybody watched him.

“What’s daddy doing?” asked Phroso.

“Giving the pretty ’plane its dinner,” said Eleuthera.

“I’ll try her where I can get a bit downhill,” Alaric suggested. “Give her another shove please.”

She was moved, the crowd following close in her wake. Alaric climbed in again.

“Now then!”

This time there was no hesitation. Like a racehorse at the start, she plunged forward, glided along the ground, rose, soared. A great cry of wonder and admiration came spontaneously from the watchers. They raised their arms in the air, shouted, leapt high in their excitement. The ’plane swept over the lake, then, piercing the cloud above it, was hidden from view. Only the whirr of the propeller could be heard aloft.

“Oh,” exclaimed Mary Adam to Eleuthera, “will he ever come back?”

She had hardly spoken, when the ’plane reappeared, floating birdlike through the cloud. It seemed to hover lightly for a moment, then alighted.

Now everyone crowded round Alaric, patting him on the shoulder, shaking him by the hand.

“This is a great day!” said one of the professors to the other. “This is a great day for Science!”

Eleuthera felt as if her heart turned to ice within her. Now Alaric would go away. He would go and bear the tidings of religion back to England. It was right that he should go, and she, Eleuthera, who loved him, must hide her own pain, and wish him godspeed.

Before nightfall it was known all over the island that the ’plane had recovered its power of flight, and that its owner intended to return to England forthwith.

At once began an eager procession of people to the vice-chancellor, all asking if they might be Mr. Alaric’s companion on his journey home. Everyone was filled with missionary zeal. The thought of England, of England without God, of lands and continents deprived of religion, suddenly filled the mind of each one. Hitherto the conception of the world outside the island had been dim and vague, belonging rather to two hundred years ago than to the present. All at once the flight of the ’plane had brought it within reach. Their homeland in need, the world sorrowing because it knew not Christ—no wonder every able-bodied man and woman in the island, and many of the children too, begged to be allowed to make the adventure with Alaric. It may be that a secular spirit of curiosity was interwoven with their higher thoughts. Be that as it may, the vice-chancellor was fairly bewildered by the number of applicants, and by the excellent qualifications that they one and all seemed to possess.

Being a methodical old gentleman, he made out a short list, and sent for Alaric to come and give the final verdict.

“I understand,” he observed, “that you consider it your duty to proceed home shortly. A most commendable resolve. You will forgive me, my dear sir, if I say that it does you great credit.”

Alaric bowed. He liked Dr. Archer, though he could not help being amused at his old-fashioned ceremonious manner.

“Pray be seated. May I offer you some refreshment?”

Alaric declined. Not expecting to be bored, he did not feel hungry. He remembered the first time he had come to see the vice-chancellor, and reflected that he had really been rather rude, munching away all the time his host was talking.

“As you are doubtless aware,” proceeded the vice-chancellor, “a number of our people are exceedingly anxious to accompany you. They are filled with concern for the spiritual deadness of our fatherland, and would gladly help you in your noble task of infusing life into the dry bones. It is impossible to accept all the offers. I have here a list of six whom I consider the most suitable. Possibly I had better withhold their names until you have made your selection.”

Receiving the bow that he expected, Dr. Archer continued. “The first candidate, if I may so call him, is one of our Free Church brethren. He has a very remarkable gift of oratory, very remarkable. His sermons are

admittedly the most eloquent that are now being preached. Our own people make a point of going to Chesterton at least once a year to hear him. No one comes away without having learned a new truth or having fresh light shed on an old one. His ministrations are equally acceptable to old and young. His personal character is all that can be desired. Modest, warm-hearted, generous, sincere, he is a fine example of what a leader of Christian thought should be. I cannot help feeling that he would serve admirably to commend our precious faith to those at home."

Here he paused, as if expecting some comment from Alaric. His guest, however, made no remark, and he resumed.

"Next on my list is our foremost educationalist. To him we owe the admirable system of instruction in use in our community. He believes that the young mind will, if rightly trained, grow naturally into the knowledge of God and of the truths of religion, and that the unfolding of the spirit should take place *pari passu* with the expanding of the intelligence. He is an expert in all problems connected with adolescence. His system also covers the wide field of adult education. I cannot speak too highly of his skill, his patience, his insight. A more gifted missionary would be hard to find." Again he paused, but Alaric said nothing.

