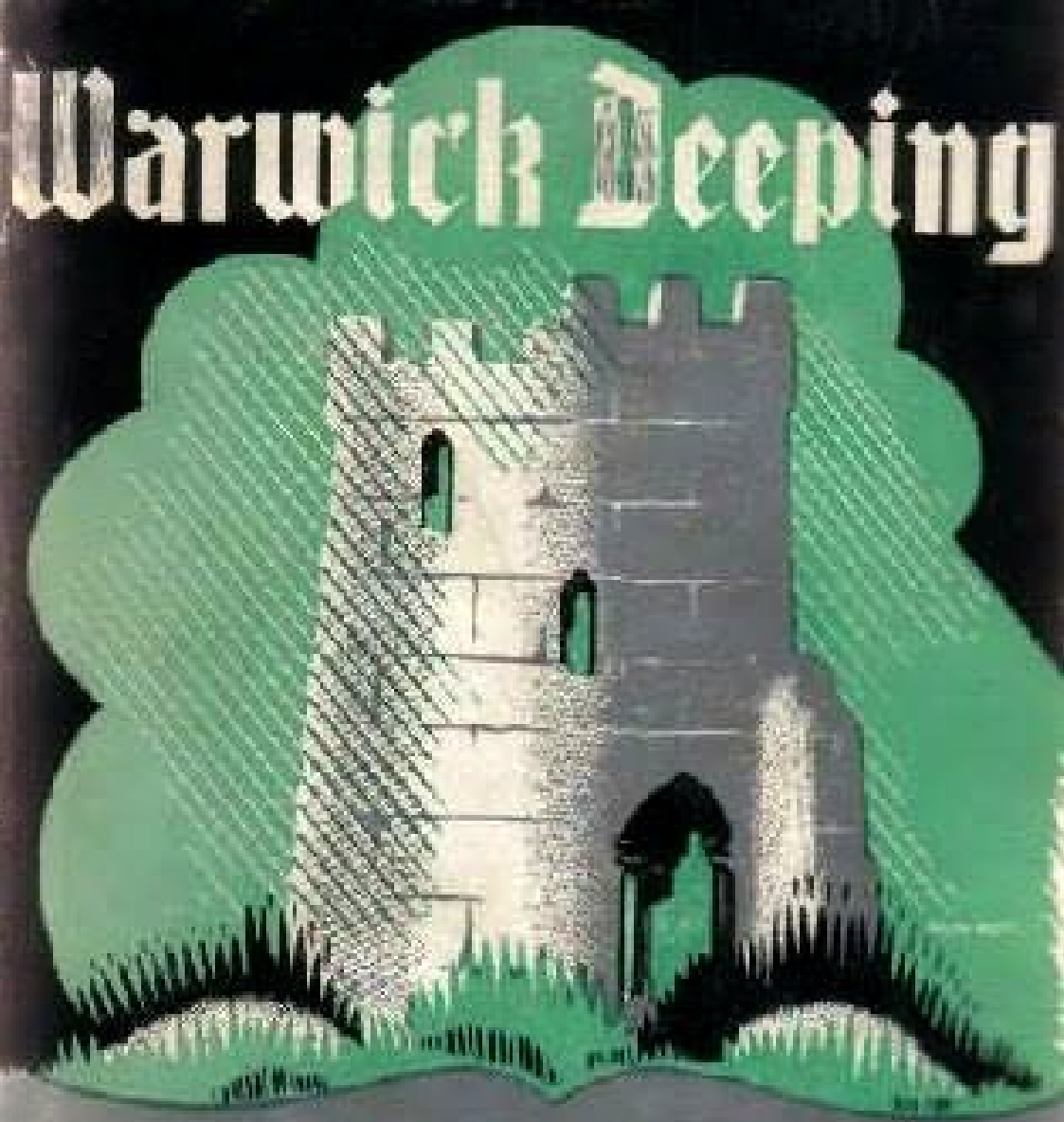
Warwick Deeping



THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR

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THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR

By

WARWICK DEEPING

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THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR

I

HE first saw the tower when the larches were turning green. The heath, bearded with the bronze of last year's bracken, and stippled with Scotch firs, rose suddenly toward the south. The skyline was spired with the green larch tops, and interspersed with the larches were old oaks and firs. It was one of those poignant days in April when the wind is in the south-west, and there is a whisper of spring in the air. Sunlight and shadows came and went. The flicker of sunlight on some bright surface was the first thing to catch Luce's attention.

In this wild and solitary place he had supposed himself free of man and his bricks and mortar. There still were solitary places in Surrey. He had followed a lane in the deep valley where the soil was richer and beech trees grew. He had passed a farm, and beyond it the lane had died away in the hollow of an old quarry or sand pit, and Luce had taken to the heathland where ploughs had never turned the earth.

Glass,—sunlight on a window! But high up among the tree tops! And then he noticed a trackway less than a yard wide snaking its way amid the dry bracken and the heather. He followed the path, and as the network of winter boughs grew thin he saw, as through a kind of veil, a tall, grey tower.

Had he been a man of simpler reactions he might have greeted this ghost of a building with a "Well,—I'm damned!" Certainly, he stood and stared at it. Almost it suggested some mysterious exclamation-mark reared in brick and mortar by some whimsical madman. But why and when?—Somebody's Folly? The Stylite's Pillar of some recluse? That might not seem madness to a star-gazer and a dreamer of dreams, and John Luce was such a creature. He was conscious of a feeling of quickened heart-beats and of breathlessness, like a mystic who had discovered something strange in a world where strangeness is forbidden by bureaucrats and by-laws.

There was a little clearing here in the woods, an orchard full of old and shaggy trees, a weedy garden, all enclosed by a rotting wooden fence that was grey and green with lichen. A tangle of old laurels half hid the lower story of

the tower. A great pear tree, nearly thirty feet high, was in full bloom, very white against the grey-blue glooms of the woods. But Luce's eyes climbed up the ladder-windows of the tower. There were five of them, white-framed and white-sashed in a wall of grey stucco. In one place the stucco had fallen away to show the red brick beneath. The tower was an octagon, with an outjutting building attached to it like the nave to the tower of a church. It had a parapet, and a chimney stack with five red chimney-pots.

Luce counted those chimney-pots. Five flues, five stories, five rooms. And the view from the leads of the flat roof! It promised an immense survey of rolling wooded country, valley and downland. But what a retreat for a recluse who wished to dream, or write, or star-gaze! Nothing but tree tops and sky, and a window high up towards the sunset.

He became quite excited. Did anyone live here? Following the bank of laurels he came to a gate. A weedy path led to a flight of steps and a green door in a kind of porch that was attached to the base of the tower. Luce unslung his pack and hitched the straps over the gate-post. He went in, carrying his stick, for, as an amateur tramp he had come to know that an unexpected and angry dog might resent his curiosity.

The place appeared deserted. A light wind might be moving in the tree tops, but in this sheltered place the air was like deep water. The pear blossom was beginning to fall, and so still was the air that the petals fell straight from the tree. He could see no sign of human occupation. The garden had not been dug. There were clumps of daffodil in flower.

He tried the green door and found it locked. Circling the place he discovered a second door in the nave-like annexe, but that too was locked. The lowest window of the tower was some ten feet from the ground, and quite unreachable. How tantalizing! There was only one window that would satisfy his curiosity. It belonged to the lower story of the attached wing, and peering in he discovered nothing but emptiness.

Since there was no one to say him nay, Luce fetched his pack and took temporary possession of the orchard. He brought out a spirit-stove, and a kettle, a bottle of water, tea, sugar, a flask of milk, a couple of rock-cakes. Sitting on his empty pack, he waited for the kettle to boil, and allowed his fancy to play about the tower. He could suppose that it was more than a hundred years old, and that since its building the trees had grown up, and made it even more secret. But what strange whim had set it here in the middle of a roadless heath?

He had just lit his pipe when the inspiration shaped in him. What a retreat

for a recluse! What a place to work in!

Often he had played with the idea of building himself some such retreat in the middle of a wood. As a social creature he was essentially eccentric, a fourth dimensional mystic with a private income of eight hundred pounds a year. He was forty-five years old. Three years ago he had lost his wife, and since her death the mechanism of modern life had become even more unreal.

Peace!

Like Falkland he was crying: “Peace, peace” in a world that was growing more and more crowded and complex, a world that knew nothing of the John Luce who had produced a strange and fantastic book entitled “The Mathematician and the Mystic.” Just ninety-three copies of the book had been sold, and of the ninety-three perhaps a baker’s dozen had been read from cover to cover.

But, by the time he had finished his pipe the whim had taken shape in him and become so definite a purpose that it changed his plan. He had been tramping for three days, and this was to have been the last of them, for he had proposed to pick up a train at one of the valley stations and sleep in his Bloomsbury flat. He pulled a map from his pocket, spread it on the orchard grass, and lay prone, studying it.—Brandon Heath. Yes, if he bore south-east he would strike a road leading to West Brandon village. Good. West Brandon it should be. With his pack once more on his back, and his stick in his hand, he stood under the pear tree and contemplated the tower.

It tempted him. He was conscious of a strange passion to possess it.

2

Tramping under the beech trees into West Brandon he came to the village's one responsible inn, The Chequers. West Brandon still smelt of the eighteenth century, and was beautiful, a village of individual cottages set back from the road in gardens. Rooks were busy in the high elms beyond the church. Orchards were in flower. One old red house raised its gables and chimneys amid the gloom of cedars. Of shops there were perhaps three, but West Brandon was feeling the urge of modernity. It had taken to itself a garage, and an estate office, for the inevitable syndicate had acquired building land here.

West Brandon did not trouble to stare at Luce. He was just a large person in an old plus-four suit, hatless, going grey at the temples, and with a pack on his back. The Chequers, a white building, set back from the road behind posts and chains, accepted the gentleman with a casualness that was not intended to be churlish.

"Can I have a room for the night?"

The sophisticated young person in the office gave him a cursory glance. He was just one of those earnest, middle-aged asses who walk about the country looking at churches and exploring by-ways, which, to the sophisticated young person is, in an age of wheels, mere foolishness.

"One night?"

"I might stay two."

The young person was looking through some new gramophone records.

"No. 3. Dinner's at half-past seven."

She did not offer to direct him, and Luce made his way upstairs in search of No. 3. He wanted a bath. He found both Room No. 3 and an elderly maid sitting by a landing window mending someone's socks.

"Can I have a bath, please?"

He was a somewhat shaggy person both as to hair and clothes, but the maid was less inhumanly self-centred than the young person below. She knew a gentleman when that rather rare genus put in an appearance, and this gentleman had a peculiarly gentle face. Yes, the dreamy sort who painted

pictures or took photographs and scribbled in little books. The maid put her mending aside and stood up.

"Yes, sir."

Luce strode into No. 3. He was a very big man, and like many very gentle creatures, extremely powerful. The floorboards of No. 3 complained of his weight. The maid heard him moving about in the room, softly whistling some song that was strange to her. As a tribute to his type she had given the bath a wipe, and put down a clean pink bath-mat. She knocked at his door.

"The bath's ready, sir."

He appeared in a blue shirt, brown knickers and stockings, with a sponge-bag looking puny in a large hand. The maid had returned to a chair by the window. From it you could see the high elms beyond the church, and hear the rooks' chorus.

Luce paused on the landing.

"By the way, do you happen to know this neighbourhood?"

Her rather tired blue eyes met his. She was sufficiently old to be wise as to when a particular gentleman could be humoured.

"I was born here, sir."

"Been here all your life?"

She gave a little wincing smile. No; she had other memories than those associated with West Brandon, but they had not been happy ones.

"Not quite, sir."

"Do you happen to know Brandon Heath?"

Did she not? As a girl she had walked with a lad on Brandon Heath.

"There's a queer place there, a tower."

"O, you mean the old signal tower, sir."

"Signal tower?"

"Yes, sir, in the old days they used to telegraph from it. They do say there were towers all the way to Portsmouth."

Luce's face was suddenly illumined.

"Of course. A semaphore tower. Why didn't I think of that? Thanks, very much," and he went in to his bath.

The maid heard him splashing and humming a tune. Yes, this was a nice gentleman, the sort of man who would have made a woman a good husband. And he hadn't. Or—had he? He looked the bachelor sort, easy and absent-minded and natural. The maid let the sock lie in her lap and stared with faded eyes at the elm trees. It was spring and the rooks were busy, and all April things had gone out of her life. And suddenly her face looked old and haggard.

The bathroom door opened, and he was there in the same blue shirt and shaggy brown knickers and stockings. His hair looked wet, his face at peace with the world. She noticed how very blue his eyes were.

"By the way—do you happen to know who owns that tower?"

"I think it belongs to the Brandon Estate, sir."

"And who?"

"O, Sir Evelyn Gage.—But he's always abroad, sir. Mr. Temperley could tell you."

"And who is Mr. Temperley?"

"The agent, sir. He's a lawyer, too. Lives in the old red house at the top of the village."

Luce thanked her, and disappeared into No. 3. He had decided to call on Mr. Temperley.

3

Mr. Temperley, who was seventy-three years old, had lived so long and so intelligently, and through so many transformations that nothing surprised him. Mr. Temperley just chuckled. He had a fine head of white hair, and a skin that many a woman of five-and-thirty might envy. In fact, he was a handsome, stately and jocund old gentleman, with nothing dusty or documental about him.

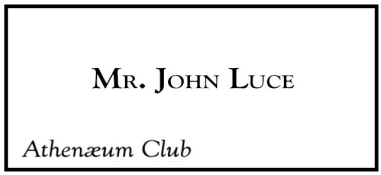
Mr. Temperley had dined and was reading *The Times* in his library when a maid came in with a card on a salver.

"A gentleman from the Chequers, sir, wants to know whether you could give him an appointment for to-morrow morning."

"What sort of a gentleman, Mary?"

"In knickerbockers, sir, and without a hat."

Mr. Temperley chuckled, picked up the card and read it.



Obviously, a cultivated person both as to clothes and club, for in these days the gent le world went shabby. Mr. Temperley liked his glass of port and his dash of colour. He wore it in his tie, a gay cerise, also a black velvet coat in the evening. But, Mr. Temperley, being seventy-three, did not temporize with life; the little that was left of it he liked brisk and bracing. He was completely frank in his philosophy—"It's a good world, even at seventy-three.—I'm not clamouring for my coffin."

"Show the gentleman in, Mary. I'll see him now."

These two men had not been together for more than a minute when they were perfectly at ease with each other. Luce, offered a glass of port, refused it gently, but asked to be allowed to smoke a pipe. They had their feet to the fire. Luce, filling a pipe, confessed that he considered it very courteous and kind of

Mr. Temperley to admit a perfect stranger into his house at such an hour, and on business. Mr. Temperley twinkled bright eyes at him, and also filled a pipe. Not at all. Mr. Temperley's interest in life was almost that of a vigorous child. The unexpected was ever the most piquing.—And what, exactly was Mr. Luce's business?

Luce looked at the fire, a wood fire piled against an old fireback.

"Too hot for you, Mr. Luce?"

"No."

"November likes its fire—even in April. Well——?"

He lit a paper spill at the fire, and held it to the bowl of his pipe.

"I understand that you can tell me about the old signal tower on Brandon Heath."

"The signal tower?"

"Yes, I stumbled on it this afternoon. . . . A unique sort of place. I confess it gave me a thrill."

Mr. Temperley gave him a quick, birdlike look. He might be seventy-three, but he understood that sort of thrill. As a Surrey worthy, and one of its shrewdest archæologists, he could grow excited over a piece of flint, or the vague swell of an old vallum. O, yes, he could give Mr. Luce the information he desired. According to the records there had been eight such stations between Whitehall and Portsmouth. They had been built as naval signal stations in 1795. Each had been staffed by a lieutenant, a midshipman, and two sailors. The stations? Yes, Putney Heath, Brandon, Netley, Hascombe, Blackdown, Beacon Hill, Portsdown. Mr. Temperley was of the opinion that not all the stations had been towered. It had depended on the natural altitude of the site. And was Mr. Luce writing a book on the subject?

Luce smiled at the fire.

"No. I do write books—occasionally. And the Brandon tower is empty?"

Mr. Temperley crinkled up his eyes.

"Yes. We let it off to a fellow named Ballard, a farmer. One of his labourers and his family lived there. But we had a difference of opinion with Ballard. He had a yearly lease, and we did not renew."

"So, the place is habitable?"

"In a sense,—yes."

“Would you let it or sell it?”

Mr. Temperley drew in his legs and sat up in his chair.

“To you?”

“Yes.”

“But,—my dear sir!”

And then after contemplating for a moment his visitor’s frank and tranquil face, he began to divine the pleasant unusualness of Luce and his whimsies.

“You mean, you want solitude?”

Luce smiled at him.

“I happen to be built that way. And there is so little solitude left to us. Even the sky.”

Mr. Temperley nodded.

“Aeroplanes, mechanical blow-flies. But hadn’t you better view the place?”

“I should like to.”

“I have the key in my office. Also, may I remind you that—the domestic details—would be rather difficult.”

“Water?”

“Yes, there is a well. But no road, hardly a trackway. No shops nearer than ours.”

“How very—restful,” said his visitor.

Mr. Temperley’s pipe had gone out. He relit it. He was enjoying the occasion.

“Well, you would not be worried with visitors; but, unless you propose to be your own staff?”

“That,” said Luce quietly, “would be the exact situation. I happen to be one of those perverse people who try to penetrate—reality. The top of a Babylonian tower—and the stars! Quite absurd, of course, but the absurd and fantastic qualities—of the ultimate reality.”

Mr. Temperley’s white head seemed to catch the firelight.

“Yes,—I get you. Ascending into heaven—shall we say, but without the smell of petrol! Very crude and limited things, aeroplanes, after all. Well, I

dare say we could let you the tower. If it had not been so devilishly remote, I expect some practical person would have pulled it down years ago and used the bricks to build—pigsties. But I think you had better have a look at its interior."

Luce said quietly, "I will."

II

LEAVING his pack at the Chequers, and having arranged to stay another night at the inn, Luce marched out of West Brandon with the tower key in his pocket.

It was a day of sailing clouds, splashed sunlight, and distant blue-black shadows. The wind was from the south-west, one of those winds which sets dead leaves dancing, and stirs the tops of the pine trees to murmurings and strange gestures. There was magic in the morning. A cuckoo was calling, and the old thorn trees were clouded with sudden green.

Luce did not meet a soul as he made for the high ground. Here and there the pines stood crowded, crown touching crown. Patches of pale tussock-grass filled moist hollows with a kind of ghostliness. Solitude, a solitude so complete that Luce was conscious of a kind of tension, a sharpening of the senses that was as primeval as this woodland. He knew the feeling well. It was as though ancient associations revived in him; he was wild man, befurred, with a club or stone axe upon his shoulder. A shadow flitting across a tree trunk would take on the semblance of some figure slipping to cover. A screaming jay might scold a warning, or a sudden rabbit bolt into dry fern and startle your footsteps. Sometimes you felt you must stand still and listen, and watch those strange spaces where shadow and sunlight spun fantasies. What was that—there? A branch jerked by the wind? Or—that sound?

The track dipped into a valley, threaded a grove of beech trees whose buds glimmered in the sunlight, and began to climb again towards the sky. The path forked where a number of scattered thorns showed green above the crumpled fern. Luce paused here, hesitant. Should he turn right or left? And then, a sudden sound came to him on the wind, startling and strange and poignant.

He stood, head up, listening.

Someone weeping, and weeping like a heart-broken child in this solitude!

The sound drifted to him on the wind. He saw a mass of gorse in bloom away on his left, and he turned that way over the fern.

“Hallo, is anybody—hurt?”

The sound ceased with utter suddenness, like the song of some frightened bird. And Luce stood still. Who?—A woman. And what affair was it of his?

Besides, he might be blundering upon some double situation, and the silence was significant. It suggested that his interference might be tactless. He turned again, retraced his steps, stood a moment listening, and then held on towards the tower.

The gorse bushes concealed a disused sandpit, and in the hollow of it a woman and a dog were hidden. She was sitting with legs drawn up, her body leaning to the left, part of its weight upon a straight left arm, the fingers of the hand spread and slightly arched. Her face had a transparent pallor. The brown dog was watching the woman's face as though he understood the meaning of her silence. She had laid a hand upon his head when Luce had challenged.

But there was no further sound, and with a relaxation of her limbs she turned and sat straight and still. Her eyes were wide and very dark. There was sand on her black skirt, and a powdering of it on one sleeve. But she sat soundless and still, letting her shoulders droop, and presently the dog, with a little whimper, crawled into her lap. He put up his muzzle and licked her chin.

The touch of his tongue seemed to break the kind of staring anguish into which she had fallen. Her pale lips fell apart. She took the dog's head between her hands and kissed it.

Luce was in sight of the tower. He saw its greyness through the branches. A great blue sky stretched overhead. Peace,—solitude! But, somehow, there was a different look in the eyes of the morning, and when a sudden swirl of wind made the birch tops sway, and set the dry fern rustling, he turned sharply and looked behind him. It was as though the wind——. But what a strange thing that he should have been assailed in that solitary place by the sound of a woman weeping! O, well, what concern was it of his? He would never know who and why. He looked again at the tower, and saw that a cloud shadow had fallen across it.

When he came to the green door at the top of the flight of steps he became conscious of a pleasant feeling of possession. He had only to make up his mind, and the tower was his, nor had Mr. Temperley's candour discouraged him. "If you are not afraid of solitude and the simple life, and of strange sounds at night." What strange sounds? "O, just the wind rushing past." He unlocked the door, and stepped into a kind of little vestibule from which a staircase spiralled upward.

He did not hurry. He had come to believe that life should be taken deliberately, and that at forty-five you should not rush at your adventures like a boy. And the exploring of this tower was his adventure. A door, hanging half-open, seemed to bow him into the first room, and entering it he found himself

looking towards a big sash window that was like a woodland vista painted on a wall. Certainly, the glass was blurred and dusty, and the paper on the walls more than shabby, and the paint as old as time. The room had a musty smell, but when he went and threw up the lower sash, the wind blew in and seemed to make the room alive.

"Not so bad," was his thought.

The paper on the walls might have been there for a generation. Little faded pink roses tied up dimly with blue ribbon on a grey ground. He smiled as at some Victorian memory. His feeling was that the previous occupants had been self-respecting people and had left the place very clean. That paint had been scrubbed. But the steep staircase piqued him. A tower was made to be climbed, and he had promised himself that the view from the top window and the leads would be immense. It was. He opened each door as he ascended, and found on three floors the same sort of hexagonal room. Plenty of space for a bachelor! The topmost room was divided by a wooden partition, and from the near half a ladder sloped to a trap-door in the ceiling. Luce gave the ladder a shake to test it, for he was a heavy man, and then went up it. Spiders had been busy up above, and when he pushed up the trap, the sudden draught blew dust into his eyes.

Blink he did, but the dust was forgotten when he emerged upon the leaded roof. He seemed to be in the clouds. The parapet was not more than two feet high, and the wind slid over it in a flat race. Standing there he was level with the chimney-stack and its five red pots, and the wind made a humming in them. He could remember as a boy the wind making just such a humming in the barrels of a gun. Around and below the tops of firs and larches swayed and sailed. The sky seemed to rush overhead. The wind was in his hair, and bellying out his coat.

And the view! He stood and stared, turning slowly like a mechanical-clock figure in some German steeple. The world rolled below him; almost it seemed to be in movement. Oak buds glittered; the red throats of Scotch firs seemed to swell as though the trees were singing, and so indeed they were. He saw green fields, young wheat, the red roofs of far and solitary houses, villages, deep valleys pocketed with shadows, hills beyond hills. Yes, that must be the Thames valley over yonder, and in the south the North Downs surged up in a grey-blue wave. But there were trees everywhere, and to Luce trees were living things and yet always mysterious. What a platform was this for a dreamer of dreams! He could imagine it on some still summer night with no wind breathing and the woods asleep. Above him,—the throb of the stars. Even the fret and the petulance of the world's progress would not vex him here, for in

this year of grace the Portsmouth road had not yet become a track for little tin toys. Motors had not reached the million mark, nor did suburbia leave bottles and wastepaper in the woods.

That building down there in the valley was man's nearest landmark. He recognized the place as the farm he had passed yesterday, a red-tiled house lying amid a smother of old trees. He could distinguish a few cows in a meadow, and in another field a white horse was pulling a roller with a little figure walking beside it. There were broad tracks like swathes where the roller had passed over the grass.

"I could buy milk and eggs down there," he thought, "if I decide to stay."

If? Yes, he was still pretending, playing the pleasant game of yea and nay. The "If" in life kept you young, and guessing. But, already, something in him knew that the tower was inevitably his.

He took another look at the landscape before disappearing into the hole in the roof and closing the trap-door, and half-way down the ladder he remembered that human sound which had startled him in the woods. Why should it recur to him just at that moment? A woman weeping. Just one of life's unexplainable and casual incidents.

But he had more of the place to explore, the tower's nave-like attachment, and he descended the stairs. The original banisters were there, and the wooden casing, and each flight had its window. Water? Yes, it was very necessary that he should make sure about the well; a two-mile tramp for water would make his tenancy impossible. He had reached the last turn of the stairs when some movement below surprised him.

He paused abruptly. He had left the green door of the tower ajar, and the movement that startled him was the swinging inwards of that door. The wind? No; the motive force was human. He found himself looking down at the foreshortened figure of a man in old khaki breeches and leggings and a tweed jacket. The brim of the man's felt hat hid his face.

Luce did not challenge the apparition; he stood and waited. And suddenly the man below became conscious of some other presence. His head jerked back, and Luce saw his face.

For some five seconds they regarded each other in silence, rather like two animals who have met unexpectedly in a solitary place. Luce was conscious of telling himself that the man below had an unpleasant face. It was wide and hard, with patches of colour on its high cheekbones; there was a certain insolence in the eyes, a knife-like thinness about the mouth.

He was aware of the man smiling, and that the smile made him look even more unpleasant.

“Morning. Just looked in.”

“So I see,” said Luce.

“Didn’t know anyone was living here.”

“No one is. But there may be.”

The man nodded at him, and his eyes seemed to narrow. His glance fell away from Luce’s face almost like a hand being surreptitiously withdrawn.

“Funny place to live in. Hope you’ll like it.”

His hat hid all but the lower part of his face, and Luce saw the flash of teeth. The fellow showed them just like a snarling dog, and suddenly Luce felt moved to tell him to get out, though the impulse was unnecessary. The stranger turned quickly on his gaitered legs and disappeared, and through one of the stair windows Luce saw him making for the gate, walking with a slight limp and an irritable jerk of the opposite shoulder.

Luce went down and closed the door. Well, probably that was the last he would see of the fellow. An empty and curious place like this might attract an occasional stroller. He would put a chain and padlock on that gate.

And then he laughed. So, that was the reaction! Already, his secret genius had taken possession of the tower, and was prompting him to propertied precautions. It even went on to suggest that he should put up a notice, “Private —Keep out.” Luce quizzed his secret self: “You Anglo-Saxon with a clearing in the forest, treating every stranger as an enemy to be shot at!” And, smiling over the incident, he went on to explore the rest of his hermitage. He found a well with a bucket and chain.

And where would he take his bath?

Certainly not on the tower’s top where his towel would look like a signaller’s flag. The privacy might be complete, but the bath would have to be in the basement. Humping buckets of water up these stairs! That was not practical. And by the time he turned the key in the lock of the green door he had almost forgotten the man in the brown leggings. He was walking back to see Mr. Temperley.

From among the birches and the firs he turned to look at the tower. His decision was made. He was going to live here through the spring and summer, scribble, meditate, dream.

2

Mr. Temperley was a man who did not allow his curiosity to cheat him into shirking details. So, Mr. Luce was satisfied that the place was habitable. Very good, and did Mr. Luce realize that the sanitation was primitive, and the water just well-water, and that in muddy weather you could not get a car within a mile of the place?

“Thank God for that,” said Luce.

Did he propose to furnish the tower? O, very sketchily. He was accustomed to sleeping in a camp-bed. And could Mr. Temperley tell him how the last tenants had moved their furniture? He could. They had managed to get a waggon and a team within two hundred yards of the tower; it had been dry weather and the old trackway through the Brandon woods had been usable.

“I shouldn’t advise you to send down a pantechnicon.”

Luce laughed.

“I shan’t. I’ll charter a light motor-van, and a couple of stout fellows. I’m not exactly a weed myself.”

Mr. Temperley smiled at him, for Luce suggested a Viking who had ceased from plunder and the blood lust, and become gentle.

“Well, we had better have an agreement.”

“Yes,—I’m a complete stranger. But what are you going to charge me?”

“How would forty pounds a year strike you? And the tenancy to be a yearly one? Though, if you want to give us notice—I daresay we can meet you.”

“I shall get quite a cheap country house. But would your people sell?”

“Possibly.”

“You might put it to them, Mr. Temperley. If I like the place—I might buy. By the way, I suppose it is insured?”

“Against fire? Yes. That’s our business.”

“And what about repairs? You won’t expect me to decorate all five stories? I propose having the lower two rooms and the kitchen papered or distempered

and painted."

"O, we'll do that for you."

"Soon?"

"We still employ our estate workmen. I can put them on at once."

"So—I could move in in about a fortnight?"

"I should think so."

And then Luce invited Mr. Temperley to dine with him at the Chequers. Not that the Chequers' dinner was in any way unique. Mr. Temperley chuckled. "Very good of you. Better come and dine with me." Luce thanked him, but confessed to a feeling that Mr. Temperley was conferring all the favours. But he did agree that an old gentleman in the seventies might prefer to be humoured, and to drink his own port and mix himself his own glass of toddy.

"You'll get a much better dinner here, Luce."

"I expect so, sir, and much better company."

"Thank you. Interested in flint implements, and pottery?"

"Yes,—I happen to be particularly so."

"Splendid! I'll show you my collection, all local produce. I've got some bronzes too, and a few Roman things from Forley. Yes, you may remember that wretched fellow Hugo Hodge plundered Forley in the 'forties. I would like to have had his scalp."

3

To make a pun of it Luce could say that his entering into possession was a veritable *tour de force*. A Ford motor-van chartered for the day carried him and his impedimenta down the Portsmouth Road, and diverging by way of West Brandon, picked up the old heath track. The van's load might have served a Crusoe. Luce had drawn out an elaborate list, though its details were of the simplest. It included a camp bed, and bedding, a hammock, a kitchen table and a shelved dresser, crockery, cutlery, silver of sorts, an old-fashioned hip-bath, two Windsor chairs, two basket chairs, a wash-hand stand, a chest of drawers, one small mirror, two second-hand carpets, a case of books, and an oil cooking-stove. Luce had been very particular about this stove. He was something of a cook, and he had had the stove demonstrated to him by a young lady in the firm's showroom. Lastly, he had included stores, an assortment of tinned goods, two large boxes of biscuits, jam, marmalade, six tins of Ideal milk, tea, sugar, coffee, bacon, eggs, and a couple of loaves of bread and a pound of butter for immediate use. A stout fellow sat beside the driver, and Luce himself occupied one of the basket chairs inside the van. Beside him stood a five-gallon drum of paraffin, and a faint odour of paraffin graced the spring morning.

All went well until the van took to the rough water of the old trackway. It rolled and pitched and creaked on bottom gear, and Luce, who had abandoned his basket chair and slipped over the tailboard, went ahead to scout for snags. They had another mile to go before they would come within hail of the tower.

"Might be the Menin Road, sir," said a voice.

The owner-driver was a cheerful cockney who had handled a Ford ambulance during the war. It had been his boast that he could—when the crisis arrived—"shake the old bitch art of a shell-'ole." He was not to be discouraged. He pulled up and got down to look at his load to assure himself that the goods were playing no monkey-tricks.

"We can do it, guvnor, if we go slow."

The green slopes and the cedars and Scotch firs of somebody's park lay behind them. There was still some bottom to the track, and when they came to the heathland the sandy soil was not too loose to hold the wheels. Luce had gone on ahead. The track plunged into a shallow valley thick with woodland

and high banks of rhododendron; the soil was moist here, and old wheel furrows were full of water and black slime.

Luce turned back to warn the driver.

“A bad patch ahead.”

The cockney got down to investigate. He was an optimistic soul.

“I can get ’er through that, guvnor.”

But his optimism proved a little previous. The van lurched, wallowed, skidded, stuck. The back wheels spun round in the black mud. Nothing would move her. She assumed indifference when her master addressed her as a ruddy she-dog.

There was nothing for it but to unload a part of the cargo and manhandle it. Luce took off his coat and hung it on a rhododendron bush.

“I’ll take that box of books.”

The two men lugged it to the tailboard.

“You can’t hump it, guvnor. Too bloody ’eavy.”

“Get it on my shoulder,” said Luce.

They did so, and watched the big man go stodging solidly through the muck. “Bit of a surprise-packet,—Bill, what?” Luce got that box of books half-way to the tower, but in the end he was constrained to return it to mother earth. The edge of the box had bitten into his shoulder, and his heart was beating a hundred to the minute.

But with half the cargo removed, the black van seemed to sit up and take notice. The cockney and his mate discovered a stack of faggots, and dumped the wood into the worst of the morass. Luce and the assistant were told to shove behind, and the black van, after some wheel-spinning, consented to go forward. There was drier ground ahead and the thing was done.

By midday the whole load had been carried by the three of them into the tower. The cockney was perspiring and humorous.

“Mind the new paint, Bill. Gawd, I could do with a drink.”

Luce remembered that he had a case of bottled beer, and the three of them sat round the kitchen table and ate bread and cheese, and drank beer.

Luce went down to see the van through the mud-patch. It negotiated the slough successfully.

“Cheeri’o, guvnor.”

Luce had paid them an extra pound for unexpected and additional perspiration, and they were loving him.

Said Mr. Owner-Driver to his mate: “Fancy dossin’ down in that bloody old ruin!”

His mate was lighting a fag.

“A bit balmy, what?”

“Anyway, ’e’s a gent.”

“Gents do funny things. Blimy, that case o’ books!”

“Guess ’e’ll need ’em. Anyway, they’ll do for bumph.”

III

LUCE spent the rest of the day in putting his house in order. He had decided to use the two lower rooms of the tower, and to disregard the rest of the building, with the exception perhaps of the west room on the fifth story. Here he would set up his writing-table and his bookcase, and from that high window look out upon a green and spacious world.

And very green it was on that day in May, though he did not climb to the leads and survey the scene until the evening. He remained busy in those two lower rooms with their fresh, primrose-coloured walls and clean white paint, unpacking and arranging and putting away. Meanwhile, he discovered various slips in his staff-work, omissions that were both amusing and chastening.

The rooms were minus blinds or curtains, and he had forgotten to provide either. Well, for the time being a blanket would have to serve. But in this solitary place need he trouble his head about an unscreened window that was more than twenty feet from the ground? No, of course not.

He had remembered to provide a lamp, one that could be suspended from a hook in the ceiling by a length of stout wire, but what about a light in his bedroom? Candles? He had no candles.

"You silly ass!"

Moreover, the men had left his hip-bath in the lobby, and the bath's proper place was his bedroom. It proved itself an awkward object to persuade up the winding stairs; it would not be compressed, and Luce's solution was to invert the bath over his head and shoulders, and ascend, wearing it like some huge steel helmet.

So absorbed had he been in putting his hermitage in order that he had not noticed the passing of time. What did his watch say? Half-past five! The sun had swung well to the west and was pouring in through the high sash-window. Tea. He was more than ready for tea. But when he proceeded to fill one of the lamp-containers of his oil stove he found that even though he had remembered to provide himself with a funnel, a five-gallon drum was not an easy thing to handle. The paraffin slopped out all over the floor, and he was constrained to carry both drum and container into the garden and perform the rite there. Here was another omission to be made good. He needed a tin can to act as an

intermediary. Meanwhile, he was to learn that his kitchen living-room would smell for days of paraffin.

He had the stove alight and the kettle on. A cheap American clock on the high, black mantelpiece had not yet been put into action; he wound the clock up and set it by his watch. He collected teapot, cup and saucer, spoons, plate, bread, butter, jam, sugar, and glancing over the table, realized that he had forgotten the milk. Where the devil had he put those tins of milk? He searched everywhere, and could not find them, nor did he find the tins till three days later, when he happened upon a small white deal box lying under a clump of heather. It had been unloaded there and overlooked.

Well, tea without milk appeared to be inevitable, but was breakfast to be milkless also? He remembered the farm he had seen from the top of the tower. Why should he not stroll down there presently and get a jug filled? The farmer might be willing to sell him milk, eggs and vegetables. Yes, vegetables. He was proposing to grow his own salads, lettuce and radish, and ridge cucumber, and a few onions. Having washed up and lit a pipe, he went down to look at the garden. He had brought a set of garden tools with him, and it was not too late in the year to put in some potatoes. The garden was producing a splendid crop of chickweed, groundsel, docks, sorrel and couch-grass. Spadework was needed, and it would give him exercise. Yes, he would make something of that garden, and to begin with for his immediate joy he would scatter the seeds of annuals when he had dug the ground about the tower—godetia, mignonette, sweet sultan, marigolds, eschscholtzia, nasturtiums, Virginia stock.

Meanwhile, he was minus milk. He collected a white jug and a stick, and locking the green door, set out upon this adventure. Perhaps the farmer's wife would sell him a couple of candles. It was a still and windless May evening, and the world was very green with the infinite and varied greenness of spring. The silver stems of the birches supported emerald lace. The green of the beeches had a more metallic brilliance. The oaks were still bronze and gold, and here and there an old yew looked very black in contrast. Scotch firs were set with new candles. The thorns were in flower, and smelling sweet. The crooks of the young fern were beginning to unfurl, and in the moist places patches of grass gleamed vividly. In the corner of a wild plantation he saw bluebells like blue smoke.

A blackbird singing; tits uttering their queer creaking notes; a chaffinch calling for a little bit of bread and cheese. A cuckoo, flying overhead, settled in a tree and challenged the wild woodland. An occasional rabbit scuttled. Following the track downwards he passed through a plantation of firs where the crowded trunks made mystery. There was no wind in the tree tops. How

good and strange and peaceful it all was, wild country, unvexed by God's prime egoist, man.

In due course he came to the valley where man did function. Here were beechwoods, glimpses of green fields, a pond with water flags, sedges, and white crowfoot. Rushes clumped the grass. Heather and bracken ceased, and green hedges controlled the vista. He struck a lane, and its ditches were riotous with green growth. Presently he saw the redness of weathered brick, a white window-frame, a chimney plumed with smoke, the high thatched roof of a barn, a roller idle by a hedge, the jagged outline of a haystack that had been cut for feed, a field gate weathered to a greyish green, the white slats of a fence, two old rhododendrons brilliant with carmine flowers.

A magnificent beech tree overshadowed the gate. It gave its name to the farm. Luce paused at the gate; he leaned upon it and gazed.

The farmhouse, its garden, outbuildings and yard were set back from the lane in the centre of a small paddock. It was shaded by a dozen scattered trees, oaks and beeches, and the meadow itself had been planted with shade trees for its cattle, and the effect was that of parkland. The house, set obliquely to the lane, faced the south-east. It was of tile and brick, with a hipped roof, a central chimney stack, and a little latticed porch painted white. A low brick wall surrounded the garden, and placed symmetrically in front of the house were two old yews, cut in the shape of pyramids. An orchard, sheltered by high thorn hedges, lay on the west, and these shaggy, unclipped hedges were white with flower.

Luce contemplated this lonely farmhouse with the pleasure of a man to whom such places seemed to grow out of the soil. To him the reaper and the shepherd and the ploughman were allegorical figures, signs of the human zodiac, infinitely right and significant. Peace, green pastures, cattle feeding, the ploughland purple under the setting sun. He had the eyes and the heart of a poet. He looked gently at life, and saw himself in it. If there was any cynicism in him it was tempered by a little, humorous smile.

But he had come here to buy milk, not to soliloquize; he pulled back the catch of the gate, and closing it like a man of conscience, followed the road across the paddock. The place had a deserted look. There were no cattle grazing within view, and no human figure to be seen. He could suppose that the work of the day was over, beasts fed and milked, and the labourers gone to their cottages. A white cock and a few hens were scratching in the farmyard. Pigs grunted somewhere. A stable door hung open as though someone had just passed in or out, but the house and its trees stood strange and silent in the sheen of the evening sunlight.

When Luce came to the white gate in the brick wall, he got a different impression of the place. It had looked mellow and well cared for at a distance, but when you approached it there were things that caught the eye. The white gate needed painting; so did the little lattice porch. The garden was untidy, the path and beds weedy, the grass uncut. A few old-fashioned plants were in flower, Love Lies Bleeding, Turk's Cap lilies, Honesty, a few clumps of polyanthus. The roses on the house had not been pruned for several years. A blind hung awry at a window, giving that particular window a strange and sinister expression.

Luce opened the white gate and walked up the weedy path to the porch. Was anybody at home here? The door had a plain black knocker, and he put a hand to the knocker.

From within came the barking of a dog.

2

He heard a woman’s voice speaking to the dog.

“Quiet, Peter, quiet.”

Luce was sensitive to voices. His very largeness liked a little, low, gentle voice in a woman, in a world that was full of bright trebles and the silly nasal shrillings of a pinched refinement. The voice in the house had a bird note—a blackbird’s note—and Luce, in his fanciful moments, assigned colour to voices. Some were hard and red, others a flat grey, others canary yellow, but violet voices were rare, and this voice was of that colour.

Apparently she shut the dog into a sitting-room before coming to the door. She hesitated there. She was alone in the house with the dog, though solitude might be blessed.

“Who is it,—please?”

Luce understood her reluctance to unlock the door.

“I’m afraid it’s a stranger, but it’s quite all right. I wondered if you could let me have some milk.”

If he was sensitive to voices, so was she. She unlocked the door and opened it, and he saw before him a little woman dressed in black, one of those dark, pale creatures with pansy eyes. She was all cream and jet as to skin and eyes and hair. In age she might be thirty. But the one thing that struck him about her was her frightened look; not that she was frightened of the immediate occasion, but of life as she was experiencing it. Her pale lips were sensitive and poignant, and there was a suggestion of shadows under her eyes. Moreover, her pallor gave him the impression of coldness, not of the heart, but of the skin.

He smiled at her and raised the jug.

“Please forgive me for bothering you. I have just moved into the old signal tower.”

She stood staring at him like a shy and solemn child, but those darkly lashed eyes of hers were not a child’s eyes. He would have described them as the full, ripe fruit of some unhappy tree of knowledge.

He went on talking.

“I thought I had some tinned milk to go on with. Couldn’t find it. Just like a man. So—tea—was milkless.”

And suddenly she smiled. Her dark eyes remained fixed on his very blue ones. His eyes were like his voice, large and gentle and reassuring to timid creatures.

“You’re at the tower?”

“Yes.—My name is Luce.”

She glanced at the jug.

“Well, yes, I can spare you some.”

“Thank you so much. I suppose you couldn’t let me have a regular supply?”

She looked frightened. Why should she look frightened?

“We don’t—deliver——”

“No. I could fetch it. And perhaps half a dozen eggs now and again?”

She stood hesitant, as though the deciding of so trivial a matter was of strange significance. But why? Had she?—And suddenly she put out a hand and took the jug from him.

“Yes, I think we might. My husband has gone to Melford. Wouldn’t it be—in the morning?”

“At whatever time suits you.”

“About nine o’clock?”

“Yes.”

She disappeared into the passage with the jug, and he heard the dog whimpering. Was this an unhappy house? And then he heard her footsteps returning. Her fingers touched his as she gave him the jug. Her hand was cold.

He thanked her, smiled and turned to go. She stood there watching him, and then—suddenly—she closed the door. Luce, carrying the jug with care, recrossed the paddock to the farm gate, and happening to glance at the trunk of the great beech tree he saw two letters and a device cut in the grey bark, an R and a T with a heart between them. Who was the lover whose knife had cut those symbols? They had been there some years, to judge by the rounded margins. And what did R stand for, a woman, Rose, Ruth or Rachel? And was

she—the woman?

He opened the gate and passed through it, and the shadow of the great tree covered him.

3

A little while before sunset she went round the yard and byres and buildings collecting eggs. Some hens were separative and laid in strange places, even in the waggon-shed, and in a tumbril in which some litter had been left she found two eggs. The tumbril's paint had weathered to a faded powder-blue, and its red wheels were caked with dry mud. On the side near the off-shaft she saw her husband's name in white letters:—"T. Ballard. Beech Farm."

The sky flared. A great cloud bank smouldered like a furnace, above a band of steely azure. A bat was fluttering noiselessly above the black roof of the barn, and she stood and watched it as though something in her mood fluttered ineffectually against that splendid sunset. She was thinking that her husband would have sworn at her had he found those eggs in the tumbril. How strange that this earth should be so full of beautiful and of ugly things! It was almost too beautiful—with a beauty that wounded—on this evening in May.

She remembered that she had left the dog shut up in the sitting-room. Poor Peter, he too was the victim of a vicarious tragedy, for—surely—to be unhappy was tragic. Returning to the house, she put her egg-basket in the dark, cool dairy, and went to release the dog. He was crouching close to the door, listening to her footsteps, his head on one side, his eyes watching the handle.

"Poor Peter."

She stooped, and taking his head between her hands, kissed it. This creature was always the same, gentle, affectionate, her shadow, causing her no bitter qualms, nor forcing her to sordid concealments. What would her husband's mood be to-night? How terrible that she should have to wait trembling upon his temper! She did not pull down the blinds or draw the curtains, for she had begun to feel afraid of this house when its eyes were closed. She lit a candle and went to look at the clock in the kitchen. There was a whining of wheels and a sudden clangour, and the candle trembled in her hand. The old clock with its solemn white face was striking nine.