"Our third candidate is of a different type altogether. Some twenty years ago, when he was a young and headstrong man, he conceived a dissatisfaction with the existing order of things in our community, and an ambition to be king. For some time it looked as though peace had departed from us. Two parties arose, the one siding with him, the other against. There appears to be no doubt that he himself was actuated solely by desire for personal distinction, and that his so-called reforms were of a very paltry nature. The vice-chancellor then in office expostulated with him, but in vain. Suddenly he was laid low by an act of God. In his sickness, the Lord spoke to him and he became a changed man. When he arose from his sick-bed he acknowledged his error and, in order that his repentance might be manifest, claimed the lowest and meanest tasks in the island as his share. In this course he has persisted for nearly twenty years, exhibiting in his character all the fruits of the Spirit. As you will be compelled to utter a call to repentance to our brethren at home, the presence of this brand snatched from the burning might be of inestimable value."

Still Alaric did not speak, and the vice-chancellor resumed his theme. "Fourth on my list is a much younger man, the most brilliant of our university students. Tall, personable, intelligent, he is conspicuous alike for bodily and intellectual pre-eminence. Wherever there is a hazardous task to be undertaken or a difficult question to be solved, he is sure to be found in

the front rank. Nor has he ever aroused the jealousy of his companions. His is the genius for friendship, the affection which irresistibly evokes affection in return. Such a man, wholly dedicated as he is to the service of Our Lord, might, I think, make a particularly strong appeal to his English contemporaries."

Glancing a moment at the list in his hand, he continued: "I have also here the names of two women, both of them well on in years. The first is a widow. An accident deprived her of her husband and her only child in the same hour. Out of her grief she took the strength to soothe the sorrows of others. It is she who attends on the dying, and by her loving ministrations makes their passing easy. She binds up the stricken heart of the mourners. To her is revealed the knowledge of the mystery contained in those words: 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.' She is possessed of courage proof against all adversity. I could wish no man a more sure companion.

"The other woman is one whom we believe to be peculiarly loved of the Lord. As you know, there are a few of our community who do not wish to enter into the ordinary obligations of family life, but prefer to dedicate themselves wholly to religion. Bound by no vows, and free at any time to relinquish the existence they have chosen, they dwell apart, praying and waiting upon God. It is but natural that they should develop a spiritual insight, a delicacy of perception far above the normal. Their experiences enrich the whole community. Through them we have learned much supernatural truth of which we should otherwise have been ignorant. You could take with you no more convincing messenger than one who dwells continually in the presence of God."

Here he stopped and looked at Alaric for a decision. Alaric answered him courteously, but without hesitation.

"I am extremely sorry, sir, that you have had all this trouble, but the fact is, I have decided to go alone."

Dr. Archer looked very much astonished. "May I enquire your reasons?"

"Of course—they are simplicity itself. First of all, either I arrive or I do not arrive. That is quite clear, isn't it? If I do not arrive, I had much better crash by myself, hadn't I? You see that. Yes. Well, suppose I arrive—I either fail or I succeed. If I fail, I get euthanasia, and there again, there is no particular point in its happening to two of us. If, on the other hand, the public is interested in what I have to tell them about you, they will be over here in no time—whole fleets of big air-liners full of passengers. I can give them a few indications as to where the island lies, and they will soon find

you out. You'll have the teleflick operators here and all the rest of the blessings of modern civilisation. You'll need all your strength of mind to stand up against it."

The vice-chancellor stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe. Maybe. Very possibly you are right. You prefer therefore to take no one with you?"

"I will, if you will allow it," said Alaric, "take two things with me. A New Testament and a cross. Then I shan't forget what I came for."

Alaric returned to his mate and briefly reported his interview. "I am rather afraid," he added, "that they want to give me a fine send-off, farewell services and banquets and all that sort of thing, and I don't think I could stand it, though they are such dears. How would it be if I slipped off quietly to-morrow morning, just before dawn?"

"So soon?" she murmured.

"Well, it's better to get it over, isn't it? I daresay I shall be back in a day or two. Let's think how happy we've been lately. Haven't we had the joy of a lifetime in a few short weeks?"