She opened a door in the body of the clock, and pulling on a chain, wound it; he said bitter things to her if she forgot to wind the clock.—"No head, have you! Forget everything." She had laid his supper on the table, and she looked carefully to assure herself that nothing was missing, so that he should have no

excuse for snarling at her. But did he need excuses? And why had life turned so sour and bitter in him? Poverty, struggle, the curse that sometimes seems to lie upon the land? He had grown mean, and cruel. He took a strange pleasure in being cruel, especially to her.

She set the candle on the table and sat down on the sofa with her back to the window; the dog jumped up beside her and put his head in her lap. But even this dog's love had to be safeguarded, like some precious thing to be put away quickly in a drawer or hidden in a cupboard. Peter's devotion to her angered Tod Ballard. It gave him yet another excuse for being cruel to both of them.

She sat listening, and the dog watched her face.

"You ought to go, Peter."

Peter appeared to understand her. He jumped down and stood looking up consentingly into her face. If the man creature came back with liquor in him ——? Yes, Peter must be put out of his way. The dog followed her down the passage to the back door and out into the brick-paved yard, and with mute docility stood beside his kennel to have the chain clipped to his collar.

"Good night, precious."

She kissed him, and went quickly into the house as though afraid of her own feelings. It was terrible to care too much—even about a dog. She returned to the sofa and sat down and stared at the still straight flame of the candle. She found herself thinking about the stranger who had come to the door. He had kind eyes, and a pleasant voice, and large slow gentle movements. She sat and wondered about him.

The jarring of a gate in the deep silence, footsteps on the path, familiar, frightening footsteps. Her husband walked as though his temper jarred and jerked and twinged inside him. She had left the front door unlatched. She heard it thrust open so brutally with the toe of a boot that it struck the wall.

Something shivered in her.

"Rachel."

She stood up. She had grown so dreadfully wise as to the significance of these home-comings, and she could tell by his voice and his movements just what she had to fear. His sober home-comings were sullen and silent, his drunken ones rough and silly. But to-night she knew that he would be in one of those sane and savage moods when the devil was thin-lipped and ruthless in him, sufficiently inflamed to be brutal like some ring-master with a whip.

“Your supper’s ready, Tod.”

She had lost the courage to fight back at him, nor had her courage ever been very great. Her sensitiveness had always been at his mercy. He came limping into the room.

“Why the hell haven’t you lit the lamp?”

Yes, why hadn’t she? Was it that she preferred the dim light of that candle?

“We’re rather short of oil, Tod.”

“We would be.—Light it. Here, give me the matches.”

He lit the hanging lamp, and as though fascinated she observed his face. It had a kind of hard, polished brightness; the lips were drawn back from the teeth. His hands were quite steady, remorselessly steady.

“Afraid of too much light, are you? Sit down.”

She made as though to sit on the sofa.

“I have had my supper, Tod.”

“Well, you can have some more, can’t you? Sit down at the table. What have we got? No bloody surprises in this house, what? Cold mutton and spuds! My god, you’re some housewife! Well,—you’ll eat it too.”

He carved two large wedges from the ragged joint, piled on cold potatoes, and thrust the plate at her.

“Eat it. Sit down; I’ll get another plate. You want feeding up. You’ve got a face like a waxy potato.”

Her meekness had been her life’s mistake, or rather—her marrying him had begun it. She had been tricked by compassion for a man who had come back crippled from the war. She sat down at the table with that plate of food in front of her.

“Really, I don’t want it, Tod.”

He had limped into the scullery for a plate, and a knife and fork.

“Eat it,—damn you, and don’t argue.”

He sat down opposite her, and seizing the loaf, cut bread as though the loaf was a live thing to be savaged.

“Where’s the dog?”

“In his kennel.”

“Suppose you’d like to pitch that to him, but you won’t.—You’ll sit there and eat it, my girl. Starving yourself, what! The little martyr! A lot of use you’ve been to me, haven’t you? Milk and jam. I ought to have married a woman with some guts in her.”

Head bent, lashes lowered, she made an effort to eat the food he had piled upon her plate. She was aware of a feeling of tightness in her throat as though some hand was compressing it. She was going to cry. She mustn’t cry. Tears exasperated him.

She was conscious of being watched. She—was—crying. The tears ran down her cheeks.

“My god, blubbing again! Stop it, can’t you?”

“I can’t, Tod.”

“Well, blub, damn you, blub.”

IV

"My good John, you are—an ass."

Yes, it had not been very intelligent of him to carry two buckets of water up two flights of stairs and bathe in it, without having visualized the eventuality that the bath would have to be emptied. What was he to do with that surplus water? Carry the hip-bath to the window and tip out its contents, or return the water to its bucket and carry it downstairs? Yes, how very unintelligent of him. But on that first morning he allowed the tower to have the laugh of him. He threw up the lower sash, carried the bath to the window, and poured a libation to the great god Pan.

But he felt reproved by the slovenliness of the act. Even a hermit——. But, by the way, hermits had been very unclean saints. The new sanctities of sanitation and a sense of humour could not permit an Oxford Master of Arts to empty his bathwater out of a window. It might be done once perhaps, but to make a habit of it, even in this solitary place, would be unseemly.

What was the solution of the problem? Abandon his bath or make a weekly ritual of it, or take it in the garden? And having served and eaten his breakfast and lit a pipe Luce went out into the weedy wilderness, and was instantly reproached by the dirty work he had perpetrated. There was a great wet stain down the face of the tower. It seemed to accuse him like a woman over whose clean apron——!

But what a morning, sunlight and the young green of the year! He felt moved to take himself and his pipe to the top of the tower. Work in the garden could wait. He climbed the stairs, swung back the trap, and emerging upon the leads, was confronted with a solution of the sullage problem. Here, in fact, was a lead-lined bathroom open to the skies, and so arranged that the rain ran off it and was carried through the parapet into a rain-head and down a pipe to the ground below. Should he carry his bath up here? And two buckets of water? Well, after all, it would be an economy of labour. And then he laughed, loudly and deeply, like a man who has caught himself in a ridiculous and delightful piece of clowning. Damn it, he would have his bath up here on the leads, and just tip the thing over, and call the resultant—rain.

Meanwhile, the day was waiting for him in its green coat of many shades. There was not a cloud in the sky and no wind moving, and the horizon was far

and clear. Old Temperley had told him that the Chilterns were visible from the tower. Luce pulled at his pipe and smiled. He was in a happy mood, and ready to quiz himself and the occasion. What an advertisement one could insert in *The Times* should one wish to sublet the tower! “Open air bathroom with a view of the Chilterns.” But with other fancifulness he began to survey the middle distance, and like a robber baron in his tower consider possible assaults and his defences. The ground fell away steeply on the south and east, more gradually so on the north and west. He had the Brandon woods as a barrier between him and the village. A by-road traversed the valley on the east, but it was so smothered in trees that only an occasional loop was visible. So far as he could judge, the farmhouse with the big beech tree was the nearest habitation, and searching for it he found that he could see the chimney, one gable and strip of roof. A thin spiral of smoke was rising from the chimney.

Well, they were almost as solitary down there as he was in his tower. A pretty little creature—that woman, with her creamy skin and her sloes for eyes. But why had she looked frightened? Was it just her cast of countenance, or in that lonely place had she something to fear? And then with peculiar suddenness he remembered that incident of a month ago when he had walked from West Brandon to look over the tower, the sound of a woman weeping in the woods, and his unanswered challenge. Had it been——? And if it had been, what concern was it of his? He sat himself down sideways on the parapet as on the edge of a precipice, and pulling reflectively at his pipe, reminded himself that women were emotional creatures. For example, the very idea of sitting on this parapet would have made his late wife shudder. Poor Norah had had no head for heights,—poor Norah. And then he was conscious of another curious linking up of associations, the emergence of an impression that appeared to have been shaping itself at the back of his mind. The woman at the farm had reminded him vaguely of someone, and now the resemblance became actual. Why had his memory been holding its cards under the table, to produce them at this particular moment? Let the psycho-analyst explain that! The woman at the farm reminded him of his dead wife, or to put it more conventionally, she belonged to the same sensitive, sensuously-spiritual type.

The discovery moved him to unexpected emotion. He sat down to confront it, that is to say, he swung both his legs over the parapet and sat poised above fifty feet of blank wall. He remained there in that singular position, smoking his pipe, and looking down at the chimney of Beech Farm. He and Norah had been such good pals. She had understood him; she had suffered the large, impulsive unpractical child in him. He had missed her horribly. For a year he had drifted about rather like a dog without a mistress, and then time had placed a large, cool hand upon the hurt. He had accommodated to things, become

perhaps a little more solitary and visionary, a shirker of noise and of crowds and of social involvements. But, somehow, the woman down yonder had revived the old smart.

He was quite sure now, though he could not say why, that it was she who had been weeping in secret on that April day.

But this sort of thing would not do. He suddenly realized his rather precarious position and his duties. He was a middle-aged oddity who had chosen the life of a recluse, and even a recluse possessed responsibilities. He had his books to unpack, and his breakfast crockery to wash, and that weedy garden demanded attention. Pivoting, he swung his legs back over the parapet, and went down the stairs. He found that his pipe had gone out. Well, that was a hint to him that man should labour, and not dabble in suggestible sentiment.

So, in a mood that demanded self discipline he went forth with a spade, took off his coat and began to work upon the weedy garden. He had been accustomed to spade work in the old days, and this light soil was very different from Sussex clay. The spade buried itself almost without the weight of his foot, and the quick turn of the wrist came back to him. He had taken out a trench two spits wide and flung the soil back over the plot. Chickweed and groundsel were buried in the trench, docks and couch extracted and flung into a wooden box. Couch was a test of a man’s conscience; every confounded little fragment had to be picked out of the soil, and Luce gave his conscience full play. He put in six hours of digging and by tea-time his back was protesting.

He went in to put the kettle on the stove, and in taking the milk jug from the cupboard he remembered that the supply would have to be renewed. That meant going down to the farm.

2

Should he go down to the farm?

For the second time in one day he admonished himself: “John, you are an ass.”

Why this hesitation, this sudden shyness? Yet a part of him was asserting that this daily pilgrimage in quest of a jug of milk might become both boring and embarrassing. He would get hold of one of the farm cottagers and bribe a child to deliver his daily milk. Yes, that was the solution of the problem.

Meanwhile, the immediate necessity confronted him. Confound it, why all this fuss and vacillation? One could presume that tinned milk was to be bought at West Brandon, and if he was going to be so shy of Beech Farm, a supply of tinned milk would render the cow superfluous. It was said that some people preferred tinned milk. He lit a pipe, washed up the tea things and put them away. Now for a book, something adequately testing, Jolland on “The Quantum Theory.” He sat down with Jolland, his back to the window and the sunlight in the trees. The day’s digging had made him feel good, and the tobacco in his pipe had a new fragrance.

Jolland was an abstruse fellow and so was his exposition of certain hypotheses. Jolland buried himself in long sentences and in paragraphs that were Germanic. He led you along labyrinthine passages, and when you had reached the end of one of them you had forgotten how you had entered it. Was that Jolland’s fault, or was his mind failing to concentrate? He put the book aside for a minute, and turning his head, became absorbed in contemplating sunlight, shadow, and trees. The interlude was fatal to Jolland. Luce found himself becoming involved in a mood upon which was imposed the claims of the intuitional as opposed to the analytical. Those trees and the sunlight were just so many million corpuscular forces in swift movement, and he—a complex of like minute centres of force, and their interaction resulted in the thing one called awareness. But why trees? Why not beefsteaks or aeroplanes? But that was quibbling. According to his other dimensional dreaming man should so evolve as to be capable of divining things super-sensuously. For instance, it was his intention to go and stand by starlight on the top of this tower and attempt—like some ancient seer—to project himself.

Abruptly he sat up straight in his chair and Jolland slid to the floor.

Someone had knocked at the green door of the tower. That—according to his auditory sense data was reality. He hesitated. Who was the visitor? Old Temperley perhaps? He remembered that he was collarless; he had not resumed his collar since his bout of digging in the garden. But why boggle about a collar? He got up, went out into the vestibule, opened the door, and found—nothing.

No, not quite nothing. A jug of milk had been placed on the top step with a neat paper cap fastened over the mouth of the jug. Someone had scribbled a few words on that piece of paper. He bent down, took the jug in his right hand and read—"I had to go to the village. I thought I could save you trouble."

3

His ultimate decision was a strange one, though he did not reflect that the solution had caused him far more conscious effort than had Professor Jolland. He was in possession of two milk-jugs, a white and a brown, and the brown one belonged to Beech Farm. It would have to be returned. He had removed the paper cap, and instead of throwing the thing away, he smoothed out its creases and slipped it between the pages of "The Quantum Theory." The milk was transferred from the brown jug to the white one. He put on a collar, collected a hat, and set out to return that jug. It could be done without his meeting her.

On this windless day the woods were very still. Sounds travelled far, and the air was full of bird notes. A humble-bee boomed past him, mimicking the sound of a distant train. A yaffle went winging and laughing over the young bracken to disappear behind a group of thorns. Peaceful sounds these, and good for the ear, but as he struck the lane and followed its windings he became aware of other sounds, voices that were as discordant as the voices of a couple of scolding jays. He saw a tumbril standing in the lane close to a hedge, its shafts cocked in the air, and in passing he noticed the name painted on it. T. Ballard. Beech Farm.

But his immediate concern was with the voices. They appeared to come from the farm. Already he could see the spread of the great beech tree by the gate, but a high hedge on his left hid the paddock and buildings. The two voices were coming nearer, and happening upon a thin place in the hedge he straddled the ditch and looked through. He could see the two quarrelling men. They were in the paddock half-way between the house and the big beech tree, and not more than fifty yards from where he stood. He recognized the man who was facing the gate as the fellow whom he had found standing at the foot of the tower stairs on the day when he had first explored his new hermitage.

Moreover, he could hear what was passing between these two. The man with his back to the gate was obviously a farm hand, a tall, round-shouldered fellow whose jacket looked too small for him. So, the other man must be Ballard, and Ballard's mouth was an ugly slit in a face of bleached fury.

"See here, you bloody swine, you'll fetch that cart in——"

"Not me. You be careful, Mr. Ballard."

“I’ll be careful with you,—you slinking brute. You’re not worth the dirty boots you loaf in.”

But the venom in the voice was more wicked than the words it uttered. Nice person this! Luce’s eyes were fixed for the moment on the round-shouldered figure of the carter. The man stood quite still, but in his stillness there was the tension of a restraint that had reached breaking point. His right fist was pressed against his thigh, the arm straight and rigid.

“Shut your foul mouth,” was all he said, “I’ve finished here.”

And then Ballard made a rush at him. The man stepped quickly aside and the blow went over his shoulder, but Luce saw that rigid arm double itself and shoot out. His fist caught Ballard full in the face, and the smack of the blow was audible to Luce in the hedgerow.

It sufficed. Ballard was on his back, a man who could be counted out, and the carter turning his head to spit, swung round and walked with a deliberate and characteristic slouch towards the gate. He had reached it and had flung it open when Ballard sat up and getting on his feet staggered like a drunken man across the grass.

He screamed.

“Come back, you swine, and I’ll kill you.”

The carter pulled the gate to with a crash, and unconcerned, like a man who had finished his day’s work, walked off down the lane.

Luce, standing there in the green hollow of the hedge, decided that this was no moment for the returning of milk-jugs. Moreover, Ballard, with blood on his face, had rushed to the gate and was shouting after the man who had floored him. “If I catch you round here, Lovel, I’ll blow your bloody head off.” Yes, this screaming little bully was best left to recover his temper. Luce came out of the hedge, and keeping to the grass, made his way back up the lane towards the woodland.

So, that hard-faced, venomous little blackguard was the woman’s husband, and his impression of her as a woman who lived under the shadow of some perpetual fear was understandable. Probably, it was just as well that he had not happened to introduce himself to Ballard with that empty milk-jug as his visiting card. Such a fellow might be prone to misconstructions. But was that the reason why she had left him his milk on her way to West Brandon? O, very possibly. She was afraid of this violent little beast. And suddenly he paused and stood still as though to listen to the cooing of a wood-pigeon in a beech tree on the rising ground above him. Was it in her mind to call for the empty

jug on her way back to the farm?

Luce gave a shrug of his big shoulders and went on towards the sandpit and the track that led up out of the lane. His blue eyes seemed to be confronting some inward issue. Surely, no human involvement was possible over the selling of a jug of milk? How very ridiculous! It was no desire of his to insert his peaceful and rather otiose self into some rustic tragedy. But why use the word tragedy? Possibly he had misconstrued the whole situation, and most certainly it was no affair of his. He would give Beech Farm a wide berth in future, and manage with tinned milk. Tinned milk was preferable to spilt milk, especially when the spilling of it was in the hands of other people. Luce was not a very social creature; he had withdrawn into this solitude to dream and think and scribble, and since his wife's death he had become more and more separative and sensitively aloof from the most obvious of life's discords. He did not want to be bothered with people, and most certainly not with people who were living in a state of untidy, primitive emotion.

He came to the place where the path skirted the Brandon woods. Here were banks of rhododendrons twelve feet high, and in places the path ran like a secret passage through the undergrowth. The track branched in a little, open, sunny space, a narrow path continuing towards the tower, the main way turning sharply to the right into the sudden shadows of trees and rhododendrons. These banks and mounds of dark foliage were brilliant with blossom.

Luce was within three steps of the point where the track forked when the woman whom he was proposing to avoid appeared in that green entry. Luce had the sun behind him, and the figure that confronted him was bosom high in shadow, but her face was lit by the sun, and the startled pallor of it had the effect of a flash of light.

Both of them stood still, staring at each other. Then Luce pulled off his hat.

"I'm sorry. Afraid I startled you."

The breath seemed to escape from her with a little sighing sound. Her eyes had been large and blurred and black. Now, they caught the light.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

Was he sorry, or were the words mere symbols? But the interplay was too swift and subtle for self-analysis. Something in him had been touched by her frightened face. There was a streak of anger in his compassion, for he had begun to understand her fear. She had a very live devil, and no skeleton, in her

cupboard.

“These paths make one’s feet like ghost’s feet.”

He smiled at her. She had discovered the empty jug in his hand. The frightened look had returned. Was it that she had cause to dread even the casual appearance of a stranger? And quickly he was inspired to tell her a white lie.

“O, yes, the jug. Thank you for the milk. I was taking this back, and then I remembered that I had forgotten the money.”

Her look of relief was instant and unconcealed.

“O, you needn’t bother. I’ll take it.”

She had a largish basket with her, and she took the jug from him and slipped it into the basket so that it was hidden. He remarked the concealment.

“How much do I owe you, Mrs. Ballard?”

His use of her name seemed to startle her.

“O, please don’t bother now. Leave it until the end of the week.”

It was his turn to be startled. So, she was assuming that this milk business would be permanent. Well, between two reasonable people why shouldn’t it be? But this husband of hers could not be described as a reasonable person, and Luce felt bothered.

“You would rather I left it?”

“Yes.”

“I was wondering whether it might not be rather a nuisance to you. I mean —my——”

His voice died away. She had been looking at him with wide, clear eyes, and suddenly their expression changed. She appeared confused, conscious of some secret shame, and of his being wise as to it. Her lips trembled, but no sound came. Luce’s gaze had dropped. He was looking at her basket and the hand that held it. He seemed to be sharing her silence and her distress, and absorbing from it an emotion that was both hers and his.

But this silence had to be broken.

“Shall I go down and see your husband—about this?”

She looked up at him quickly, momentarily, almost like a woman glancing round the edge of a curtain.

“My husband does not like strangers. I mean, we used to have the Tower for our men, and when Mr. Temperley took it away——.”

“I see. I’m an interloper,” and he made himself smile; “that’s quite understandable. And I’m rather like your husband in not being sociable. I dare say I can manage on tinned milk.”

“O, no, why should you?”

“It won’t kill me.”

“But it’s such a little thing, so silly.”

“Isn’t life made up of silly little things?”

He drew a smile from her.

“Yes. Do you know the old sandpit, Mr. Luce?”

“I do.”

“I could leave you a jug there.”

He stared at her. Probably she did not appreciate the implications such a piece of deception might involve.

“Could you?”

“Yes.”

After all, what a harmless subterfuge was this, and why all this pother about his daily supply of milk? He would not meet her there. It was like leaving a letter for some obliging person to post.

He laughed.

“But why should you trouble? Are you sure?”

She nodded at him.

“I take my dog out nearly every afternoon. Good-bye, Mr. Luce. I ought to be home.”

Home! As he stood and watched her disappear into one of those green tunnels he realized that she was going back to that mad dog of a fellow. A moment later he had reached that other more significant conclusion. Assuredly, it had been Ballard’s wife whom he had heard weeping in the sandpit on that April day.

V

RAIN.

It spread from the west in the night, windless rain, straight and heavy. Luce heard the rush of it in the grey of the morning, and the musical gurgling of that fifty-foot pipe from the leads to the earth. His window showed him a world of wet green gloom, dripping trees, soaked soil. So low was the sky that it seemed to rest on the tree-tops. Fingers of grey vapour seemed to trail across the woods.

Well, if he desired a shower-bath he had only to go up on to the leads. A rain-bath! The idea piqued him, and slipping out of his pyjamas and into a brown mackintosh, he climbed the stairs, pushed up the trap-door, and felt himself among those streaming clouds. He took off his mackintosh, and hanging it on one of the chimney-pots stood there naked.

So large were the drops that he felt their individual impact upon his body. A thousand ghostly fingers seemed to be tapping his skin. The deluge soaked his hair, and ran down into his eyes. How beautiful and exquisite was Nature when you had no sodden cloth to clog you! Almost, he felt himself to be a brother to the tall trees who stood with their heads and shoulders dripping, so still and so greenly glad.

This would be a book day. No work in the garden. He collected his mackintosh from the chimney, and went down and towelled himself. His indoor mood was satisfied with a shirt, slippers and a pair of old grey flannel trousers. He dawdled over the preparing and the eating of his breakfast. He had opened the window and sat listening to the wet whispering of the woods. How peaceful and profound was Nature.

He got up to fill a pipe. Hallo,—he was getting rather short of tobacco. The tin accused him of having smoked more than his usual ration; there was less than two days' supply left. Well, why shouldn't he walk over to West Brandon; the woods would be wonderful in this rain. He might even buy a daily paper, and find the pulp of it more useful than its news.

His mood was for the rain in the woods. He shaved himself, substituted rough knickers and stockings for the flannel trousers, buttoned the mackintosh to his chin and put on his oldest hat with its brim turned down. The track

through the Brandon woods was a wet black squdge, with the banks of rhododendron flooding it like green roofs. In five minutes he looked like a wet tree trunk, and his grey hat had become black. The drenched woods streamed. They smelt of wet leaf-mould; the red and mauve flowers of the rhododendrons were like clouded lamps.

Brandon looked like a deserted village. Luce noticed a row of May flowering tulips in a cottage garden with their cups closed and heads bowed against the rain. A drenched lilac drooped across the path. The village shop, standing back with white windows behind six pollarded limes, had not troubled to put out its newspaper boards. Luce felt like apologizing to the shop and its owner, for he dripped on its floor like a wet sheepdog. He did apologize.

"Afraid I've brought in the weather."

"That's quite all right, sir. We wanted rain."

"We've got it. A quarter of a pound of Player's Medium, please."

"I'm afraid I have only ounce packets, sir."

"Never mind."

Luce groped with a wet hand for the silver in a breeches pocket. And then he remembered the perpetual problem of the daily milk. He could hardly expect to find a jug in the sandpit on such a day as this, and as an insurance against fate he bought two tins of milk and stuffed them in his mackintosh pockets. As for the daily paper he left it unpurchased, for the thing would have been pulp unless he had carried it like a poultice under his shirt.

A waggon and team were going by as he emerged from the shop, the carter walking beside the leader, with a sack over his head and shoulders. Luce stood to watch it pass. A figure in a white mackintosh came round the angle of a red wall, old Temperley out in the rain, and loving it. His fresh face had a rain-drop pendant from the tip of its Roman nose.

"Good morning, Mr. Luce. Enjoying a shower-bath?"

Luce had just taken off his hat to shake it.

"Hallo, sir. You out?"

Obviously so! No sort of weather kept Mr. Temperley within doors. Like a boy he was capable of paddling wilfully through every puddle, and at the age of seventy-three the crossing of a village street is something of an adventure.

"How's the tower, Mr. Luce?"

Luce, having shaken his very wet hat, replaced it much as a Viking might have helmed himself.

"Everything that one could ask for."

"Not disturbed at night?"

The question was ironic, and Luce countered its playfulness.

"You might have driven a much harder bargain with me, sir. You might have advertised the place as the most silent spot in Surrey."

"God forbid, Mr. Luce."

"Exactly. But there is one thing I do complain of. I'm roused up at dawn by a most infernal shouting."

"Shouting, Luce?"

"Yes, the birds."

And having caught Mr. Temperley out, he made the suggestion that it was unwise to stand about in such rain. Mr. Temperley had his answer ready; he had been born under the sign of Gemini, and he liked the last word. "Well, come in and have a glass of sherry." Luce confessed that he had not cultivated the old-fashioned sherry and biscuit habit, or its modern variant. Moreover, his wetness would be an insult to anybody's carpets and chairs. Mr. Temperley disposed of the objections. If Luce was not in the habit of drinking sherry, an occasional glass would not create a crave; as for the carpets, they were like Mr. Temperley, of an age to welcome society, even though its feet might be muddy.

"Besides, I have one or two flints to show you. Veritable Mousterian, from a gravel patch near Woking."

Luce humoured old Temperley, for—after all—this old gentleman was a very charming person. He was taken into the Georgian house, and allowed to remove his boots and parade in wet socks. Mr. Temperley kept his sherry and his latest treasures locked up in a black oak corner-cupboard.

"Sit down, Luce. Here we are. Now, what do you think of that?"

He passed Luce a piece of flaked flint, and Luce, holding it in the palm of a big hand, examined the primitive artifact.

"A nice specimen, sir."

"A double-edged scraper, what? And look at this for a *coup de poing*."

Luce held the pointed pear-shaped weapon in the hollow of his hand, just

as primitive man might have held it. He was visualizing the primitive creature as the ethnologists described him, and suddenly he was reminded of a certain long-armed, slouching, sinister figure—that fellow Ballard at the farm. Ballard's head was not Neanderthal, but there was something in his poise—and in his bent-kneed walk that might have linked him with this flint tool.

Mr. Temperley was watching Luce's serious, absorbed face, and the way his fist grasped the flint. This big man's blue eyes were the eyes of a visionary, and Mr. Temperley could imagine him laying a hand on some old sword and becoming in the spirit the dead man who had wielded it.

"Not a bad weapon that—in a fist like yours."

With a peculiar smile Luce placed the flint on the table.

"These things can infect one. Almost, one might become a primitive. By the way, sir, I have a rather primitive sort of neighbour."

"Oh," said Mr. Temperley, raising his white eyebrows and filling a sherry glass.

"That fellow at Beech Farm."

"Ballard?"

"Yes."

Mr. Temperley passed Luce the glass.

"Had any trouble with him?"

"No, nothing of that sort. I found him at the bottom of my stairs—one morning."

Mr. Temperley sat down and held his sherry glass up to the light. He liked good wine and good gossip, but both wine and gossip should have the kindness of age. Yes, the Ballards. A case that went to prove that a woman should not marry out of pity, for the thing that you pitied might turn and rend you. It was true that Ballard had been badly smashed up in the war, and it could be argued that a crippled body need not house a crippled soul. Mr. Luce's experience had been otherwise.—"When there's an outward blemish, Luce, I'm always suspicious of some mental scar. In Ballard's case there is a very definite scar. —I'm sorry for the wife."

Luce was sufficiently disingenuous to ask a question that might keep Mr. Temperley talking.

"Is there a wife?"

Yes, most certainly there was a wife, though she combined the functions of domestic drudge, house-mate and scape-goat. She had been a nurse in the war, and that was how she had met Ballard, and taken pity on him. Ballard had been something of a dandy as an officer and a stout fellow who had won the M.C. and a Bar. Superficially, Ballard had presented quite a good appearance when he had taken up Beech Farm. A hard nut and a hard drinker, perhaps; but farming was sometimes such a brutal business. Who was it who had described life on the land as muck and misery? Mr. Temperley had lived with the land, leasing it, conveyancing it, loving and hating it almost like a man who had to struggle with it for a living. There were some farms that were like rogue elephants. They got a man down and crushed the life out of him.

Luce had finished his sherry and he sat holding the empty glass.

"Yes, the French understand some of the ferocity and meanness that can grow out of the soil. You get it in Maupassant.—But it is hard on a woman, unless——"

Mr. Temperley took up the point.

"It's one of those cases of—well—I've forgotten the word for it. No matter. There appear to be women of a particular emotional make-up who will put themselves under the feet of some trampling little brute, and make a religion of the thing. They may even derive satisfaction from it."

"In this case?"

"Well, she has stuck by him. It has sometimes amazed me what some women will stand."

Luce put his glass down and glanced at the clock.

"I rather take the view that some people are noxious animals, and would be better dead. I think I'm due for my second shower-bath, sir."

He rose slowly and stood looking into the wet garden.

"Good for the hay, and for the birds."

Mr. Temperley was putting the sherry away.

"If you should have any trouble with Ballard——"

Luce turned and smiled at him.

"I don't have trouble with people. To begin with, I'm rather too big for most men to quarrel with. And I don't quarrel."

Mr. Temperley chuckled.

“Yes, I suppose—if one is built like a St. Bernard, little snarling tykes don’t matter.”

2

She was one of those foolish creatures who even when a trivial promise has been made, can be worried by the thought of breaking it. Should she go out in such rain? But what if he walked all the way from the tower to find no jug of milk in the sandpit? Poor man, he would have no milk either for his tea or his breakfast. And he would think of her as a bric-a-brac creature who either forgot, or broke a promise if it did not suit her to keep it. She did not want him to think of her in that way.

She looked out of a window. The rain hung like a curtain, blurring out the landscape. But how very beautiful was the wet greenness of this spring world. The grass was lushing up in the paddock, and when the sun shone it would be a cloth of gold. She remembered that her umbrella had two rents in it; she had no money to pay for it to be re-covered.

But, her husband? He was in the waggon-shed overhauling the reaping machine in readiness for the hay harvest; it was an old machine, prone to fail in a crisis, and causing him to rage. The reaper was like her umbrella—a product of penury. Supposing he——? She stood there hesitant, a sensitive creature to whom any deception was somehow repugnant and humiliating. It was her heritage, this over-quick conscience, and she was the victim of it, like one who looks in a mirror and sees more than the reflection of a face. As a child she had suffered from this too-sensitive conscience. It had compelled her to quaint little confessions, self-ordained penances in a white nightgown. Always she had been so afraid of hurting people and of smirching that something in herself by the petty lyings and slynesses that cause cruder children no qualms. She could remember at school an older girl sneering at her. “You—are—a soppy little fool. Or do you think that by sneaking about yourself—you’ll suck up to old Grogan?”

And the sky had been very black over Beech Farm. He was in one of his dumb and deadly moods. Inevitably, she had noticed his bruised face, and had begun to ask him about it. It had been foolish of her, a natural impulse that should have been suppressed. He had snarled at her.—“Mind your own business, damn you.” Incidentally, she had gathered that he had sacked the carter Lovel, and was himself looking after the horses. And this particular mood, bleak and black like some dreadful day in December, was more to be

dreaded than his chattering rages.

Had she written her own tragedy? Might not things have been different if she had been a woman of coarser fibre and had scolded back at him? But she was not made to stand up to cruelty. The unreasoning crass brutishness of it seemed to paralyse her. She shook at the knees. She was so ready to take the failure to heart. She was the victim of her own too sensitive-self. That she could have made life good and wonderful for some other man was neither here nor there. She stood looking at the drenched and derelict garden, and even at this moment she was the creature of her conscience. She hesitated where most women would not have thought twice about such an adventure, or would have faced it with a shrug of passionate cynicism. Should she or should she not slip out with that jug of milk?

The jug stood ready on a shelf in the dairy. She had covered it with a paper cap. And suddenly the sensitive balance of her self swung over towards—"I will." She went quickly into the passage, took down an old black mackintosh from a peg, slipped into it and buttoned it to her chin. She did not bother about a hat, and her umbrella was too shameful. With the jug in her left hand she went out by the back door, and past a pleading dog whom she left gazing dolefully after her at the end of his kennel chain.

But if her sensitiveness was like swansdown on the surface of life she was not alone in feeling ridiculously responsible for the fulfilling of a contract, however trivial it might be. Her crossing of the paddock from the orchard hedge to the field gate under the beech tree might have been a traversing of no man's land. Would she be seen, shot at? And yet, she did not hurry; something in her refused to hurry. Why should she always be apologizing to her fate? With the milk-jug pressed against her bosom she walked towards the gate as though going upon an errand that no other creature could question, yet during those seconds she was listening for the expected voice. She heard nothing but the sound of the rain upon the beech leaves. She reached the gate, pulled the catch back, and was out in the wet green shelter of the lane.

At the tower Luce was buttoning up a very wet mackintosh. He too was pulled by the same sensitive thread. A little, inward voice had admonished him: "Supposing she should take the trouble to deliver your milk for you, are you going to be so churlish as to leave it untouched?" You did not snub a child or a woman of her sort in that way. So, pulling the door to after him, and with the empty jug in his hand, he went down through the wet woods to the sandpit.

It so happened that she reached the place half a minute or so before he did. She had placed the jug on the ground, and was standing looking at it, and wishing that she had a flat stone to add to the paper cap. There was no wind,

but she was wondering whether the rain would soak through the paper cover. She was looking about for something with which to cover the jug when Luce came to the edge of the pit.

Undiscovered for the moment he stood looking down at her. Her very dark hair gleamed wet. Her pale face had a kind of intent, childish innocence. She was looking for something, and in wondering what it was he forgot to ask himself whether he ought not to leave her unconscious of his coming. And then, she seemed to feel some other presence. There was a startled lifting of her head, an upward glance, a sudden stiffening of the thread of her black figure.

Almost, her eyes had a blind, blurred look. And then the breath seemed to escape from her with a little sighing sound.

"O—Mr. Luce."

She smiled, but her pale lips were poignant. What other figure had she feared to see poised up there amid the gorse bushes? He did not say that it seemed to be his fate to surprise her. She was like a frightened thing who asked to be allowed to smother her tremblings.

"Really, you should not have troubled in this rain."

He spoke to her like a large, middle-aged person reassuring a shy child, and coming round and down into the sandpit he tried to make the occasion appear pleasantly impersonal. He even attempted a touch of playfulness.

"As a matter of fact I was coming all the way with this jug and then I thought I had better look in here—on the chance."

She was still as white as the milk.

"But hadn't I promised?"

"Promises aren't like the laws of the Medes and Persians when it rains like this."

He saw her bend suddenly, take the jug and remove the paper cover. Was he a sentimentalist, or were his feelings about her quick and real? She belonged to another man, and possibly there was nothing about the savagery of sex that she did not know. Probably a man like Ballard threw love on the bed and ravished it. And yet——. He was holding his milk-jug and letting her fill it. He looked at her wet black hair and white neck, and was moved by a quality that seemed peculiarly hers. She was gentle. She was like this flowing milk. She might have been a young girl, virginal, sensitively shy, a thing unsoiled. She had a forehead that was shaped to be serene and sweet, lips that were clean

and tender.

The rain came down upon them both. And suddenly her wet head was raised. She drew back a little, looked at him and smiled.

“Will that be enough?”

“Plenty. I don’t indulge in milk puddings.”

“Have you anyone to make milk puddings for you?”

“No. And if I had—I should not order them. Some of us—you know—are a little odd.”

She seemed to question that word. Her eyelashes gave a little flicker.

“You like—being alone?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

“Just—with yourself. Yes,—I understand.”

She raised her face to the rain, and looked lost for a moment within herself. Her drenched hair was like a wreath, and Luce stood contemplating her. If they were alone together in the wet woods, that was but the mere chance of the day and of the weather. Two milk-jugs had met and exchanged their contents, that was all. He was going back to that brick tower, and she—to the farm.

He was aware of her face coming out of its dream. He would have said that she had been asleep, and that with her waking consciousness some inward pain had returned. Her wet face looked different, like Eve’s face outside the gate of Eden.—But what a sentimentalist he was! He was aware of her clasping that empty jug against her bosom. She seemed to shirk a direct glance.

“I’m afraid—we are getting so wet.”

His feeling was that she wanted him to go. Well, that was easy. But why did she look so rigid, like some animal whose fear——? He put up a hand, and then remembered that he had come out without a hat.

“You get back home. And if it rains like this to-morrow—please——.”

That last quick glance of hers puzzled him. It seemed to snatch itself away. He stood and watched her walk out of the sandpit, holding the jug between her breasts.

3

About six o’clock it ceased to rain, but there was no clearing of the sky. The cloudy canopy seemed to press even closer to the earth. The effect was the effect of twilight, one of those green-grey dusks after heavy rain, suffused with a damp melancholy and a silence that is sinister.

It was so dark in the kitchen that she had lit a candle. She was getting supper ready. The dog lay on a mat behind the door watching her as she moved over the brick floor, a floor that was always damp, and in winter seemed to chill you to the knees. She had a tin to open, something she had bought at the village shop, and perhaps because her thoughts were elsewhere, she bungled the business and cut her finger on the jagged edge.

A little petulance was born in her over this misadventure. She held her bleeding finger under the tap. It gushed for a few seconds, and then, with foolish gurglings, became mute and dry. So, the water in the storage tank had fallen below the level of the service pipe, which meant that no one had been active at the wheel pump on this wet day. Life in a solitary farmhouse could be full of such small vexations. She tied up her finger with a piece of old linen from a drawer, and so unskilfully that it looked like a small rag doll. He—might be in any minute, and there was the table to be laid, and perhaps, if she had the time she would go out into the well-house, and give the wheel a hundred turns. Though it was no affair of hers to work at the pump, she was just strong enough to swing the wheel, and when a man was tired and short-tempered emergencies had to be met.

The dog followed her into the sitting-room, and sat on the sofa while she was laying the table. She had nearly completed her task when she heard the back door open. He—was there. She heard the familiar sound of mucky boots being scraped on the old shovel that had been fixed edge upwards beside the door.

“Rachel.”

His voice sent a shiver through her.

“Yes, Tod.”

“Got any hot water?”

“No. But—I can——.”

“Hell,—what a house!”

She heard him kicking off his boots. He had been greasing the reaper and his hands were foul and slimy. She saw the dog slip down from the sofa and make for the dark corner behind the cupboard. He too was wise as to a man’s moods, and with a surreptitious swiftness she took Peter by the collar and led him to the foot of the stairs. They were old-fashioned stairs shut off by a door, and she opened the door, spoke softly to the dog, and giving him a gentle push, closed the door on him.

She heard her husband’s voice in the scullery.

“Damn it—no water.”

“I’m sorry, Tod, the boy must have forgotten.”

“God! The useless little swine! As if I hadn’t enough to do.”

These rages of his! She seemed to spend her life in trying to appease them, though life was sufficiently hard for both of them without the eternal horror of his almost insane anger.

“I’ll get you some, Tod.”

She rushed out with a basin to a water-butt in the yard, and returning, placed it in the sink for him.

“I’m sorry, Tod.”

But why should she be sorry? Why should the self-abasement always be hers? She was aware of his foul and greasy hands.

“I’ll get you some soda.”

He reached for a cake of yellow soap and plunged it and his hands into the basin.

“You’d better have some soda.”

“O, shut up. What, cut your finger?”

“Yes, on a tin.”

“You would!”

VI

HAD Luce kept a diary—which he did not do—he might have recorded in it during the next week certain happenings and his comments upon them. Being the unsocial person that he was he could set out to ignore much of the machinery of civilization, but he could not elude the persistencies of the Post Office. Very few people wrote him letters, yet a man cannot live in a civilized country without possessing an address. Luce had left his address with his London bankers, his lawyers, and with the head porter of his club, and then dismissed the matter from his mind.

A perspiring and aggrieved postman knocked at the door of the tower. He had a solitary letter to deliver, and it had caused him to curse eccentric gentlemen who withdrew into the wilderness. Luce, going to the green door, was met by the man's hot and sulky face.

"Mr. Luce?"

"Yes."

The man thrust the letter at him, and Luce, being a human person, did appreciate the fact that he had caused the Post Office some trouble. Also, May had developed a transitory heat wave, and flies had become active. Half a dozen of them had followed the postman to Luce's door.

"Afraid I've brought you out of your way. What about a glass of beer?"

The man's grievance was instantly appeased.

"That's all right, sir."

Luce served him with a bottle of beer.

"In the future you need not bother to deliver a lone letter like this. Keep them till you have collected a dozen."

The man smiled at him. The gentleman might be odd, but he was a gentleman.

"We can't do that, sir. You'll have your letters all right."

"I don't want 'em," said Luce. "I would be much obliged if you would lose them for me, but we English have a sense of duty!"

This solitary letter was not to be disposed of like some silly circular. It was from that wretched fellow Lowndes. It insisted upon Luce meeting him at their solicitor's office to settle some legal snag in a mutual trusteeship. Confound Lowndes! But knowing Lowndes as he did he resigned himself to the necessity of satisfying this meticulous person. Had the postman a telegraph form on him? He had. Luce wrote his message. "Meet you at Hunt's to-morrow 11 a.m.," gave the postman a shilling, and delivered him refreshed to the heat and the flies.

But this letter was to be a fine thread in the web of circumstance. Going down to collect his milk ration, with the pinewoods pungent in the heat, he found no milk-jug in the sandpit. Had she forgotten? Or had something prevented her from coming? And, after all, what right had he to be curious as to the cause of the omission, or to feel just a little peeved about it? Surely, he was not going to allow himself to be involved in sentiment? This milk business was becoming a little bit silly.

Let him not imagine that somebody else's wife had the face of a Cassandra. Tinned milk and celibacy would suffice at his age, nor had he any desire to blunder into the domestic china-shop. Women could be so temperamental. Next morning he put on his one passable lounge suit, and caught the 9.25 train from West Brandon station. He settled the business with his fellow trustee. He lunched at his club. He met Hugh Pusey at the club, and in a lax moment told him about the tower. Afterwards, he accused himself of being too facile a fool. "That's your idiotic way. You blurt things out and don't foresee the possible eventualities."

For, Pusey, who was a vivacious sort of ass, had shown a sudden enthusiasm for the fancifulness of the idea. He would look Luce up at his hermitage. Carlotta Reubens should drive him down in her car. In his Bloomsbury days Luce had known Lottie Reubens and had misliked her. If Hugh was her latest experiment in sex, that was no reason why Lottie should be inflicted upon him, even for tea.

Walking back from West Brandon in a shimmer of heat, and coming to the deep cleft in the Brandon woods where pines, beeches and rhododendrons shut out the sunlight, he was reminded of that little piece of ritual, the exchanging of milk-jugs. Was it just curiosity that persuaded him to diverge and visit the sandpit, or was it his fate to be afraid of hurting other people's feelings? Without analysing the impulse, he surrendered to it, and coming to the fringe of gorse bushes, looked down into the hollow. The white jug was there, and going down to collect it, he found a folded piece of paper tucked between the jug and the sand. The message had been written in pencil.

“Please forgive me. I did not forget you yesterday. I just could not come.”

He stood reflecting, the jug in one hand, the slip of paper in the other. Was it wise of her to leave notes about?

Also, there was a little, intimate breathlessness in this short message that both troubled and touched him. But, surely, he ought not to allow himself to be affected? And what was it that had prevented her from coming yesterday? Had that primitive—her husband—had anything to do with it?

Slipping the piece of paper into his pocket, he made his way back through the brambles and gorse to the mouth of the pit. Yes, this absurd question of this daily milk was becoming rather too serious. Most certainly it was unwise of her to leave notes under a jug. And what was he to do about it? Tell her? But would not that be a rather clumsy snub like hinting that she was trying to inveigle him into an affair? And she was not that sort of woman. Something in him was quite sure that she was not that sort of woman.

On his way home the solution occurred to him. Of course, that was the thing to do. He would go down to the farm and see her husband. He would make of it a simple and conventional occasion, and suppress all the previous interplay. He would say to her husband, “I should be much obliged if you would supply me with milk and eggs. Yes, as between neighbours. I could come down and collect my supply, or perhaps one of your labourer’s children would bring it up to me?” Yes, such rational behaviour was sound psychology. No doubt she would understand, and being a sensitive creature, be grateful to him.

2

Coming to the tower Luce saw it sunning itself among the trees. What a peaceful spot was this after Piccadilly and the Mansion House, so separate and serene! He would begin work to-morrow, the work which he had dreamed of doing. With a feeling of satisfaction he unlocked the green door, carried his milk-jug into the living-room, set it down on the table, threw up the lower sash of the window, and took off his coat.

He remembered that little note of hers in his pocket, and feeling for it, was about to crumple the thing up and throw it into the grate, when a sound outside the tower attracted his attention. He stood listening, the slip of paper in his hand. Footsteps? Was some inquisitive person exploring his garden? He was in the act of moving towards the window when a voice broke the silence.

"Hallo, anybody there?"

Luce's right hand dipped into a trouser pocket. He approached the window, leaned out, and saw—her husband. For the moment he just stared down at the upturned face. Confound it, had the fellow seen him in the sandpit and followed him up through the woods?

"Good evening. Yes,—I'm in."

"Well, that's lucky. My name's Ballard."

Luce, poised in his shirt sleeves above this human problem, realized that the fellow's face was friendly. But what the devil did he want?