"May I come and see you off?"

"I don't want you climbing up the cliff and getting tired. I'll tell you what you may do, though. Just go down on the shore and wave to me as I pass. That will give me something beautiful to remember."

So it happened that Eleuthera stood on the shore just as the first pale light was stirring in the east. The sea at her feet was very calm, and there was no breath of wind to move the great fronds of the palm trees. Nature was still asleep, water and beach and cliff untroubled and at rest. Dreamily she wandered there, lulled by the soft plash of baby waves at her feet. Everything was so quiet that her pain seemed hushed into stillness too.

Suddenly the whirr of the 'plane behind and above her. She turned swiftly. It swept down, passed so close that she could feel the rush of wind against her cheek, then skimmed out over the sea and set its course upwards and away to the distant West. She waved, and called, but surely he had swept already out of hearing. Straining her eyes, she watched. A long ray of sunlight shot swiftly out from behind the land. The 'plane, silvered for one moment with dazzling light, gleamed in the distance, shone, and vanished out of sight.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW ALARIC CAME HOME

CAMBRIDGE has changed extraordinarily little since 1950. Of course, the revolutionaries wrecked all the churches in the town, and left not one stone of the college chapels standing. They blew up some of the fine houses in Grange Road as being the homes of the capitalists, and destroyed half the region beyond Mill Road Bridge as unfit for human habitation. After the Great Pestilence and the consequent decrease of the population, little rebuilding was needed. The gardens of the big houses were taken for playing-fields; and where the poor quarters of the town had stood, the country surged back again and meadows replaced the dreary streets.

Though the names of the colleges are changed, the buildings stand unaltered. King's and Trinity, with ugly gaps where the chapels stood, are recognisable as President's and Lenin. Corday was once Corpus Christi; John Baronoffski's, named for the hero of '51, and formerly St. John's, is recognisable as John's. The grey bridges still span the immortal river, the willows dip their leaves in its green waters; at nightfall the iron gates leading to the Backs clang to, and the sound of bells is heard, ringing to hall if no longer to chapel. What if the men and girls wear white gowns now instead of black, and both sexes alike are housed in the same colleges. The professors still drone their lectures in the same way, class lists are still posted up on the Senate House wall, and though the vice-chancellor mumbles: "In the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," instead of "*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*," to the kneeling candidate for degrees, no one hears and so no one is any the wiser.

Yet it was to Cambridge that Alaric wished to bring his message. London was too vast, too apathetic, too amorphous. Mere *vis inertiae* could suffocate the gospel he had to deliver. In London everyone's mind was full of their own prejudices, their own sorrows, their own boredom. In Cambridge, if anywhere, there was youth and an open mind to be found. In a university town, even nowadays, some men may exist who hope and dream and aspire.

It was a golden afternoon in mid-October when Alaric sailed up from the south and hovered over the town. All the trees in the Backs were glowing gold and russet, and the creepers stained the grey buildings with crimson and fire. A bright mist marked the channel of the river, spreading out here

and there over the fields and the courts, and rising into golden haze where the sun caught it.

The men and girls were coming back from their games. Some hurrying in by moth from the golf courses at Royston or Mildenhall, gathering from afar as rooks gather at nightfall in the elms, some plodding back from the football or hockey grounds, some wandering in from the river. Doubtless few of them would have taken exercise unless they had been obliged, but the Professor of Physical Hygiene was more obeyed and more respected than any of the other professors. And so, having rowed or run or played in some fashion or other, they returned not too dissatisfied with themselves and life in general, with the prospect of hot baths before them, and an excellent dinner in hall.

Alaric alighted in the college aviation-ground across the other side of the Backs, and walked slowly up the Avenue and over the bridge. The sight of the autumn glory of the trees, the familiar curve of the river as it passed silently by John's, the willows bending over the stream, gave him a thrill of intimate delight such as only the exile knows. He paused on the bridge to savour the poignant sweetness of the emotion. In the few moments that he stood there, he seemed to experience an eternity of delight. Turning, he looked up-stream, gazed at the bridges, the gardens, the massive outlines of the colleges growing blacker as the light faded. There were wisps of mist trailing round them now, touching them with an eerie beauty. Somewhere a pigeon cooed, a bell rang a mellow note—then silence. Alaric went on through his college and came out into the great court.