"I think we have met before, Mr. Ballard."

"That's so. You found me—trespassing."

"We all do that—at times. As a matter of fact I was coming down to see you."

He was conscious of making inward comments upon the face of the man below, though, had these comments been translated into words, they would have been Erse or double-Dutch to the farmer. The sunlight was shining obliquely across his face. One cheek was in the light, the other in shadow. The teeth seemed to show as a hard white streak below the slit-like eyes. Sinister was the adjective that Luce used to himself.

“It was about my daily supply of milk and eggs. But won’t you come up, Mr. Ballard?”

“I’ve got a suggestion to make, Mr.——”

“Luce is my name.”

“Between neighbours, Mr. Luce.”

What was at the back of that hard, drink-raddled face? Luce had put on gloves of velvet.

“Come up, Mr. Ballard. You might like a drink?”

“That’s an idea, sir.”

Luce watched Ballard limp away round the base of the tower. He realized that he himself was putting on his coat. Why put on a coat? As a symbol of concealment? And he had that note in his trouser pocket. Had Ballard discovered that two quite innocent people had been swapping milk-jugs, and was the fellow playing Agag? If so, what an absurd predicament! Luce felt hot and a little angry. And then, suddenly, he remembered that confounded milk-jug. Supposing Ballard saw it and recognized it? Idiot! Obviously, he was not built for this sort of backstairs business, and feeling ridiculously guilty and resenting the shabbiness of it, he grabbed the jug, and put it away in his cupboard.

Footsteps upon stone, the faint creaking of a hinge, his own voice sounding breezy and swelling, a social service voice.

“Come in, Mr. Ballard.”

Ballard came in with that limping movement and a smirk that seemed to slide obliquely across his face. He pulled off his hat and showed the tenuous hair of a big, flat head that was going bald.

“Funny old place, this.”

“It suits me,” said Luce; “what can I give you? A little whisky? Sit down, Mr. Ballard.”

“Yes, just a spot of whisky, thanks.”

Ballard sat down and put his dirty hat on the table. It was not the sort of hat that a fastidious person would welcome in such a situation, but Luce had nothing to say on the matter. His concern was to find out what the fellow wanted. In opening the cupboard to collect the whisky bottle and two glasses, he exposed that jug to view, but his large body was interposed between it and his visitor.

“Afraid I haven’t any soda-water in stock.”

“Never mind the soda, Mr. Luce.”

Luce pushed the cupboard door to with an elbow, and set glasses and bottle on the table.

“Just back from town—on business.”

He proceeded to pour whisky into a glass, and since Ballard failed to produce any conventional suggestion as to the size of the drink, it was limited by Luce’s discretion. Let the fellow have a large one. He passed Ballard the glass, and reached for the water-jug which happened to live on the mantelpiece.

Ballard added an equal quantity of water to the whisky.

“Here’s to you, sir.—Well, as a matter of fact, I’m here on business.”

“O,” said Luce with a sudden stare, helping himself to whisky.

And what was Ballard’s business? Luce took himself and his glass to the window and balanced himself on the sill. Could there be any possible communion between the owner of that foul hat and the woman with the frightened eyes? He found himself listening to Ballard’s voice, a voice that had made itself glib and genial. And why, when he was not drinking, did Ballard cover the mouth of his glass with a flat right hand, as though someone might take a surreptitious pull at his liquor? But, from Luce’s point of view Ballard’s business was more curious and grotesque than the way he sat sheltering his whisky. Ballard was explaining that he had been obliged to sack one of his men, and the fellow was refusing to relinquish his cottage. Meanwhile, he was engaging another hand, but had no accommodation for him. The man was married, but without children, and would Luce consider letting the labourer occupy the annexe of the tower? It would be a temporary arrangement, but why should it not prove mutually helpful? The man’s wife was a decent body, and Luce might find her useful.

So, that was it! Luce felt both relieved and amused. He smiled at his visitor.

“I’m afraid that’s not feasible, Mr. Ballard.”

“You want the whole place?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

He found himself watching the other man’s eyes. They were eyes that retained an angry look even when he smiled.

“But you can’t need the whole damned place, Mr. Luce?”

“Solitude, Mr. Ballard. That’s why I came here. You see——”

“You won’t help a neighbour.”

“I don’t think you quite understand.”

Ballard put his glass on the table, reached for his hat, and stood up. His face had lost any assumption of friendliness, and to Luce it was the face of a man who was not quite sane, and whose temper was so little under control that it broke loose under the smallest provocation. The skin over his cheekbones looked tight and flushed. He clapped that foul hat on his head. His slits of eyes shot sharp, satirical glances round the room as though searching for some object that would shape with his conclusions.

“Well, that’s that, Mr. Luce! I take it you’ve got your own reasons for wanting to be private.”

Luce, perched on the window-sill, watched Ballard as he might have watched some unpleasant animal.

“Quite so. You can hardly expect me to explain——”

Ballard whipped an insolent smirk at him.

“Cut it out, Mr. Luce. I’m not a bloody fool. I’m not butting in on a petticoat show.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Cut it out, man, cut it out.”

He jerked himself round, limped to the door, and then faced about. His mouth looked crooked as he laughed.

“But if a man won’t meet me—I don’t meet him. You’ll have to go to the village shop for the lady’s milk and eggs.”

Luce sat quite still.

“I think you had better get out, Mr. Ballard.”

“I’m going, sir, don’t you worry.”

Luce stared at the closing door. So, the fellow had assumed that his solitude must be sacred to sex, and that he had a woman tucked away here.

Damned, smutty, malapert brute!

3

She heard him shouting at the dog.

“Come here, you bloody little beast!”

She was at the window in time to see a brown shape scurrying for the farm buildings, with half a brick bouncing behind it. Her pallor seemed to deepen. She pushed the casement open and dared to flout him.

“Tod!”

He turned on her. He was just beyond the garden wall.

“Hallo! What’s the matter with you?”

“I won’t have my dog——”

“O, won’t you? Bloody, useless brute. Seven and a tanner for that! You shut your silly mouth.”

She shut the window. Her impulse was to follow the dog, and to comfort him. Oh, if she could only run away. Why should she have to suffer this brutal bullying, this perpetual humiliation? But she had no money of her own, and even when she needed new shoes he would hand her out a pound note, and she had to produce a bill to him and account for the change. What was it that made a man cruel? She could understand worry and overwork and poverty making him bitter, but that he should find pleasure in being cruel was to her—incomprehensible.

Yes, she would go and reassure poor Peter. Probably she would find him crouching in some dark corner, for this was not the first time that she had had to rescue the dog; in fact she knew that he would remain in hiding until he heard her calling him. Her husband had disappeared, and she was letting herself out by the garden door when she heard his sudden voice behind her.

“Wait a minute, will you.”

He had come in by the back door, and she stood with face averted.

“Yes, Tod.”

“If that fellow who’s taken the old tower should come down for milk or eggs, slam the door in his face, see.”

She was conscious of holding her breath. Was this part of his cruelty? Had he been watching them, and was he just playing with her?

“Yes, Tod. But—what—is he like?”

“Big, a lot of hair, blue eyes. Talks like a gent from Oxford. I’ve just had a few words with him.”

“Have you?”

“I thought he might let me a couple of rooms for the new chap. Not he. Talked about—privacy. Damned fool. I wasn’t going to let the fellow do the high and mighty with me.”

“No, Tod.”

“Privacy! I pulled his bluff. He has a woman up there, that’s why he’s so—exclusive. I told him so.”

“Did you, Tod?”

“You should have seen his face.—Well, you slam the door on him if he comes down here.”

“But he won’t, Tod, will he, now?”

“I should say not. That’s all. Where are you going?”

“After the eggs.”

“Do you go after eggs without a basket? Don’t lie to me. Do you understand. It’s that damned dog, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“All right. You are as big a fool as the dog. I’m taking the gun out.”

She fled, carrying her secret shame with her, and the core of that shame was her fear of him. Cowardice! Why should she be such a contemptible coward, and shake at the knees when he shouted at her? The humiliation of it! He despised her, and she was beginning to despise herself. She had not dared to answer him back, even to confess that she knew Mr. Luce by sight. She had stood there quaking, expecting him to accuse her of having tried to fool him. And he had been to the tower; he had made a scene. And what did her new friend think? Well, that was all over. She need not expect him to come down again to the sandpit.

Living there with a woman? She did not believe it. But how pleasant for a man like the tenant of the tower to have the vulgar gibe thrown in his face. Her husband seemed to leave smeary marks upon everything that he touched.

She found herself in the rick-yard, calling softly to the dog.

“Peter, Peter, it’s all right.”

With a little inward pang she realized that she had nothing but the dog.

4

It was a source of wonder to John Luce that man had the stars and the trees to look at, and that modern man looked at neither, and was like a blind beggar squatting against a wall, asking alms of Fate. He could remember an occasion when he had taken a city lad out for a day's ramble, and had discovered that trees were no more than bunches of green wool to this urban mind. They had all looked alike to the lad, and when Luce had tried to teach him to distinguish them, he had found—to his astonishment—that his companion could not appreciate the differences. But to Luce trees were intimate, individual creatures, prone to moods like man. You had to stand against the trunk of a tree and look up into the great heart of it to feel and know that tree. It might speak to you with different voices on different days.

It was so on this day in May. He had been watching a big beech in the Brandon woods, for the swelling buds of it had puzzled him. He had always thought of beech buds as pale and pointed spurs, and on the side towards the south the buds of this particular tree were more like green-gold beads. On this evening, going down into the woods after the ugliness of Ballard, he found that two warm days had solved this sylvan problem for him. Those swelling buds had opened to display a multitude of pollened flowers, and as he stood looking at them he was moved to exclaim—"How silly of me! Why didn't I think of that before?"

A little breeze came and stirred the young leaves, and the great tree seemed to laugh.

"Yes, how foolish of you, my friend. But last year's hot summer persuaded me to all this fruitfulness. Look for the woman in me—too. Can you find her? And if you come to me later I will show you all my little boxes with their three seeds inside. Besides, there are other marvels, other moods."

Inevitably so. Was it the association of ideas? This beech tree, that other beech tree by the gate of Ballard's farm, Ballard's wife. What an unlovely fate for a sensitive creature to be linked to a thing like Ballard! Well, the problem of his daily milk supply had been solved for him. Was he sorry? Sorry?

He was leaning against the trunk of the tree, and all about stretched a great greenness, solitude. He had desired this solitude, and now that it was his, he had a most strange feeling as of some other presence permeating it. A pale

face, dark eyes, the sound of weeping. But how sentimental and foolish of him!

Was he thinking too much of a particular woman? But, he had not been thinking about her.—Was that true? Had not some other self crept almost imperceptibly into this green world, as though to share it with him? Out of the rib of circumstance had the Unknown God created Eve?

What nonsense!

He broke off two or three flowering sprays of beech foliage, and with a last upward look at the tree, turned homewards. The woods were steeped in silence and in evening sunlight. And there, just where the path broke out into a patch of heathland, he met her.

5

She had her dog with her, and when Luce had looked at her face, he gave his attention to the dog. She did not want to be looked at too closely.

“Hallo, old fellow.”

The dog was as shy as his mistress. Experience had not persuaded him to feel friendly towards anything strange in trousers. He stood bristling, looking up with bright brown eyes into Luce’s face. He growled.

“Peter!”

But Luce had a way with dogs. An animal can be as sensitive as a human, and Luce stood quite still, smiling at Peter. The dog’s eyes remained fixed on his face, and when Luce spoke to him again, there was a little movement of the stumpy tail.

“Well, have you had a good look at me, Peter? Now try—a smell.”

He put a hand down, and deliberately the dog sniffed it, looked up into Luce’s face with eyes that had lost their mistrust. Luce fondled the dog. His large hands were very gentle.

She was watching them. She had understood his quickness in turning to the dog, and was grateful to him for it. She was trying to say something to him.

“I’m so sorry, so—ashamed.”

He was bending down, with the dog’s head between his hands. He might not have heard her, but she was wise as to his silence.

“No more growls, my lad. Please don’t apologize to me, Mrs. Ballard. I don’t take—things—to heart.”

He straightened up and looked at her.

“I’m afraid you——”

He saw her lips quiver. It was her turn to hide her face from him, and to bend down and caress the dog.

“Please don’t think. One shouldn’t—talk about some things. But, you—will—understand?”

“Of course. I understand, my dear.”

He was smiling at her. She raised her head for a moment, looked at him with a kind of blind strangeness, and turned to go.

“Thank you.”

And with the dog at her side he saw her take the path towards the pinewoods. She did not pause or look back, but seemed to hurry like one who was not sure of her strength. Luce’s blue eyes stared. What on earth had made him call her “My dear”?

VII

THUNDER in the air.

Luce had carried a deck chair up to the leads to watch the coming of the storm. Half the sky was still blue, but cutting across it was the black cloud canopy like a vast and movable ceiling being slid across the welkin. Little grey shreds of vapour trailed above. There was a great stillness, a feeling of suspense. The trees, with their green hoods drawn, seemed to stand breathless and expectant.

Over yonder the sun still shone on a landscape that was as vivid as a piece of paradise, green fields, green woods bathed in a golden glow. On the other horizon, blackness, rumblings, a kind of twilight. Thunder in May. He could remember being taken as a boy to see Irving play in *Arthur*, and that strange scene of the Queen's Maying, Guinevra and her women among the green and flowering thorns, and the sudden darkness and the imminence of sad and tragic things. Thunder, lightning, treacheries, wounds and death, rain upon the May blossom, white petals falling.

Luce saw distant lightning stab the grey horizon. He sat and watched the storm approach as though it marched to meet the oncoming night. He could see a grey veil dropped over distant hills. That meant rain. The stillness held, and then a sudden wayward wind came rushing through the woods; tree tops swayed; the tall firs tossed their arms in strange gestures. Again, there was a stillness, a feeling of suspense. And suddenly the sky was rent nearer and nearer to him, and in the gloom, the momentary glare lit up the blue-green woods. The welkin rolled like a drum. Again, came a gusty wind, and a sudden moaning of the trees. It died away, and the first few drops of rain fell, large and separate and strange. Luce saw their wet marks upon the leads of the tower.

It was time for him to take cover, and yet he was loth to go. A flash seemed to end in the woods less than a furlong away; the sky crackled overhead. He saw the rain coming like a curtain, and picking up the chair, he made for the ladder, pulling the trap-door to after him. It was very dark in the tower, but as he descended a window was lit by a pale glare. The building trembled with the crash that followed.

In the lower room he had left the window open. Putting down the chair he

went to close it against the deluge. So heavy was the rain that the whole world looked grey, and twilight seemed to have fallen. This was one of those storms whose dark wings would join themselves to the pinions of the night. He sat down at the window to watch Nature in her epic mood, conscious of sharing its strange restlessness, and sense of exaltation.

He sat there for an hour. The storm passed, but the rain continued, and its moist murmur mingled with the dripping of the trees. He had opened the window to listen. There was no sound save the rush of the rain. Twilight was here, an increasing dimness.

But a man must eat, in spite of storms and the pageantry of Nature, and he got up to get his supper. It was a very male meal, and of the simplest—bread and cheese and beer, necessitating the washing up of one plate, one glass, one knife. His cheese—a wedge of Cheshire—lived in an old biscuit tin, and he had cut himself a portion and was putting the tin back in the cupboard when he heard the voice. It came to him in a kind of wild whisper through the rush of the rain.

"Mr. Luce, Mr. Luce."

He went to the window, leaned out and found no one. The voice had passed like the cry of a winging bird. A woman's voice,—hers? Had he imagined it? Nonsense! A sane man cutting himself a hunk of cheese did not imagine such things; nor was the rain beating on the back of his head imaginary.

He drew back, looking out into the grey-green gloom. And then he heard the rat-tat of the brass knocker on the tower door, just two notes, abrupt, poignant.

He went quickly into the vestibule and opened the door.

"Mrs. Ballard!"

He had opened the door wide, and she seemed to glide in like a shadow. She stood leaning against the wall, panting, hands hanging. Her hair and her clothes were drenched, her face the colour of milk. Her dark eyes had a wildness.

Looking down at her as she stood huddled against the wall he saw that she was wearing no shoes, and that her stockinged feet were covered with what looked like black mud. He was filled with a sudden consciousness of some horror. The green twilight, the rushing rain, her limp figure and tragic face!

He was about to speak, when her lips moved.

“Mr. Luce,—I have killed my husband.”

2

He remembered closing the door. The edge of it just cleared her body. There was very little light in the vestibule, and her face was like a dim mask. He was aware of her looking at him with big, blind eyes. Was she waiting for him to say something? What could one say to a woman who came to you with such a confession?

Again her lips moved.

"It was—the dog. You see, he was cruel, cruel to everything."

"How did it happen?"

"His gun. He had left it against the wall."

Suddenly, she began to shiver, and this trembling seemed to pass beyond her power of self-control. She stood there shaking; he could hear the chattering of her teeth, and this terrible trembling moved him to profound pity. She made him think of some wind-buffeted and bewildered bird blown in through an open window.

He said: "You're wet through."

She did not confess at the moment that she had tried to drown herself, that she had waded into the farm pond, and that the suck of the mud had become a horror. Her will to die had failed her, and she had left her shoes in that slime. He was conscious only of the urge of his compassion. He took her gently by the arm and drew her into the room.

"Sit down, my dear."

Mutely she obeyed him. He had pushed a chair in front of the empty grate, and he stood looking down at her like a man confounded by the distractions of some problem. Those wet clothes of hers? And a fire? His consciousness found relief in action. He rushed up the stairs to his bedroom, pulled the blanket and quilt from the bed, and bundling them up, returned to the lower room.

"I'm going to get wood for a fire. Take your clothes off. Wrap these things round you."

Her eyes were strangely vacant.

"Yes, Mr. Luce."

A previous tenant had left a few logs and some kindling in one of the unused rooms of the annexe. Also, into the same room Luce had tumbled a packing-case and two or three wooden boxes. He went down and filled one of the boxes with wood and carried it on his shoulder to the vestibule.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, Mr. Luce."

Opening the door he saw her sitting in a basket-chair with the blanket and quilt wrapped round her, her wet clothes lying in a little heap on the floor. She looked so very small, just like a sick child who had been allowed out of bed.

"That's better."

She glanced up at him almost shrinkingly.

"I—was so cold."

Luce put his box down and looked about him for paper with which to start his fire, and in the cupboard he found a copy of *The Times*. His glance fell on a whisky bottle tucked away in a corner. A couple of ounces of whisky might help to warm her, and he poured some into a glass.

"Sip this—slowly. We'll have a fire in no time."

Going down on his knees in front of the grate he began to lay his fire. Her trembling had ceased. Sitting huddled up in the chair she watched his large and deliberate hands at work and their movements seemed to soothe her.

"I think I could tell you now, Mr. Luce."

Kneeling there feeding the fire he listened to her voice, and seemed to see beyond the little, leaping flames the happenings she described. Her husband had been out with his gun. He had been caught by the storm, and had come back drenched and surly. Her poor dog had been the cause of it all. As she described it, Luce could see the beast slinking away and being called back by Ballard. "Come here, damn you." Peter, hunted into the passage and driven into a corner, had turned on the man, and Ballard had used a boot. She confessed that his savaging of the dog had made her lose her self-control. She had rushed into the passage to rescue the dog. And then his vile temper had turned on this other victim. He had struck her, driven her back with blows into the room. Ballard had left his gun leaning against the wall. She confessed that she had felt like a wild thing driven into a corner. She had picked up his gun. "If you try to touch me—again——" He had shouted at her. "Put down that

gun, you bloody little fool." She had put the table between herself and this raving man, and suddenly he had pushed the table against her, and sent her staggering back against the wall. She said that she had been conscious of nothing but his furious face, and those menacing hands. He had been advancing round the table at her when she had fired. The noise of the explosion had shattered something in her. His face—No; she had not dared to look at it as he lay there.

Luce, putting wood upon the fire, was aware of her pausing. She sat in stark silence, confronting reality, and compelling herself to honour it.

"I did it—wilfully. Something made me kill him."

Luce stared at the fire. Were not evil beasts better dead? He said, "Who can blame you?"

Did he blame her? Strange that he should be asking himself that question! What did it involve? This essentially gentle creature was what the world called a murderess. No, he would not allow that word its fitness. He drew aside from the fire so that the blaze should warm her.

"Come nearer, my dear."

She made no movement, and rising, he gently pushed her and her chair nearer to the fire. He noticed that she had not touched the whisky.

"Drink that down."

"Must I?"

"Would you like a little water?"

"Please."

He fetched a jug and diluted the spirit, and watched her put the glass to her lips. Then he knelt down again beside the fire.

"Are you sure—that he——?"

She understood his meaning. She shivered.

"Yes, O—terribly sure."

"And then?"

She told him how she had put the gun down on the table and run wildly out of the house. Her impulse had been to kill herself. She had thought of the pond, and had waded into it, but with the mud sucking at her feet a horror of the thing had seized her. She had flinched from the mud and the water, leaving her shoes behind. And, all the while the rain had been coming down. She said

that she had felt herself going mad. Her one impulse was to tell someone. The farm was deserted, for the men had gone home. And then she had thought of Luce.

"You had been kind to me. You seemed to be different. I felt that if I told someone—you, I shouldn't go mad."

Again she was silent, staring at the fire, and Luce, rising with a kind of gentle stealth, went and with a deliberate hand locked the outer door.

3

He stood by the open window. Dusk had fallen, and the rain was still coming down. Behind him the fire was throwing a flicker of light and shadow about the room. He closed the window.

Voices? Voices could be overheard.

The window was more than ten feet from the ground. No one could see into the room unless a ladder was brought to it, or a tree climbed. The window had neither blind nor curtains; he had not bothered about such fittings in this solitary place. Should he light the lamp? Or would she prefer the firelight? And what next? Probably, he had not realized as yet his involvement with her in this tragedy.

He said, “I was having supper—when you came. Have you had anything to eat?”

Yes, she had had her tea. And she was not hungry. How could she be hungry?

“Please, Mr. Luce, do finish your supper.”

Was it just a question of bread and cheese? But to satisfy her, and because in such a crisis simple things may make for sanity, he humoured her. But, already, his mind was working, not as a mere separate entity, but on her behalf.

“Those clothes of yours.”

Yes, that poor little pile of wet clothes, they too needed the fire, and Luce placed his two Windsor chairs in front of the blaze and hung her clothes upon them. She watched him as a child might have watched the wise and practical activities of a kindly nurse. The wet clothes steamed. Leaning against the mantelpiece he began to fill a pipe, and his wits were working like his fingers. The pipe was filled and lit, but the deep tangle of her tragedy was to take more kindling.

“Is it still raining, Mr. Luce?”

Now why did she ask that? He went to the window, raised the lower sash a foot and put out a hand.

“Yes.”

“It is so heavy, it can’t last.”

He saw her lean forward and touch those wet clothes. What was in her mind? Was she wondering how soon they would be dry, and she be able to resume them?

“Not safe—for a long time yet.”