It was just as he remembered it. Late geraniums still clustered round the fountain, the grass glowed like green fire, and there was something brooding and haunted and serene about the space between wall and wall. The buildings looked as if they knew secrets that they would not tell, and as though they were waiting for some unavowed consummation. Wiser than the ephemeral generations of men, they knew, and they bided their time.

Alaric walked briskly along the cobbled path and came and stood where the chapel had once been. He was aware that he made an odd figure there, with his long hair and streaming beard, but dressed like all his contemporaries in white tunic and shorts. He bore with him a wooden cross, a foot or two taller than his head. Holding this firmly in one hand, and a book in the other, he leaned against the wall and began to read.

Presently, as he expected, a small knot of students began to gather round him.

"Hi, you!" shouted one of them. "What are you doing here?"

“If you want to know,” returned Alaric, placidly, “I was waiting for someone to ask me that question. Thanks so much.”

There was a laugh, and a girl said, “What’s the book?”

“Splendid!” cried Alaric. “That’s the next question I was waiting for. Anyone got another ready?”

A pretty, boyish-looking girl stepped up, elbowing her way through the crowd. “I say, Alaric!” she called. “What in the wide world are you doing here?” She turned to the others. “It’s the President’s eldest son—my half-brother. I say, Alaric, my name’s Erica, and I’m the daughter of the President’s youngest mate. You don’t know me, but I know you. You used to edit the *Æsthetic*, and it’s jolly well gone to pot since you quit. I say, what do you wear your hair like that for? Hadn’t you better go for voluntary at a mental clinic?”

“Not at all,” said Alaric. “My hair is long because I have been spending my vac. at a place where there was nothing to cut it with. Will anyone offer me a hair-cut and shave and a meal, and I’ll tell you my adventures afterwards.”

“Right-o,” cried the girl, in her loud, clear voice. “I’ll cut your hair myself, and—” she looked round—“Boris, your room’s next mine—may he come in and get a shave? Yes? Good! Let’s have hall in my room—otherwise you can’t hear yourself speak. D’you want a guest-room and stay the night? Rollo,”—she selected another undergraduate—“say Erica wants a guest-room for a friend. You needn’t say who it is. Come along. D’you want this funny old stick, Alaric?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I brought it along to remind me of something, like tying a knot in one’s hankie.”

“Right-o. Come along. Everyone come round to my room after hall for coffee, and listen to Alaric’s adventures. Fancy anyone having adventures nowadays! I thought they were all used up!”

Alaric was extremely pleased to find himself clipped and shaved once more. He keenly disliked looking ridiculous. It was comparatively easy to face martyrdom, but it was oddly hard to arrive in Cambridge looking a figure of fun. Well, that ordeal was over, anyhow!

He enjoyed his meal enormously. Erica and half a dozen undergraduates shared it with him. In contrast with the islanders they had no manners; their speech was cynical, and often coarse. They had, none of them, apparently, any ambitions or any idea of what they would do when they left college. However, they were friendly—that was the great matter; and they were eager to hear anything which promised a new sensation.

Hall over, the room began to fill up. Some of the students sat on the table, some on the chairs and sofa, and the majority on the floor. Erica brought out a flask of coffee essence and filled the cups with hot milk from the tap.

"It's rather nasty like that," she explained cheerfully, "but less trouble than trying to make it."

"In a place like this," grumbled one of the men, "there ought to be coffee laid on. I know a fellow who has a dozen different kinds of drinks laid on."

"Shut up," murmured several voices, "you're never satisfied."

There were various shufflings and whisperings, and the small audience subsided into attention. Alaric knew exactly what he wanted to say. His mate's ritual-book, the flight, the island and its organisation, his own unhappiness and illness, his vision on the mountain, the aeroplane, his return.

When he had finished, there was silence for a few minutes. Then Erica cried noisily: "Well, if the President hears of this, Alaric, he'll give you what for! Don't tell anyone, you people—I mean, not the dons, or let the radio correspondent get hold of it."