“No, Mr. Luce.”

She sank back in the chair, and he returned to his place beside the fire, and with an elbow resting on the shelf, stood smoking and watching the flames. More wood would be needed very soon, and he had only three or four logs left. Obviously, he would have to break up those packing cases and sacrifice them to her necessity.

“What time is it, Mr. Luce?”

He had to strike a match to light the face of the clock.

“Twenty-two minutes past nine.”

“As late as that.”

The match went out and he dropped the charred stick into the fire.

“Don’t worry about the time.”

“But—they will be asleep—if I am too late.”

He glanced at her dim face.

“Who?”

“At West Brandon. I must go to West Brandon, mustn’t I? I must give myself up.”

He stood rigid, staring down at her.

“Will you come with me, Mr. Luce? I—shan’t be so afraid—if you will come with me.”

4

He did not answer her for a moment, perhaps because he found himself resisting the idea of her surrender. So, she was ready to give herself up. Well, what else could she do? Her to-morrow was as clear and cold as a stretch of sky after rain. She would put on those bedraggled clothes and walk through the wet woods to her fate.

"I have killed my husband."

The sleepy and astonished face of a village policeman, symbolizing the face of convention. "I beg your pardon, m'am, did I understand you to say ——?" Yes, he could hear her making the confession with a kind of simple serenity. She would be taken away, questioned—and her statement recorded. They would lock her up.—And then? The inevitable processes of the machine, all the legal ritual. Machinery could be so merciless. Would they hang her? No, that—of course—was unthinkable. She had suffered great provocation. She could plead fear of her husband. An able advocate could put up an eloquent defence. But, even if justice did not condemn her to death, it would—no doubt—demand some penalty. For how long would society shut her up in the cage, for five years, ten years, twenty years? But might not that depend upon her candour?

He was biting hard on the stem of his pipe.

"You are not going to Brandon to-night."

Her eyes were two dark hollows.

"But—I must."

"Why should you? Those clothes won't be dry till the morning."

"Does it matter, Mr. Luce?"

"Of course it matters. You are not fit to go."

He did not question his own determination that she should not go.

"You can sleep here. I'll make up a bed for you. I can manage."

He heard her sigh.

"My mind is made up now."

“You mean?”

“I want to tell them.”

“The whole truth?”

She answered with a little movement of the head, and he began to appreciate her almost childlike candour. Was she wise? No doubt she was. She had done this thing and would accept its consequences.—Such consequences!

“Why tell them that?”

“But—I must.”

“Is that how you feel?”

“I did it—knowingly.”

He walked to the window and stood there confronting some new, insurgent force within himself. Of course, there might be less deadly peril for her if she told the truth. Her sincerity would provoke sympathy. But—the afterwards, those dead, inevitable years?

“Did you know? I wonder? I should have said, my dear, that it was—blind impulse,—some twitch of your frightened hand.”

She shivered slightly in her chair.

“No,—I knew. It is the truth. I shall tell them. Something in me made me kill him.”

“My dear, you are too good.”

His pipe had gone out, and he felt in his pocket for his matches.

“Now, wait. I want you to try and get some sleep.”

Sleep! Again, that little, hopeless sigh, a sound that moved him most strangely.

“How can I sleep?”

“I am not going to let you face—any more, to-night. There’s a bed for you here.”

A candle stood on the mantelpiece. He lit it, and his hand was as steady as his voice. She sat there watching him, and the movements of his big, deliberate body. She let herself be dominated for the moment, relaxing into a surrender that was strange and soothing.

“I shan’t sleep, Mr. Luce.”

“You’ll try, my dear. I’m going up to make your bed.”

VIII

SHE could hear him moving in the room above.

Strange ministrations! Placing the candle on the table, he had stood for a moment as though considering his problem. This room was to change its temper for a night, and in ceasing to be his, was to become hers. Yes, the bed, a mere camp-bed of green canvas, that was the first consideration. He had one spare set of sheets and blankets stowed away in an old trunk, and he got them out, and with the experienced hands of a camper remade the bed. The pillow was given a clean slip. Then, he proceeded to remove all the male gear from the room, pyjamas, shaving-brush and razor, washing-things, towels, clothes, using the next flight of stairs as a series of shelves. He put out a clean towel and a fresh cake of soap. But, what an improvisation for them both, though less so for him than for her! He could manage, doss down on the sitting-room floor, but she—had nothing, nothing but those wet clothes. Well, well, but did one boggle over such details in the face of such a tragedy? Poor kid! And then, with immense seriousness he placed on the bed a clean pair of his pyjamas, blue and white striped over-size creations in cotton.

Below, she sat huddled in front of the fire behind the screen of wet clothes. What a long time he was! Her fear returned, her horror of being alone, fear of the half darkness and the shadows. What was she doing here? Hiding? What was the use of hiding? Even his very kindness made her afraid. What was she doing here? Clinging to some impossible hope, allowing herself a little, sweet, shivering anguish? And, suddenly, she stood up, her hands clasping the blanket. She let it fall. She was not conscious of being naked. Her hands clutched at those steaming clothes; she would put them on, take her fate with them and run. Was it that she could not bear his kindness? After all, she had told him, satisfied something in herself. She would go to West Brandon and give herself up.

She dragged a wet skirt from the back of a chair. And then, she heard him coming down the stairs. Too late! He would find her naked. With a little gesture of despair she flung the thing back upon the chair, dragged the blanket round her, and subsided into the shadows.

She was very conscious of him there behind her. She was no longer afraid, or afraid of the same things or in the same way. His larger and more measured

rhythm seemed to tranquillize her.

"Your room's ready, Rachel."

It was the first time that he had used her Christian name, and she could not remember telling him her name.

"Must I go?"

"Afraid of the dark, my dear?"

"Yes."

"I left a candle up there. It's so easy to say,—'Don't be afraid.' I shall be here."

She made a movement in the chair as of gathering the blanket round her. Would she be able to walk in this trailing thing? And if she took his room where was he going to sleep?

"And you, John?"

He was standing close to her chair.

"Don't you worry about me. Wrap that blanket round you. That's right. I'm going to carry you up."

"O, no, you mustn't."

"I shall."

He bent down and had her out of the chair, and his strength was so deliberate and easy that she felt her whole self relax. How beautiful to be so held and carried. If life had been more like his arms and shoulders with their succouring and supporting strength, would it not have transcended tragedy? Her head lay against his left shoulder. She had to make no effort, but just lie there and draw her breath.

The stairs were steep and narrow, and though he had left the door of the upper room open, the light of a solitary candle did not penetrate far. He moved very slowly, step by step, feeling his way, taking care to keep her head and feet from the wall. She was very conscious of his gradual ascent; it gave a sense of being shielded and supported. She shut her eyes, and lay still.

He carried her in, and laid her on the bed.

"Do you know how to manage these things? You have to slip in feet first—like getting into a bag."

She was aware of him going to the door and pausing there.

“If you should want anything, call me.”

He closed the door, and she heard him descending the stairs. She lay for a moment, looking at the candle flame standing so straight and still. Then, she sat up, and the bed creaked under her. A moment later she had discovered that blue and white sleeping-suit laid out for her. She put out a hand and touched it. Should she——? Something came to life in her, the laughter of a girl before her joy in things has been broken. How she could have laughed ten years ago! But now——! Standing on the mat beside the bed she stepped into those immense trousers, and found them festooned about her feet. She loved him for this,—as she was ready to love him—for everything. Love! What irony!

But that blanket? Had he given her his bed, and was she in possession of his one spare blanket? She bent down, rolled up those trousers, and went to open the door, carrying the blanket over her arm.

“Mr. Luce—John.”

She heard a movement below.

“Yes.”

“The blanket. I am putting it outside the door.”

She closed the door, placed the candlestick on the floor beside the bed, and slipped in feet first as he had told her to do. She left the candle burning and lay wide-eyed and still, listening. The rain had ceased, and the stillness was profound, and in the silence she heard him come up the stairs and take the blanket. With a little, smothered sigh she turned over and blew out the candle.

2

Luce had put his last logs on the fire. Touching the clothes on the backs of the two chairs he reminded himself that they were all she had in the world. And was he a sentimentalist that such a reflection should cause him emotion? Her necessity demanded that those clothes should be dry by the morning, and taking the skirt and holding it closer to the fire, he watched the moisture rising from it.

The clothes of a murderess! An exhibit for Madame Tussaud's! News for the journalists. He kept turning the skirt, while his thoughts were occupied with her tragedy. What—before God—was he to do? Go down to that empty house and make sure? And then, perhaps, he began to foresee the sinister implications such interference might provoke. Supposing he was to leave the marks of his very large feet about the place, and they were traced to him, and he was asked to explain them? Even if she told the truth, would the law believe her? It would begin searching for motives, sifting clues and evidence, postulating some sex tangle. And he——? No, he would be ill-advised to go near the place.

But—to-morrow?

That ticking clock on the mantelpiece seemed to be plucking time to pieces.

She would give herself up.

She would tell the truth.

But what if Ballard happened to be alive?

He held the skirt in front of the fire until it ceased from steaming. There were those other garments, her poor muddy stockings, and the fire was burning low. He went to fetch more wood, and to obtain it he smashed up the big packing-case, using a billhook he had brought with him.

Would she sleep?

Poor kid, how could she be expected to sleep?

And to-morrow. O, damn that clucking clock!

He had hung the dry skirt on a chair, and was rinsing her muddy stockings

in a bucket of water. He wrung them out and hung them in front of the fire.

O, no, they could not hang her. She could plead provocation, panic, that she had acted in self-defence. There would be evidence as to Ballard's brutal temper. Yes, mitigating circumstances. But—even then! A light sentence, five years, ten years? And what would that mean? The cage. Five years of—the living death. He would not see her.

Good God, what was boiling up in him?

This madness! But was it madness?

Why should she have to suffer because of a brute like Ballard?

He piled more wood on the fire.

Yes, why should she have to suffer?

For the moment this tower was a sanctuary.

Supposing——?

At last her clothes were dry. What was the time? He held the clock-face to the fire and found the hands standing at seven minutes after midnight. He wound the clock. Another day! And he was no nearer to a solution of the problem. Some course of action would have to be decided upon, and the decision would be so dreadfully final. Could he temporize? He might assume that while she was hidden here he could hold off reality like a man with his shoulders against a door. She had but to show herself to the outer world, and he would be helpless.

Helpless! What did that word suggest?

Going to the outer door he unlocked it, and stood on the stone steps of the tower. The rain had passed, and the trees had ceased to drip. He could see stars. The night smelt wet and sweet. God, how beautiful the earth could be, and how beauty could wound!

He went down the steps and into the garden and out by the gate into the woods. He wanted to try and think things out in the darkness, not as yet realizing that some human riddles are solved, not by thinking, but by feeling. The solution would be so very simple when it arrived. Meanwhile, he walked up and down the woodland path, with the wet foliage brushing against him in a silence that was impersonal and profound.

What if she showed herself determined to surrender to fate?

He was conscious of emotion, of something within him beginning to struggle and resist. Why should she give herself up? And suddenly he stood

still, looking up at a patch of clear sky studded with stars. Maybe the primitive urge that is in all of us, began to inspire and to possess him. The very setting was in sympathy with such an elemental manifestation, these miles of woodland and of heath, night, a world that might have been the world of man at war with nature and with other men. Dressed in furs, and with a stone axe on his shoulder! Death and peril in the woods! He found himself leaning against a tree, listening, looking, his muscles tense, his wits alert. The soul of the savage, of the lone man of the wilderness, seemed to remanifest itself in him, and to shoulder to one side the correct, socialized creature of a conventional community. His large hands had become fists. His shoulders hunched themselves. There was a fierce stirring of the primordial stuff in him.

Had he indulged in self-analysis or painted a little personal picture of his past Luce would have seen himself as essentially a separative person, a northern man who had felled trees and made himself a clearing in the woods. Around him spread the waste, to be crossed by no stranger save as a potential enemy. The wayfarer, coming to this solitary place, would know that these woodlands would expect him to blow his horn. Let him arrive with stealth and he would be treated as some treacherous enemy. Luce had always hated crowds, and the chatter and smell of too much humanity. Like your Saxon he had preferred trees, and the green and empty spaces, and if that stubborn, separative self was reborn in him on this May night, it was but part of an old heritage. What was his was his. His urge was to lay his large hands upon some weapon, though the gesture might be translated into the more modern tongue. Why not defy and outwit the thing that is called society? Why surrender to the crowd and its crowd customs? The thing may have been a mere blind impulse, vaguely realized as yet, an urge that was to be sublimated, but it was there in him.

He returned to the tower. He had ceased from questioning the significance of his involvement in this woman’s tragedy. It had become reality. He locked the door, and taking off his boots, crept up the stairs on bare feet to listen at her door. Was she sleeping? Please God she would sleep for a little while. Sleep, yes, and he too might need clean eyes and a clear head. When did the day break? About four. That would give him three hours of sleep. He sat down in one of the basket-chairs, and with his feet in the other, covered himself with the spare blanket. The fire was a mere knot of embers, the silence complete save for the ticking of the clock. And like some old sea-rover who could lie down with his sword and shield beside him, and forget to-morrow’s hazard, Luce slept.

3

The birds woke him in the stealth of the dawn. There was to be a fresh, rain-washed splendour in this perfect morning, and the birds were wise as to it and rejoiced. But if the light came gradually, Luce's waking was as sudden as the drawing of a curtain. His feet pushed back the chair. He was up, and standing at the window, his head shaggy against the dawn. He was like a man in a tower, looking out at a green world whose peacefulness was an illusion, a man ready to take up his bow and shoot.

He lit the oil stove, warmed up some water, and washed and shaved himself, and having refilled the kettle he put it on the stove ready for early morning tea. Early morning tea! How tame and domestic, but had not a mug of hot tea sometimes saved one's soul in the trenches? He unlocked the green door, and relocking it from the outside, bent down to examine the steps. Had those stockinged feet of her left any pattern upon the stones? He could find no mark of any description, and having satisfied himself of this, he walked slowly along the path to the gate. The soil was light and sandy and the heavy rain had smoothed it out as the sea refreshes the sand of the shore. A mere scrutiny of the garden path did not satisfy him. He followed the woodland track for nearly a quarter of a mile, but nowhere could he discover any mark left by her shoeless feet.

Had she been seen by anyone? It seemed to him most unlikely, for who would have been out in that drenching rain? The twilight and the wet woods would have made her flight completely secret. And the inference? Was it not obvious? No one would suspect her of having taken refuge in the tower. And what, in all probability, would the assumption be? That she had committed suicide, or lost her reason, and that she would be found somewhere, dead or alive. They might drag that pond; they might recover her shoes, and the finding of them would suggest that she had contemplated suicide, but had been frightened by the water, and that she would be found elsewhere in some covert or heathy waste, exhausted, perhaps dead. The search for her might last for days. There were miles of wood and heathland to be covered.

She was safe for the moment, sure of some respite, if she did not show herself. Who would suspect a rather eccentric and middle-aged person of harbouring a woman who was a stranger to him? No one—as far as he knew—

had ever seen them together, and his tenancy of the tower could be numbered in days. Good business! He was conscious of a feeling of fierce and secret elation.

He turned back towards the tower with the early sunlight streaming through the trees. What a marvellous morning, with the smell of the wet woods everywhere, and the thorn trees in flower, and the bracken beginning to unfurl its fronds. His world seemed limitless, and illimitably green and secret. And then, passing by the black spread of an old yew tree, he got a glimpse of the tower, and suddenly he stood still. God,—what was she thinking of? He saw her standing at the open window, a little figure against a dark background like a picture in a frame.

4

In the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the spirit had surrendered to the importunities of a weary body, and she had slept.

Her moment of waking had been as sudden as Luce's, but unlike his, her spirit had not risen instantly to the day's challenge. She had lain there wide-eyed and still, more conscious of the inward and immediate features of her misfortune than of her surroundings. It was as though sleep had exorcised the haste and the horror of the thing, and brought her mute to the confessional. She had been conscious of a feeling of resignation. She had heard her inward self saying, "I shall dress and go and give myself up. I shall be glad when it is all over. The horror is finished for me. There is peace in surrender."

She had slipped out of the narrow bed, and discovered herself and the beginnings of a new mood draped in that monstrous sleeping-suit. This was no stage for the whimsical and the ridiculous, but smitten she had been by a little tremor of tenderness. She would be able to think of him always and to the end as a man—who——. But her clothes? Her urge had been to recover them. She had heard Luce moving in the room below, and stealthily opening her door she had stood listening. Should she call to him? And then, she had heard him go out and close the tower door.

Her haste and those torrential trousers had come near to spilling her down the stairs. The things, flopping over her feet, had tripped her up, and she had saved herself by clutching the handrail and swinging sideways against it. The incident had seemed to revive her feelings of breathlessness and of terror. What if he returned before she had recovered her clothes and smuggled them and herself upstairs? In her child's panic she had let those blue and white accessories slip from her; and had run down naked save for the jacket. She had found her clothes hanging on the chairs, and had clutched them and fled, and then, when she had gained the upper room she remembered that she had left the trousers lying on the stairs. With a little sob of overcharged dismay she had run down to recover them.

She had dressed herself, but the smooth, resigned apathy of her waking mood had passed. Her hands had felt flurried; they had fumbled. Her stockings seemed to have grown smaller in the night, and in pulling them on a darned heel split. Well, did that matter? Dressed once more in her own clothes she

became conscious of the significance and the finality of the act. That window, sunlight, the green freshness of the morning. She had put out her hands and raised the lower sash.

What a beautiful day!

Her opening of the window had let in the scent and the freshness of the morning. There had been sudden anguish in the joy and loveliness of life. She had felt her throat swelling. Almost, her eyes had filled with tears.

How very beautiful this world could be!

And she was to leave it, give herself up. How much better it would have been if she had shown more courage. But—now!

And then she had seen Luce standing there in the sunlight, waving his arms at her. What was the meaning of that silent signal? He seemed to be waving her away from the window. And suddenly, she understood. She drew back, and with a little catching of the breath, sat down upon the bed.

IX

SHE heard Luce climbing the stairs, and she waited for the sound of his voice like one who has dropped a stone into a deep well and listens for the splash.

"Rachel."

Why did he speak so softly? And again she was wise as to the inference, and with a quickening of her heart beats she became conscious of a new crisis.

"Yes. I'm dressed."

"Are those clothes quite dry?"

"O, yes."

"You mustn't show yourself at that window."

His sudden insistence upon secrecy seemed to leave her poised above a precipice. Did he mean? But it wasn't possible. She had been so ready in her waking mood to accept the day's inevitableness. And now? Why had she gone to that window? Why had she felt herself overwhelmed by the beauty and desire of the morning?

Something seemed to give way in her. She cowered; she burst into tears. This sudden caring was too quick, too cruel. And then she realized that he was in the room. She saw his face. Dear God, had it happened to him too?

He was closing the window.

"Dear, don't cry like that."

She saw with blurred eyes his big hands hanging. They opened and shut, opened and shut. Then, he was holding her. He sat down on the bed with her on his knees.

"My dear, we are going to face this out together."

She lay in his arms, sobbing. Could she go now? O, yes, she could go to her confessional and with a new courage. She became calm. She turned her face to the light.

"I'm so sorry, John. I'm braver now."

She was aware of his strange stillness, the quiet, strong solidity of him.

“That’s right. We’ve got to think things out.”

“It will be easier—now.”

He was silent, and suddenly she wanted to look at his face, and dared not. What was he thinking? This silence of his was—— Yes, just what was it? Her eyes were wide open, her lips tremulous.

“I’d like you to go with me, John.”

“Would you?”

“Yes.”

“That hasn’t happened yet.”

She lay looking up into his face. If she was conscious of bewilderment, a mingling of fear and of tenderness, his face expressed none of these things. His blue eyes stared. He sat there on that flimsy bed with a stillness that was like that of a rock or a tree. But what madness, what dear madness was this? And how had it happened? Just as it had happened to her? She began to struggle a little.

“Let me sit up, John.”

She sat erect on his knees, her face turned towards the window.

“Don’t make it more difficult for me, dear.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s different—now. It’s you who have made it different. When shall we go?”

She heard him say quietly. “You’re not going, my dear.”

Only then did she begin to appreciate the profound significance of his purpose. She felt that she must struggle against it, for his sake as well as for her own. She freed herself and went to the window, and once again she was wounded by the beauty of the morning. But the window was shut. Should she open it, make him understand that she was determined to accomplish her penance? But was she so determined?

“Don’t make it harder for me, John.”

She ran a finger over one of the glass panes as though tracing letters in a film of dust. Her back might be turned, but she felt him close to her. This sense of his nearness distracted her. There was more than mere method in his madness.

“John,—I——.”

She felt his hand on her arm. His grip was gentle and yet inexorable.

“Mustn’t stand there. I think some breakfast is the thing of the moment. Let’s go down.”

She suffered him to draw her away from the window, and in surrendering for the moment she was conscious of the bitter-sweetness of such surrender. But—how weak of her! He was still holding her gently by the arm. He was looking down at her feet.

“No shoes.”

She too glanced at her stockinged feet.

“It was so silly of me——.”

“Hardly that.”

She felt compelled to glance up at his face. Almost, there was a smile on it, a gleam of satisfaction. Was he thinking that she could not walk to Brandon without shoes?

“That’s another problem, my dear. I can lend you slippers, but would they stay on?”

“I could try.”

“As a matter of fact they are downstairs. We’ll try them.”

He did not let go her arm until they were in the room below. It was she who noticed that the kettle was boiling over; he had forgotten that he had left it on the lighted stove. She made a movement towards the oil stove, the instinctive reaction of a woman who had had to do things for herself, but he warned her away.

“My job. You’ll get scalded.”

He picked up a poker and inserting it under the handle lifted the spluttering vessel from the stove.

“One forgets things in a crisis. Wait a moment, here are the slippers. Pretty monstrous. Well, try.”

He handed her the slippers, old red leather sabots in which her small feet floated. He watched her put them on.

“The crockery is in the cupboard. We had better make use of the boiling water. Excuse me a moment.”

He went out, and making sure that the green door was locked, he withdrew the key and put it in his pocket.

Those slippers of his might have been the two clowns of the show, but she shuffled about in them, with her Cassandra eyes looking at cups and saucers as though they were the trappings of tragedy. Luce had lit the stove's second burner, and collected a couple of eggs from a paper bag. Two boiled eggs! As he dipped a saucepan into a bucket he found himself challenged by a crowd of material factors, for if the tower was to stand a siege, it would have to be provisioned for a garrison of two. Yes, and food was but a part of the problem. How was she to be provided with shoes, a hat, all the essential feminine accessories? But was he not assuming that the situation was too completely in his hands?

He dropped the two eggs into the saucepan and glanced at the clock.

"Like yours hard or soft?"

What a question at such a moment, but she met it with a seriousness that might have associated itself with the solemnity of a credo. Did she prefer a hard-boiled egg? Did she believe in God?

"Not too hard."

He had replaced the kettle on the stove, and she came forward with the brown teapot in her hands.

"Shall I warm it?"

"Yes, I think we should."

He heard his secret self exclaiming, "Strangest of strange meals!" And yet, to both of them, it was a mute, and pregnant interlude, a correlation of consciousnesses, almost mystical, yet starkly simple. She ate as though being willed to it by her companion, though he could divine the spirit of her busy with other food. What next? Would she again insist upon surrender? Probably. And he, consuming bread and butter and marmalade, and aware of her poignant pallor and tragic eyes, was becoming more and more the rebel. No, he was not going to let her be taken.

2

Standing by the window he filled and lit a pipe, and the silence between them hung on the lip of circumstance like water brimming in a bowl. Both of them were sensitives, gentle and honest creatures, essentially ungreedy, capable of great generosities. That they should have found themselves involved together in this human tangle was—just—tragedy. Irony is for lesser imbroglios, nor was Rachel Ballard capable of irony.

She was the first to speak, sitting there with her hands in her lap, her eyes looking at the breakfast table as though its material objects did not exist for her at the moment.

“You were not serious, were you?”

“Utterly.”

She gave him a sudden tragic look.

“But, my dear, think.”

“I have been doing that—for hours.”

“But don’t you see?”

“Many things.”

“But you can’t. It is not possible. Don’t you understand that it would mean your being involved?”

“O, yes, but that makes no difference.”

“My dear, it must.”

His blue eyes were set in a stare. He seemed to be biting at the stem of his pipe. She saw the bowl of it disappear into the hollow of a big fist.

“Listen,—Rachel. Society has always demanded victims. Why should you be one of the victims, because you were caught in a sordid, human tangle not of your own making. That’s how I look at it, my dear. Justice isn’t always justice; it’s just—revenge—dressed up in a wig and robes. Why should society be allowed to perpetrate a double wrong?”

“My dear!”

“Wait. I challenge society’s right to torture you, for shutting up is torture, because in a moment of fear and of horror—you——. Yes,—I want that horror forgotten. Even a dog is allowed his bite, and man can be more merciful to a dog than to his neighbour. I have never been much of an admirer of man’s justice. It’s too mechanical, too much concerned with putting the real human problem away in a cupboard and getting back to its dinner. And the man who has refused to conform has always been nailed on a cross, or hanged, or shut up in a prison. I confess that I have always conformed—to a point, for the sake of one’s personal peace, and because nothing had drawn blood from me. Just as we English did not fight in the war as the Serbs fought, because there was no real blood rage or bitterness in us. But this—is different.”

She made a movement as though to rise from her chair.

“It can’t be. You are mad, dear.”

“Very well, call it madness.”

“But till last night, you and I——”

“Strangers,—were we? And yet—perhaps—nearer to each other than either of us knew. I’m not going to let them take you, if I can help it.”

She was standing now.

“No, my dear, no. Let me go. I’ll give you anything, anything you want,—but let me go.”

She was aware of him putting his pipe down on the window-sill. He came round the table to her, and laid his big hands gently on her shoulders.

“My dear, you must not say such things. Look at me, Rachel. What did you say just now? That you would give. My dear, is the thing that has happened to me no better than that? Look at me.”

“Yes,—John.”

“And don’t tremble so, child. This business is in my hands now.”

He saw her eyes close.

“Hold me,—just for one moment, dear.”

He put his arms round her.

“Don’t tremble.”

“O, my dear, how good you are. I wish——.”

“What do you wish?”

“John, when I looked out of the window this morning everything seemed so beautiful, sunlight and green leaves and peace. And I thought—“What a beautiful clean world, and here—I have this horror in me.” It seemed so cruel, my dear, that I could not enjoy one beautiful day.”

“And you wish—for——?”

“Just one day. It would not matter—to them, would it? They need never know I have been here.”

Her eyes were still closed, and he put his lips to her forehead.

“You shall have that day.”

The lover in him dissembled. He was to use all his strength and cunning to win for her many such days.

3

There was method in his madness.

“I want you to stand by the table, Rachel. You will understand—in a moment.”

He unlocked the green door and went out and down into the garden. The boundary fence was some fifty yards from the tower, and he walked as far as the fence, and faced about. He had raised the lower sash of the window before leaving her posted by the table, for he wanted to discover whether she would be visible to anyone standing by the fence. She was wearing black, and her figure could not be distinguished, but he could make out the white oval of her face.

He returned to the tower. She was still standing where he had placed her.

“I could just see your face. I’m not going to rig up any sort of screen. It might be too obvious.”

His solution of the problem was a very simple one. He drove two nails into the walls, and stretched a length of stout string between them to mark the danger line. It left her two-thirds of the room to move about in.

“That will keep you from—forgetting.”

For the first time he smiled at her.

“Now, we’ll put all the furniture in the safety zone. That’s it. The table two feet back. The stove had better stand by the fireplace. I’m the only one who can be allowed in no man’s land. On the next floor you will be pretty safe, unless you go and stand at the window.”

She had helped him to move the table and the stove, nor did she question this dressing of the stage. She had chosen to grant herself a day’s reprieve, and she realized the need for secrecy. No one must know that she had passed a whole day in the tower.

“Can I wash up, John?”

“Want to?”

“Yes.”

He understood her desire to do things. In the doing of simple things there is peace, and perhaps he divined the inward meaning of her mood. This was to be her own, intimate day, and the work of her hands might be symbolical, but he was not sufficiently the trousered egoist to reflect that she might find pleasure in doing things for him.

“I’ll leave you in charge.”

Was he going out? He was, but though she felt herself suddenly afraid of being left alone, she did not question his purpose.

“If anyone should come?”

“The door will be locked. Keep absolutely still. And if you feel—that there is any danger, creep up the stairs.”

“Will you be long?”

“Perhaps—an hour.”

She saw him collect a jug from the cupboard. He glanced at the clock, took his hat from a peg, turned and smiled at her.

“Not afraid?”

“Just a little, John.”

“There’s a reason for this, my dear, or I wouldn’t go. I won’t leave you longer than I can help.”

Did she guess that he was going to the farm? She did, and though something shuddered in her, she did not ask for his reasons. This illusion of forgetting! Standing close to the string that he had stretched across the room, she watched him disappear into the woods, and when he was no longer visible her thoughts followed him. She ran the tips of her fingers along the string. His reasons for this precaution? Had he been thinking of her or of himself? Of her, most certainly. Then, why this string? If her ultimate surrender had been agreed upon, then how could the secrecy of her presence here be of such profound importance? Would it matter if she was seen? That he had given her shelter for a few hours could hardly involve him in her tragedy. She would be able to say, “I was almost out of my senses. I wanted to tell someone. I went to the Signal Tower and told Mr. Luce. He gave me shelter for the night. How could I have gone back to that house?”

Her fingers played along that string. What was its ultimate significance? Had he been humouring her when he had agreed to one day’s reprieve? But she could not suffer him to become entangled in her tragedy. What would be

said? That he had been her lover, that he had been interested in her husband's death? How horrible! She must take care to safeguard him; she must not stay too long here.

What if she went now, in his absence? Would it be easier for both of them? The inspiration carried her into the vestibule; she put her fingers to the handle and turned it. The door was locked. She remembered then that the window was ten feet or more above the ground.

Her impulse died away, or rather—she became absorbed in wondering about his purpose. Gould he be so mad as to think that he could save her from the consequences of that fatal moment? And why——? She pressed her hands to her breasts. Dear, exquisite madness, but she would not suffer him to be mad in that way. When he returned she would tell him that she had made up her mind; she would ask him to go with her to Brandon. Meanwhile, the breakfast table and its crockery became a reality. She had promised to wash up those things. It was the last thing she would do for him; it would be one of her memories.

4

Luce had come within a furlong of the farm lane when he saw something lying in the middle of the path. The track curved here, and Luce came upon that something unexpectedly, a brown animal crouching in the shadow of a thorn tree. Peter, her dog!

The beast had his front legs tucked under him. He was breathing in little jerks like a creature whose ribs had been crushed in. Obviously, he had dragged himself along the path, to lie down and die here. His filmy eyes looked up at the man; he whimpered.

More tragedy! Had some strange instinct driven the dog to try and follow his mistress—but how had Peter known that she had taken this path? Luce put his jug down on the ground and bent over the animal. He spoke to him very gently. He touched the dog's head.

"Poor old man, poor old Peter."

The dog licked his hand.

What was he to do? Leave the dog to die here? That would be both heartless and short-sighted, in that Peter's body might be found here on the way to the tower. Carry the dog down to the farm and pretend that he did not know to whom Peter belonged? But then he would have to say where he had found the dog. Should he take Peter to his mistress? More anguish for Rachel! And yet he had a feeling that it was the most wise and human thing to do, and that though the dying dog would bring pain to her, she would understand his compassion and thank him for it.

Yes, the dog should go to the tower and Luce took off his coat, spread it, and very gently lifted the dog on to it. Peter made a little moaning, but there was no growl of resentful pain. Luce spoke to him in a low voice. He wrapped the coat round the dog, and lifting him very carefully, stood for a moment looking into the woods. If he were seen carrying her dog to the tower the inference might be fatal, but he saw nothing but tree trunks and young fern and sun-splashed foliage.

He was within sight of the tower when the thing in his arms began to struggle. The dog's legs moved spasmodically. Luce paused in his stride, looked at the dog's filmy eyes, and then hurried on. Well, if the poor beast was

dying——. And it seemed to him that there was a mute appeal in the dog's eyes. When he reached the steps, he had to hold Peter in one arm, while he felt for the key in his pocket.

Should he let her see this other victim of a man's brute rage? But she had heard the key turning in the lock, and he saw her standing in the other doorway when he pushed the green door open.

Her eyes were fixed on the bundle in his arms. She stood very still, her eyes big and black.

"I'm sorry, dear."

"Peter!"

"Yes, I found him down there. Yes,—I'm afraid——."

He pushed the green door to with a foot.

"No, let me put him down. It's kinder."

She moved back quickly into the room, and pushed one of the basket chairs forward, and Luce laid the dog and his coat on the cushion. She was down on her knees by the chair. She put her face close to the dog's.

"O,—Peter!"

The dog struggled to raise his head. A tongue came out and licked her face. Then, his head fell back.

5

It was as though some new mood had entered into her when she rose from her knees. She stood there looking down at the dead dog. His little tragedy was other than her own, and with his passing she too had heard within herself a cry of anger and revolt. Why should such things happen? And why, because of one man's brutality, should she find the hand of Man upon her shoulder, demanding payment of the blood fee?

"I'm glad you brought him here."

He said, "I was afraid it would hurt you, and yet—it would have hurt you more if I had left him. He must have been trying to get to you."

She was looking through the window at the sunlight on the trees.

"Thank you, John. I suppose we are sentimental people, but a dog does grow into one's life. And Peter had one queer prejudice."

"I have many."

"He never would say good-bye. If I had to go out and leave him, he used to walk off into a corner of his own. But—I'm glad—we said good-bye."

It struck him that her emotion had discovered a new quality in itself. She had discarded his red slippers and stood up more solidly on her stockinged feet. He would have said that she looked less resigned and helpless.

"But, you haven't finished, John."

"No."

He looked at her questioningly, and she understood.

"You can leave him here. You'll bury him for me, presently?"

"Where would you like him buried?"

"Where do you think?"

"It had better be in the woods. I can spread some leaf-mould over the place. Yes, after dark."

He was conscious of watching her face. Would she consent to this burial by starlight in some place where the dog's body would leave no clue? She

accepted his choice.

“Yes, I think that will please me.”

“Good.”

He turned to go, but she made a sudden movement.

“You’ll need your coat, John.”

She drew it from under the dead dog’s body, and held it out to him, and without a word he put it on.

X

LUCE found himself back at the spot where he had left the milk-jug. He collected it, and with a definite conception of the pattern he proposed to produce in his own space-time scheme, he went on and down towards the lane. Chiefly, he was conscious of the morning's stillness, of the freshness of the rain-soaked earth, and of the impersonal and passive splendour of the great trees. Did they quiver a leaf over any human happening? But he had an inward eye on the clock. He judged it to be the hour for the country world to set forth upon its affairs, unlock stable doors and water horses, and get ready for the day's work.

He had reached the big beech tree by the farm gate when he saw a man—or rather a lad—appear in the garden-space within the brick wall. The figure suggested to Luce the suddenness of wide-mouthed fear. It stood and shouted.

"Tom, Tom!"

A voice came from the farm buildings.

"Hallo!"

"There's been a murder."

"What?"

"Come over 'ere. It's the boss."

Luce, standing very still under the shadow of the great tree, saw a man appear in the stable doorway. He had a bucket in his hand.

"What's the game?"

"I'm not kidding. He's lying—on the floor."

"Who, Ballard?"

"Yes. Come quick."

The man put down his bucket and ran, though his running was a clumsy, bent-kneed business. Neither of them had seen Luce. He watched them both disappear into the porch doorway, and taking the psychological moment, he opened the gate and walked across the paddock to the farm. He arrived at the garden gate just as the pair reappeared in the doorway. The lad was looking

scared, the older man rather pinched about the mouth and nostrils. And Luce produced his wilful anti-climax. He held up the jug.

"Excuse me, can I get some milk here?"

He caught the man's bovine, contemptuous stare.

"Milk?"

"Yes."

The fellow spat. He was feeling a little queasy within.

"Well, I should say not, guv'nor. We've got someat else to think about."

"O?" said Luce. "Someone—ill?"

"Someone's had his face blown in."

Luce stood his ground. So, there was no doubt about Ballard's death. He may have looked sufficiently serious—even for a stranger, and he could suppose that he might be expected to show some interest in so sensational an event. Moreover, he was here to create a particular impression and to impose it upon any person who might be produced as a witness. He remained planted in the garden gateway, not obstructively so, but with the air of a man whose natural rights included some participation in any herd emotion.

"Someone killed?"

The man drew the back of a hand across his mouth, gave Luce a second stare, and seemed to be prompted by some other thought.

"Seen the missis, Fred?"

"No."

Luce was aware of them looking at each other. The lad had very pale eyes, and over them the eyelids flickered.

"Supposing it's—a double case, Tom?"

The man turned about suddenly, walked back to the house, and paused in the porch as though listening, and to Luce the working of the man's mind was almost audible. Should he go in and look for some possible and ghastly partner in this tragedy? But the inherent and heavy caution of the peasant mind seemed to prevail. He came down the brick path.

"I'm not meddling. It's a show for the police."

He appeared to address the remark to Luce, and Luce nodded at him. He asked a question.

“Anyone else involved?”

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“There might be.”

The lad was looking at the silent house as though it held other horrors. His mouth hung open.

“I wouldn’t go in again, Tom, for—— Supposing she’s in there somewhere—with a face like——?”

The man growled at him.

“No, you wouldn’t! What’s more it’s just as well no one should be messin’ about in there. We don’t know.”

He made a sudden movement towards the gate, and Luce gave way to him, looking very grave.

“The sooner the police are called in—the better, I should say.”

“That’s right, mister. ’Ere, you—Fred, carry on with the horses. I’m going to Brandon.”

The lad glanced at Luce.

“P’raps the genl’man will stay here.”

Both of them looked at Luce, and it was then that the man was moved to ask him a question.

“You ’aven’t got a car, sir?”

“No; I’m afraid not. I live up at the Signal Tower. Only just settled in there. I’m afraid I can’t help you in that way. But I don’t mind staying for a little while—if my friend here—wants company.”

He watched the man set out for Brandon, saw him open the gate by the beech tree and pull it to with a metallic clang from the iron catch. There was a finality about that sound; the machine had been set in motion, and Luce, following the lad to the farm buildings, realized how serious was his involvement. He was damning himself as an accessory, as a concealer of evidence; he had set himself to interfere with the machine’s inexorable progress; he was exposing himself to sinister suspicions. Well, what of it? He stood in the stable doorway, still holding that milk-jug as a symbol of his disinterestedness. Should he wait until the man returned with the village policeman? Was it good strategy to show himself as a casual and fortuitous super in the play?

The lad passed him with a bucket, and went to a pump in the yard. Luce noticed that even while working the pump-handle he kept glancing in the direction of the house. The strange fascination of blood and violence, and of death! Sensationalism! People crowding to visit the place. Officialdom in charge! He was conscious of feeling nauseated, angered.

The lad came back with the bucket, and paused in the doorway to stare at the house.

“Shot in the face—he was. I wonder who done it?”

Yes, everybody’s mouth would be asking that question, and with the same promptings of crowd curiosity.

“I’m afraid I’ve no views. Who lived here?”

“Just him and the missis. I wonder if she done it?”

Luce did not respond to this challenge. He was beginning to feel restless, and to resent contact with details that would be pawed and picked at. More and more was he determined that she was to be saved from the sordid and the vulgar scrutinies of the crowd. Better—death! And then the lad reverted to the practical and the trivial. He glanced down at Luce’s milk-jug.

“I got to get the cows in for milking. If you wait a bit, mister, we’ll manage a jugful.”

Something in Luce writhed.

“No, I won’t bother, but I’ll help you drive the cows in.”

The beasts were in the next field, three shorthorns, and Luce went with the lad and walked back with him behind the stolid, pleasant creatures. They were half-way across the home paddock, when the lad became aware of the absence of some familiar detail in the day’s routine. He looked suddenly at Luce.

“That’s funny, that is.”

“What?”

“Her dog ain’t about. He always was let off the chain first thing, and when the cows came in, ’e’d run over to meet ’em.”

“I see.”

“Besides—if he was still on the chain—there—behind the house, and something was funny, he’d be—’owling.”

Luce agreed. It occurred to him to pull out his watch. How long had that fellow been gone? Nearly forty minutes. Should he hang about here any longer

just to create a particular impression? He slipped the watch back into his waistcoat pocket.

"I think I'll be getting back. Breakfast, you know."

"You won't have no milk with your tea."

"I have some tinned milk. You don't mind being left?"

"Not with the beasts about. They're company, mister."

Luce gave him a nod and a faint smile, and walked off towards the farm gate. He was within ten yards of it when a figure in blue on a bicycle came into view. The constable dismounted at the gate, saw Luce and stared at him.

"What's your business here?"

The question was sufficiently abrupt and aggressive to make Luce realize that he had a particular type to deal with, common man in authority. He did not like the look of the fellow. The constable was tall and lean and goat-like; his weather-reddened skin was stretched tight over a thin nose, eyes were grey-blue and a little insolent, lips compressed. Hard, aggressive and supercilious, he was not the ordinary fresh-faced, good-humoured Bobby.

Luce was consciously but casually polite.

"Good morning, officer. I had just come down to try and get some milk here, but I am afraid there has been rather a sad business."

The constable's goat-like eyes scrutinized him across the gate.

"Milk."

Luce's hand displayed the jug.

"Yes, I'm practically a stranger here."

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm up at the Signal Tower."

The man unlocked the gate, pushed it back, and wheeled his bike through. After a second stare at Luce he became a little less curt and arrogant.

"All right, sir. I'm wanted here."

"Good morning, officer. Is there any other place near where I could get some milk?"

"Nothing nearer than Brandon, sir."

"Thanks. That's rather a long way, but I suppose I'll have to try it."

Luce made his way back up the lane, feeling that the penal code at its crudest had materialized in the person of the policeman. What mercy or human sympathy could you count on from a fellow of this type? At the moment Luce might have been looking at life through the eyes of Rachel Ballard, but his consciousness became more male and personal when he found himself alone among the trees. That meeting at the gate had involved him finally and completely in the tragedy, unless——. And what was the alternative?—that she should give herself up, pretend that she had spent the night in the woods, and conceal all knowledge of Luce and the tower.

Otherwise? Yes, that fellow in blue would accuse him of having wilfully tampered with the case, which would be true. He had become an accessory. He was condoning and concealing homicide. They would begin to question his motives. Even his eccentric behaviour in coming to live alone in so solitary a place might appear—sexed and sinister. He was on the edge of his own particular and human precipice.

Also, what effect might his interference have upon her fortune if society discovered that he had attempted to conceal her and to obstruct the course of justice? Would not cynical people infer——? Undoubtedly. Ought he not to advise her to obey her first impulse, to confess that there might be safety in surrender? But that was the very thing that he had felt moved to resist. To hand her over to communal justice as it was symbolized by the face of that policeman!

It was during his return through the woods that separative man in him shrank from the complete consistency of the rebel's choice. He had to act and think for her, not for himself. But what was his decision to be?—and of necessity it would demand instant action. For the moment he felt himself walking rather blindly back to her hiding-place, unable to convince himself either one way or the other.

He found himself in the presence of that strange and solitary building. What did it suggest? That circumstance and solitude were somehow in league with him? The open lower window was like a mouth emitting some secret message. In a crisis such as this how did one come to a decision? Did one come to it consciously, or was emotion the key that unlocked the door?

He was conscious of feeling profoundly perplexed as he mounted the steps to the tower. He slipped the key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door, and as he did so it occurred to him to wonder whether she was still there. What if she——? And then he heard the swift movement of her feet. He had closed the door and relocked it when she joined him.

“O, my dear.”

One look at her was sufficient. Quickly, he put the jug down on the window-ledge and took her into his arms.

“You’ve been frightened?”

“Yes.”

“Someone has been?”

Her face was against his shoulder.

“No—just—fear. When you had gone. The horror of everything. O, my dear, I’m so cowardly.”

One of his hands lay upon her head as though sheltering it. He knew now that the decision was being made for him.

“I understand. You want life, my dear, not what man may choose to give you. I understand. We’re against the whole world, you and I.”

And instantly she protested.

“O, no, no, that can’t be. I can’t let you be compromised.”

He was aware only of her pale, distracted face.

“But I have done that, my dear, already. There is going to be no turning back for us.”

XI

It took Luce an hour to pacify her and to convince her that he was in earnest. And what, when he had persuaded her to agree that they could be a law unto themselves, did he mean to do? Yes, what did he mean to do? Hide here for a while? And then?

He asked her if she did not realize that many such riddles were left unsolved, and that he was determined to try and flout the law. It was obvious that no one had seen her, and that her disappearance might remain a mystery. They would search the woods, drag the ponds and explore the rivers. A description of her would be circulated all over the country. Even the ports would be watched.

And then? She confronted him with tragic eyes.

"Hasn't it occurred to you, Rachel, that a life may be reborn and lived out elsewhere?"

Her lips moved.

"But—you?"

She saw him smile.

"I'm just a lone man, one of those easy, dreamy old idiots who can live—anywhere."

Did she understand him aright? But was such a future possible? And if she loved him,—as she did?

"Ruin your life, John,—I?"

"Isn't the real life—inside one? I have a feeling that some things are meant to happen. I don't think I want to be alone again."

"But even if we succeeded, we should be—outcasts?"

"Not quite, my dear. I have always been happy away from the crowd."