The men and girls looked at each other, and, one by one, or in twos and threes, began to slip away, until at last only Erica was left. She sat on the edge of the table, swinging a graceful leg and staring at Alaric.

"Jolly lucky to have adventures like that!" she commented. "I wish I could. It's so boring—the sort of feeling of everything being used up."

"What is used up?" Alaric asked gently.

"Oh, everything. Everything's been felt before, and said before, and done before. You can't live in a new way or think in a new way or anything. It's all so stale. We're all born with fine sets of teeth and nothing to chew."

Alaric did not smile, the girl was too much in earnest. "What about devotion and self-sacrifice and worship?" he suggested. "They aren't used up. And God? If God is infinite, *He* can't be used up. My friends in the other Cambridge didn't feel the way you do, though the island was so small."

"Didn't they?" she asked wistfully. "I wish I could have adventures like you, Alaric."

He was inexperienced in the direction of souls, and for a moment did not know what to say. However, she went on. "Perhaps you understand—I can't talk about it to the others. It's the feeling of having a pretty decent brain and a strong body and heaps of energy and there being nothing in the least interesting that one wants to do. We don't want any new sort of 'planes or

submarines, or new kinds of things to eat or burn or wear. Things have sort of stopped. Fancy being really keen on anything! It must be too frightfully jolly for words."

"Couldn't you be keen on what I'm keen on?" Alaric asked. "Would you like to read the book I brought? I'll show you where to begin."

She sprang down lightly from the table, stretched out her hand and took it. "Do you really in your heart of hearts think it is *true*? Swear by the Revolution!"

Disdaining the conventional oath, he assured her that it was true.

"You think," she pursued, "that there is really a huge sort of something big and friendly and sort of unknown all round us."

"You can imagine the air all full of radio messages, can't you, and how when I was on the island I couldn't hear one of them, and how hateful it felt —I told you——"

"Yes?" she nodded, fixing her intelligent eyes on his face.

"Well, you take that book of mine and go and tune in to God. Then you'll begin to find out what you've been missing. Things aren't used up—they've hardly begun."

Erica held the book close. "Good-night, now, Alaric. You'd better go to bed. We haven't sleeping-balconies yet, but it's all right if you turn on the fresh air—see, here is the indicator and you press the button like that. Do you like a lot of air? I like a huge draught."

For the next three days Alaric was kept very busy. The news that he would talk to anyone about his adventures had been whispered throughout the university, and all the undergraduates wanted to hear. Sometimes he spoke to small groups of them in their rooms, sometimes he paced up and down by the river with one or two. They made extraordinarily few comments, for the ideas that he presented to them were almost too unfamiliar for them to grasp. Still, he saw that they listened, and he was almost sure that some of them understood.

On the afternoon of the third day, he happened to be alone for a moment in the room that had temporarily been put at his disposal, when the door opened and Manlius walked in.

"Big Brother!" cried Alaric in delight. "Good man! How in the world did you know where I was?"

"You did not hear the interesting account of yourself on this morning's radio news? Half the world knows where you are."

“Great Bernard Shaw!” exclaimed Alaric. “I forgot all about listening-in. We got out of the way of it in the island. What a joke. So I’m an International Celebrity, am I?”

“I’ll tell you what you are,” returned Manlius very gravely and sadly: “you are *under observation*.”

“So I should have guessed.”

“You take it with great sang-froid.”

Alaric began to laugh. “Dear Big Brother, you still use your funny little French tags, except when you get excited, and then you talk real Anglo-Saxon. Do you still say ‘Exactly’? My father says ‘Exactly,’ too. Did you catch it from him or he from you? I say ‘Exactly,’ too when I am in a nasty mood. A while back when I quarrelled with Eleuthera, I caught myself saying ‘Exactly,’ and it gave me quite a shock, it sounded so exactly like Big Brother when he is cross. Do say ‘Exactly’—I should so like to hear you.”

“Alaric,” said Manlius, “is this a moment for idle chatter? I came here not to listen to your remarks about my English, but to tell you that you are under observation.”

“Well,” returned Alaric. “I don’t see that I can do anything. I knew I should be. I’ve had three days for intensive propaganda, and I flatter myself I’ve made the best use of my time. If the President likes to send his eldest son to a better world, I can’t stop him. I don’t agree with him. I think it’s a pity, but—there you are!”

Manlius watched him admiringly. It was not mere bravado that made Alaric speak thus. He leaned forward across the table and spoke very earnestly and with more emotion than Alaric had ever seen him display. “Little Brother! If you will go to your ’plane now and slip away quietly, I can guarantee you a few hours’ start. Take my advice and go.”

Alaric shook his head, smiling a little.

“Otherwise,” said Manlius, “you must come with me to the Residence. The President wishes to see you at once. I came in one of his ’planes.”

“Poor old Big Brother! I know you hate ’planes. What a shame they wouldn’t let you come in your old tin lizzie. Well, how is the President?”

“Alaric, I wish you would take my advice.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll tell you the whole story if you like, but it will take time. How did you say my father was?”

Manlius did not press his suggestion further. “Your father is an amazing man,” he said. “He heard that the Skoutchniki were making great progress in the Dominions, and that there was a perfect epidemic of voluntary euthanasia, so he’s just been on a vast tour all through the Empire to try and stop it.”

“Succeeded?” asked Alaric.

“For the time being, yes. His personal prestige stands very high. I doubt, though, whether the impression will be lasting.”

“Exactly,” said Alaric. Then he laughed. “Didn’t I say ‘Exactly’ nicely? There was a world of meaning in it.”

“What was the world of meaning?”

Alaric rose. “That life is meaningless without God, and only the knowledge of Him through Our Lord Jesus Christ can give it value. There you are, Big Brother. You asked for it, and you’ve got it. Now let’s go and see my respected father.”

CHAPTER XV

MANLIUS DECIDES

THE lights of London from the air! The four great beacons, marking the boundaries north, south, east and west—great steel towers flinging their rays like trumpet-blasts of light into the night sky. The gliding lights of the air-liners as they sailed in from the continents of the world. The quick flashes of the moths, five tiny green lamps, tossed this way and that, like will o' the wisps above a swamp. The dull red fore-and-aft lights of the airbuses, changing to dull blue when the airship moors. The steady glow of the quartz-lamps arching the moving roadways in the deep street-cuttings. The radiance of thousands of windows through which the sunlight pours outwards. And then, aloof, quiet, remote, the pale October moon.

All these Alaric saw, and marked with great delight, as he flew from Cambridge to London in the President's 'plane.

"You must go up alone," said Manlius, when they landed in front of the Residence.

The President was in his study. He had turned the sunlight off to quarter-power, and stood with his back to it, so that his face was in shadow. When Alaric entered he did not come forward to greet him.

"Hullo, Father!" said Alaric.

"So it is you who have been playing the fool this time," observed the President. "I understood you to say that you were going to keep your mate in order."

Alaric stood still in the middle of the room and held his head high. "Am I speaking to the President or to my father? If the President wishes to reproach me, I suppose I am bound to listen, but I haven't come home to be lectured by my father. Aren't you pleased to see me, Father?"

"Pleased!" repeated the President bitterly. "I wish with all my heart you had stayed in your remote island. Pleased! Ever since you landed here, you have acted in complete disregard of my wishes."

"Well," cried Alaric, "why not? Since when have sons been expected to consider their fathers' wishes? If fathers here took the trouble over their sons that fathers do in the island where I've been, they might claim something in return. What did you ever do for me except beget me, and that not for my sake, either. Why shouldn't I do what I believe to be right? All the same"—his voice softened, and he stepped forward and kissed his father on the

cheek—“I’m pleased to see *you*. Don’t let’s quarrel. I’ll take a seat, and you shall tell me all the news. Wonderful thing an armchair is! You appreciate that sort of thing after sitting on blocks of wood for the best part of a year. Well, what’s been happening since I’ve been away? Any excitement? Anyone found out what’s wrong with modern Art? Who’s editing the *Æsthetic*?”

The President paid no attention to the question. “Manlius told you that you were under observation?”

“He did. And look here, President—I am a freeborn British citizen, and as such I claim a right of free speech. What business have you or anyone else to interfere with me?”

“Alaric, this is mere bluster. You know my will is supreme.”

“Call this the Age of Reason!” jeered Alaric. “You are a tyrant, like Diocletian and Nero. Suppose I appeal to Parliament?”

“Parliament! You know Parliament merely exists to do as I tell it. Democracy was always an easy prey for tyranny.”

“Then you admit you are a tyrant?”

“Certainly.”

“Who feels no compunction whatever about killing his own son. Well, I must say you play the part pretty thoroughly.”

“Alaric,” said the President, speaking with more emotion than his son had ever known him display, “you know that you are the only human being for whom I have ever felt a spark of affection——”

“So you say.”

“The fact is this—the world is not big enough for me and God. One of us has got to go.”

“You and God,” said Alaric, “inhabit completely different worlds. You live in a world of matter, and of dominion over material things. God is Spirit.”

“If men worship God, they give him their wills. I intend to dominate the wills of men. As I say, there is not room in the world for me and God.”

“So one of you has got to clear out?”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly,” repeated Alaric. “There is always some mischief up, when you say ‘Exactly.’ ” He reflected for a moment, then leaned forward and said with extraordinary earnestness: “Tell me one thing, Father.”

“What?”

“Do you believe that God exists?”

“Of course. Should I take all the trouble I do to oppose the non-existent?”

“Well, I’m——” Alaric whistled with surprise. “I must say, Father,” he added after a pause, “you’ve absolutely gone in off the deep end. You’re mad. You’d better call in a specialist at once. A kind of tiny insect like a human being standing up like that against the creator of the Universe—I’m sorry, Father, but really, you know——”

“All the same,” observed the President, “I commit you for euthanasia if you continue your propaganda.”

“Very well,” returned Alaric. “But you won’t make me alter my opinion.”

“Is that your final decision?”

“It is.” Alaric began to whistle again. “Don’t say *I* did it, that’s all. I want to live. I like life. But I’m not going to be a party to your silly attempt to push God out of His own universe. Call this the Age of Reason—why, you don’t even give me a chance to state my case. How do *you* know—you might be completely convinced by my remarks if you listened to them.”

There was a long silence. Anyone observing the two would have been struck by the likeness between them. The President was dark and his son very fair, but both had the same strong straight features, fine poise of head, broad brow and curved chin. The President’s hands were white, Alaric’s brown and a little roughened by work, but their shape was identical. The two men looked across at each other with equal determination.

“I am not unreasonable,” said the President at last. “You shall have your chance. Dine with me now, and tell me about your island and its people. Afterwards we will call in Manlius. You will state your case for God, and I will state my case against. Manlius shall sit between us, and shall decide which of us is the more reasonable of the two. I will have a kerchief prepared, lethal to either of us—since we are the same blood—and harmless to him. At midnight he shall hand it to the loser in the argument. Do you agree?”

“If I win, I allow Manlius to kill you?”

“Exactly.”

“Father, how can you suggest anything so diabolical? Suppose I refuse to have anything to do with it? What is the alternative?”

“Immediate euthanasia.”

“And my message undelivered?”

“Just so.”

Alaric sunk his head on his hand. “Oh, Father, how can you be so cruel? Is this the homecoming that you have prepared for your son?”

“I have made my offer,” said the President. “Take it or leave it.”

“Very well”—Alaric sat up straight and faced his father—“I accept.”

The dinner was a lively one. Alaric spoke of the islanders and their ways, the President of his tour through the Empire, when he had been received with more than regal honours. After dinner they returned to the study, where Manlius was awaiting them.

The three men took their seats. Alaric was flushed and a little elated; the President looked cool, cynical and amused; while Manlius’ face showed that he appreciated to the full the bitterness of the task that had been imposed on him. They might have been three symbolic figures: Alaric typifying joy and hope in God; the President, self-interest and love of personal power; while Manlius might have been Humanity, called on to choose between the two. On the table, enclosed in a crystal box, lay the handkerchief.

The antagonists faced each other. Alaric spoke first. His father answered him. Alaric rejoined. . . .

At twelve o’clock the time-signal sounded. The President, who was speaking, broke off suddenly.

Manlius leaned forward and opened the box. Taking out the handkerchief, he handed it to the man on his left.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Concrete--A Story of Two Hundred Years Hence* by Aelfrida Catherine Wetenhall Tillyard]