Meanwhile it was very necessary that every detail should be decided upon and all eventualities foreseen. She should sleep in the second floor room while he occupied an improvised bed on the floor of the living-room. It did not seem to him likely that the tower would be searched, but it behoved them to be

prepared for such an occasion, and he remembered that there was a large, built-in cupboard in the room on the top floor. In the case of an alarm she was to lock herself in that room and shut herself up in the cupboard. It would be his affair to bluff the searchers, assume an air of amused candour, and exclaim, "Now, where the devil did I put that key?" Obviously, he would be unable to find it, and he did not think it likely that they would insist on forcing the door.

He went up to look at these two upper rooms. The locks were fairly stout, and would defy mere perfunctory curiosity. Moreover, he felt himself capable of creating an atmosphere of friendly candour. "You can take my word for it, there is no skeleton in my cupboard." He was not the sort of person whom they would be likely to suspect, and so far as he knew no living soul could say that he and Ballard's wife had met each other. He stood at that upper window, thinking. What his immediate need? Food for two people. And then? A pair of woman's shoes, a hat, and various accessories. The purchasing of food would be easy, but the procuring of feminine accessories would be a far more difficult affair. It would be dangerous for him to try and buy them in the neighbourhood. Yes, he would have to go to London, and purchase each article separately. But—a woman's hat?

Meanwhile, the food question challenged him. His stores were running low, and she might have to remain hidden here for days. He would walk into Brandon and visit the village shop. He was a large man and could claim a large appetite, and the careful buying of food need not raise suspicion. Moreover, they could ration themselves.

He descended the stairs to find her sitting beside the body of the dead dog. It occurred to him instantly that the body of the dog would have to be hidden until he could bury it. That cupboard upstairs would serve.

He spoke to her gently.

"I feel I ought to go into Brandon and lay in some more food."

"Must you, John?"

"Yes."

He explained the details of his plan to her. They had to take every precaution against a surprise visit. The dog's body could be placed in the cupboard, and at night he would bury it in the woods. He took Peter in his arms, and she followed him up the stairs. He showed her the cupboard and gave her the key of the room.

"You understand, dear. If anyone should turn up while I am away, run up to this room and lock yourself in."

She stood mute and motionless. It occurred to him to wonder whether he had persuaded her to accept the finality of their conspiracy against fate. He had the key of the green door in his pocket. He gave it to her.

“That’s my pledge, Rachel. Remember, that if you show yourself now—it might be fatal to both of us. They will be searching the woods. Someone might see you leave this place.”

She let the key lie in her palm. Then her fingers closed upon it.

“Yes. I understand.”

2

Luce was on his way to Brandon with his camping haversack slung over his shoulder when he met two men on bicycles in that deep and rutty place where the Ford van had got itself bogged. With the trees in full leaf the track was even more like a green tunnel, but the ground had dried into caked furrows. The leading man dismounted from his bicycle, partly because the track was treacherous, but also because he was not very sure of the way. Luce saw that he was an inspector of police.

He spoke to Luce.

“Are we right for Beech Farm?”

The inspector was a fresh-faced man, large, well fleshed, and essentially human, and Luce smiled at him. This big, blond creature was to his liking.

“I’m a newcomer here, but if you turn left when you reach the heath, I think the path takes you down to the farm.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Nice and fresh after the rain.”

“You’re right, sir.”

They wheeled their bicycles over the rotten ground, mounted and rode on, and Luce went his way, not sorry that he had met the man who would be in charge of the case. Even this trivial coincidence might be of some value, in that human contacts can be given useful significance. Luce felt that, if he chose, he could stroll up to the inspector and be treated as an interested and privileged member of the public. He found himself wondering whether the news of the tragedy had reached Brandon village. If so, it would be public merchandise in the village shops. But on that serene morning Brandon seemed pleasantly interested in nothing but its own affairs, and far less vocal than the rooks in the high elms. Luce’s first visit was to the shop that retained its privilege of providing articles of universal utility, from brooms to sausages. Already he was on friendly terms with the owner, and could assume an air of gentlemanly playfulness.

“Good morning, Mr. Mason. I find my larder is getting like Mother Hubbard’s.”

Mr. Mason, in his white apron, was prepared to fill the void. Bacon, yes, and did Luce like it fat or streaky? A Dutch cheese, no—half a cheese. Sardines. And what about a couple of pounds of sausages? One or two other people came into the shop, but Luce did not hear Beech Farm mentioned. He went on to the baker's. Would his haversack accommodate a couple of loaves of bread? It would not. He found that one of the loaves would have to be housed in a paper bag. Below the Chequers Inn a local newsagent sold tobacco, sweets, stationery, and toilet accessories. Luce went in and bought a *Daily Telegraph*. By the way, did they sell toothbrushes? They did. He purchased a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste and a comb, and stowed them away in his pockets. Such trivial merchandise could hardly rouse suspicion.

Then, in the village street he met Mr. Temperley, and Mr. Temperley's was the face of a man who knew, and it occurred to Luce that Mr. Temperley's face was a universal, and that he would have to accustom himself to confronting the world's countenance.

"You look quite—domestic, Luce. The daily bread?"

Luce smiled at him. Mr. Temperley had shot an arrow very close to the mark?

"Stores getting a little low, sir. It reminds me of drawing rations. Rather a splendid storm last night."

"All round you, I imagine."

"As a matter of fact I was up on the top of the tower. A magnificent grandstand. But when the rain came——"

Mr. Temperley was looking a little depressed.

"Just the night for a tragedy. Have you heard about Beech Farm?"

"No, sir. Not struck by lightning?"

"Better if it had been in some ways. That fellow Ballard was shot."

"Shot!"

"Yes, in his own house. And his wife has disappeared."

"His wife? I think you told me——"

"Yes, poor woman. The only decent thing a man like Ballard could have done would have been to shoot himself."

"But—someone else?"

"Yes. I'm dreadfully afraid, Luce, the poor wife did it."

“Good God, sir!”

“If so,—O—well—she’s probably dead too. They’ll find her in some pool or the river. A bad business, a very bad business.”

3

Luce escaped politely from Mr. Temperley. He had been very much afraid that Mr. Temperley would invite him in to sherry and biscuits, and over yonder Luce had left a hostage to Fate. What might a woman not do after such a night, and so emotional a morning? Old Temperley's words had troubled him. "They'll find her in some pool or the river." For, death is not difficult to those who are in pain, and bitter waters may seem sweet.

He had passed through the Brandon woods and reached the more open ground beyond when he was startled by a voice calling. "Mrs. Ballard, Mrs. Ballard." For the moment he could see no one, and then between the scattered trees, Scotch firs, thorns and birches, he saw a line of figures strung out and wandering through the heather and young fern. So, they were beating the woods for Rachel Ballard. Luce stood still, watching the approaching men. Now and again one of them would diverge to peer under the spreading branches of a thorn. "Mrs. Ballard." The voice was countered by another voice speaking with authority. "Better keep quiet over there." The approach of these searchers had for Luce something of the inevitableness of a heath fire advancing inexorably with the wind.

He waited. There seemed to be wisdom in waiting, for they were working in the direction of the tower. And then he realized that the particular figure which was nearest to him was that of the inspector in charge. Here was his chance to create an impression of impartial interest and of innocence. He strolled forward to meet the man in blue.

"Someone lost, Inspector?"

Luce was not told to mind his own business. He had a pleasant voice, and Inspector Ford had been bred in the country where a gentleman's voice still may carry. He looked at Luce and his haversack and his paper bag. Only a gentleman could wear clothes like that.

"Yes, sir. Rather a bad business down there. We are looking for a woman."

Luce faced about and put himself in line with the man in blue. The gently perspiring face of Ford had a serious intent kindness. There was nothing of the bloodhound about him. He was more suggestive of a large and fatherly person looking for a lost child.

“I’m a stranger here,” said Luce. “Up at the old Signal Tower. Probably you don’t know it.”

“No, sir.”

“Can I help?”

The inspector paused to examine a mass of last year’s fern that had piled itself almost like a small tent round the trunk of a fir.

“If you care to, sir.”

“Have you any idea?”

“None at all. I’m having the pond dragged down there. It’s a murder case.”

“Murder! Then—the——?”

The big man looked at him gravely.

“Yes, sir, one of those cases—where, from all I hear, one’s going to be sorry for the woman I think—— Still, that’s not my business—Mr.——”

“Luce. Look here, Inspector. I’ll go and get rid of this stuff, and come back and join you. By the way, what’s the woman like?”

“A little, dark person, sir.”

Luce swung on ahead, and walking hard, he was soon out of sight of the line of men. His impulse was to run, but he suppressed such emotional haste, for there was no immediate danger in this beating of the heaths and woods. She was much more likely to be in danger from some sudden emotional impulse that might persuade her to self-surrender.

Coming in sight of the tower he remembered that he had left the key with her. Rather too sensitive a gesture, that! It would mean that he might be kept waiting for a moment on his own doorstep, and if any Peeping Tom was around it might strike him as curious that a man living alone should have to loiter there. More and more was Luce appreciating how supremely important it was that every detail in the picture should be correct and convincing. In so poignant a piece of living literature anachronisms could not be left to the proof-reader. It was necessary that she should know of his return, and be ready to turn the key for him.

When he reached the smother of old laurels near the garden fence, he began to whistle a tune. Yes, he would promise to whistle some particular tune when he had to leave her. It would serve as a password, and the tune he chose at the moment was Strauss’ *Blue Danube* waltz.

As he climbed the steps he was afraid that she might open the door—out of time, for, even though no one might be watching he was becoming a ruthless stage-manager. Was it not notorious that some trivial omission had betrayed many a most careful criminal? His eyes were fixed upon the green door. He was willing it to remain shut until he reached it. He kept up his whistling. He had reached the doorstep itself when he heard the key turning in the lock.

He turned to look at the little world behind him, and then allowed himself three whispered words.

“Don’t show yourself.”

He opened it, entered, and found her concealed behind the door. He smiled, nodded at her, and closed the door.

“Thank God, my dear, you haven’t had an attack of conscience.”

She understood him.

“I did, John.”

He stood looking down at her.

“I—wondered. That’s my particular phantom, Rachel. Supposing we lay that ghost. I have just been talking to the police inspector, and if he were to suspect that I knew. . . .”

He unslung his haversack.

“Take this, dear. And keep away from the windows. I have to go out again.”

“Again?”

“Yes, they are beating the woods. They are working up this way. I am going out as a volunteer—to join in the search for you.”

XII

SHE found herself looking at his books.

She had unpacked his haversack, and put his purchases away in the cupboard as though she had become responsible as a woman for such things. The cupboard was on the safe side of his string, and so was his bookcase, and the books intrigued her.

Would she not find the man in his books? Did she need to find anything more than the live book which they were sharing told her? She was becoming as passionately involved in the romance as he was. But was passion the word? No, its inadequacy was self-evident. She was kneeling by the bookcase, holding one of his books in her hands, and when she opened it and read, she was aware of feeling like a child looking into a mirror that gave her broken reflections. She did not understand that solemn stuff, metaphysics and imaginative mathematics. And did she understand him? She was very sure somehow that she did, because she loved him and would love him with a sensitive and wise devotion that would grow deeper hour by hour. She had had her attack of conscience. It had carried her as far as the green door, and almost it had thrust her out to surrender herself with the idea of saving him from further madness. And then, she had realized that he was asking to be mad, and that the love between them transcended reason.

She was kneeling on the floor with the book open in her lap when she heard those voices in the woods. Was she afraid? No, not for herself now, but for him. She put the book back, rose from her knees, and going out into the vestibule she climbed the stairs to the room from whose window she had confronted the morning. How long ago that seemed! He had warned her against going to the window, and she stood against the wall opposite it, and saw as in a picture a part of the weedy garden, the rotting fence, and the ground beyond it with its scattered trees. Two figures were approaching the fence; one of them was Luce's, the other a figure in dark blue.

They paused beyond the fence, and Luce appeared to be speaking to the other man.

"Queer old place, that of mine."

For, in joining the line of beaters he had found himself next to the police

constable whom he had met at the farm gate, though a space of some thirty yards had separated them. And Luce had accepted the coincidence. The fellow with the goat's eyes might be regarded as the arbiter of things sinister, an enemy to be watched, and as they had approached the tower Luce had so shaped his course that he had been brought nearer to P.C. Pook. It had seemed to him that the fellow was unpleasantly interested in the building. Had he spotted anything suspicious?

With nothing but some heather and a few pines between them and the garden fence Luce had crossed over and joined the man as though the openness of the ground made any immediate attention to the business in hand superfluous. He had made that rather obvious remark.

"Queer old place, that of mine."

A moment later it had occurred to him that the other man's attention was so concentrated upon the tower that Luce's words had not penetrated. The constable's thin lips were pressed together. Faint wrinkles showed about his eyes. He was absorbed in staring, set like a dog who has sighted something to be chased. Damn the fellow! Luce felt fierce.

"You seem interested, officer."

The man turned his head sharply.

"My business, sir."

"I was just saying—that it's a funny old place. It puzzled me completely when I first saw it. I couldn't explain it."

The man's eyes were turned again upon the tower. What the devil was he staring at? Had he discovered anything significant? Luce's eyes scanned the place from base to parapet, pausing at each window, but he could see nothing that could arouse suspicion.

"You can see the Chilterns from the top of the tower."

He received a laconic "So I've been told."

The constable moved on, following the fence and the banks of rhododendrons and of laurel, and Luce kept at his heels, his eyes fixed on the nape of the man's lean and leathery neck. A most unpleasant fellow this! He would not enter into conversation; he kept you guessing; he was not a man, but a petty official. And then the constable paused abruptly and bent down as though to examine the path.

Luce drew level with him. What had authority discovered? Not a footmark

that might betray the fact that someone without shoes had come this way? Luce was conscious of a moment's acute suspense.

"Anything interesting?"

The constable transferred his attention to Luce's feet.

"One of yours, sir, by the size."

And Luce laughed.

"In the comic press, officer, the joke is generally made against your force."

P.C. Pook took him literally.

"So I've been told."

Proceeding, they skirted a bank of old laurels and came to the garden gate, and again the constable paused. He turned back to peer into the laurels, and then he was moved to open the gate, and examine the shrubs from the garden side. There was one very ancient shed on the ground in which previous tenants had stored tools and vegetables, but its roof leaked, and Luce had put it to no use. P.C. Pook walked over to the shed, opened the door and looked in.

"You don't keep a dog, sir?"

"No," said Luce, rather regretting that there was no fierce Alsatian about the place.

The constable rejoined him, and stood looking at the green door.

"Do you keep that locked?"

"As a matter of fact—I do."

P.C. Pook gave him a supercilious stare. So, this gentlemanly idiot had some sense.

"Just as well. Tramps."

"Do you get many tramps round here, officer?"

"Plenty. And chaps who'd like to kid you that they're on the road, looking for work."

"I'll keep that in mind. By the way, isn't it possible that some strolling rough might not have done this thing?"

The constable turned sharply towards the gate.

"Not likely. You take it from me, the woman fired that gun."

Meanwhile the search had spread into the woods beyond the tower, and when Luce and the constable rejoined it, the line of beaters was half-way down the hill. Masses of rhododendron covered the slope, brilliant with flower, and above the tops of the tall trees, firs, larches, and beeches formed a canopy. Difficult ground this, and the search went slowly. Evergreen foliage was pushed aside, and heads and shoulders thrust into the green mounds. P.C. Pook was becoming sarcastic.

"Messing about—wasting time and trouble."

"Where do you think she will be found, officer?"

"In the water, if you ask me."

The search dribbled down through a plantation of young larches to the by-road skirting the hill, and here it bunched together round the inspector, who was hot and an invitation to the flies. His decision was that they should swing to the left across Brandon Heath and work back towards the farm, and Luce went with them, walking between the inspector and a farm hand. He was beginning to feel reassured about the business. This world was sufficiently wild and secret to keep these searchers walking for a week.

2

A bicycle leaning against the fence! A moment later he had appreciated the fact that the machine was red, and that it belonged to the G.P.O. How very difficult it was to exclude the social services from a world in which organized interference was becoming normal. A boy in uniform was standing outside the green door, and Luce saw his hand go out to the brass knocker.

He hailed the lad.

“No one in. Telegram?”

They met at the gate.

“Mr. Luce?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve been knocking for five minutes.”

“Splendid” said Luce, “nothing like persistence. You see, I live alone.”

The lad passed the yellow envelope to him, and Luce opened it, drew out the telegram and read. Another wire from that pestilent fellow Lowndes! As a superman in the hierarchy of the Fusspots Lowndes was supreme. Was Luce satisfied that as trustees they had safeguarded the interests of a hypothetical next generation? Luce looked at the lad, who was staring interestedly at the tower.

“Have you a form?”

A pouch was opened and a form handed to him.

“And a pencil?”

“Yes, sir.”

Luce went to the tower steps, and using one of the stone surfaces as a table, wrote his reply to Lowndes.

“Perfectly satisfied. Need we worry about A.D. 2000.”

He would like to have said many contemptuous things to Lowndes, but the reflection that it would be wise for him to resign his trusteeship assuaged him. He returned to the gate, handed the form to the lad for him to read and check.

“One and twopence, sir.”

“You can read it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Luce produced a two-shilling piece.

“Keep the change.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He waited at the gate until the lad had mounted and pedalled off down the path, and then, with a feeling of relief, he went to unlock the green door. Had the knocking alarmed her? He realized how very necessary it was to keep the door locked. That lad might have opened it, and made an attempt to call someone to whom he could deliver his telegram.

As Luce stood in the little vestibule at the bottom of the stairs he was aware of the tower’s silence, the almost stagnant silence of a building that has long been empty. Surely, she had not been overwhelmed by another attack of conscience? The sitting-room door hung ajar. He swung it back and entered, and saw that she had laid the table for lunch, white cloth, glasses, plates, cutlery and silver. And she had laid it for two! Supposing, in his enthusiasm for fooling the world with friendly candour he had introduced some other man into the tower, the inspector for instance, with the suggestion of a drink, and his casual guest had cast eyes upon that table? But where was she? He climbed the stairs, whistling the tune of the morning, but not till he reached the top story was there any response.

“Rachel.”

He heard a key turning in the lock. So, the lad’s knocking had alarmed her, and she had fled upstairs to the upper room.

“It’s all right, dear; only a telegram.”

She put her hands in his.

“I had just finished laying the table, John, when that knocking began.”

“It’s just as well that I locked that door. No, the telegram was of no importance. We’ll go down and eat. But just one word of warning. We must not talk down there. If two voices were heard by some Listening Tom.”

She nodded at him.

“Yes, John.”

“And there is one thing I want you to notice about the table. I have been

making friends with the police inspector. Supposing, that for the sake of allaying any suspicion I had brought him in for a drink? I think you had better stay upstairs when I am out."

Then, he remembered his minor purchases, and produced them from his pocket.

"All that I dared buy. Our shopping has to be surreptitious."

What a present for a lover to produce, a comb, a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste! but she held the things in her hands as though they were very precious.

"I can't pay you, John. I haven't a penny."

He put an arm round her.

"Is that going to worry us?"

Below, he paused in the sitting-room doorway with his arm about her, and pointed at the table. She saw at once how the laying of those two places might have betrayed them. He felt the quick intake of her breath.

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. She turned her head, looked up at him, nodded. And then she went to the stove. She had four of the sausages he had brought back ready for frying. Sausages! How very unromantic, and yet how completely so!

This dumb meal was less silent than it seemed. She was very quick to catch the meaning of his glances and his gestures. Moreover, he went and fetched a writing-pad and pencil, and scribbled notes for her to read. Was she worrying about poor Peter? No. He would bury the dog after dark. Yes, the woods were being searched, and for the next few days they might expect the casual and the curious to be in evidence. Also, he was going down to the farm to help in the search, collect rumours, and impress upon the world a conviction that he was no more than a disinterested supernumerary.

He scribbled a final warning.

"Better not wash up or do anything that would make the slightest sound while I am away."

Then he burnt the scribbled page, leaving the ash in the grate, kissed her, and went out to see what the world down yonder was doing.

3

He found them dragging the farm pond.

More police were in evidence, keeping casual curiosity at a distance. A young constable, posted at the farm gate, had challenged Luce.

“What’s your business, here, sir?”

Luce had smiled at him, and said that he had been helping in the morning’s search, and that he had a piece of information that might interest the inspector. The constable had let him through.

The dragging of the pond had as yet produced no results, and Luce, joining Inspector Ford, was allowed to stand and watch.

“By the way, Inspector, I don’t know whether it might have any bearing on this business, but I met the dead man a few days ago.”

“Where, sir?”

“He called on me. He had a proposal to make. But that was of no particular significance. What did impress me——.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That Ballard was not quite—sane.”

“In what way, sir?”

“He wanted me to sublet part of the tower. I refused. Well, a man who is normal does not lose his temper badly over a mere incident like that.”

“He lost his temper?”

“Remember, we were complete strangers. He was so savagely insolent—that if I had been a little younger—I might have kicked him down my steps.”

The inspector was watching the pond.

“Yes, and he had that reputation, sir, and if his wife’s disappearance did not lead us to suspect——.”

“He could not have shot himself?”

“The doctor has examined the body. It could not have been a case of

suicide."

"I see. I've known of a case where a dog knocked over a gun."

But the inspector had ceased to listen to him. The iron drag had emerged with an object impaled on one of its hooks, a woman's shoe. A constable freed it from the hook and brought it to his superior. Luce watched the inspector's large hands turning the shoe over and over. What would he make of it?

"Go on dragging, Carter. Sims, go in and bring me a pair of shoes from the bedroom."

The shoes were brought and compared with the one that had been recovered from the pond.

"Same size. This hasn't been in the water long. Too good a shoe to throw away. Worn down just a little at the heel."

Luce listened and watched, but he did not ask to be allowed to examine the shoe.

"A three—by the look of it. Any number visible on the other shoes, Sims?"

"Yes, a three, sir."

"Good."

The voice of the man on the drag rope was heard to exclaim excitedly: "I've got something, sir."

All eyes were on the pond. The dripping rope ran in, and a dark object came to the surface in the shallows, a battered car with its handle caught by the hooks. No one smiled.

"Not much use to us, Sims. How deep is that water?"

"Pretty deep in the centre, sir."

"Go on dragging. One of you put on those waders, and take a pitchfork and probe around."

The search continued, but the Beech Farm pond surrendered no more secrets. It retained in its mud that second shoe, and if the police were puzzled, Luce was ready to allow them to play with that problem. It was not reasonable to assume that a woman would throw one shoe into a pond, or even to wade into it wearing only one shoe.

He filled and lit a pipe.

"I'll be getting back, Inspector. I've got a neglected garden on my hands. I

thought I would come down and mention that—incident."

The big man was vaguely courteous. The public had a passion for providing one with vestigial information.

"Much obliged, sir."

And Luce idled off, hands in pockets, his pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth.

XIII

On that second night she protested. She had taken both his room and his bed, and if there were to be improvisations, why should she not share in them? And perhaps, in pleading, she had raised her voice forgetfully, and he had shaken his head at her and pointed to the open window.

"Be careful."

For the night was black and still, too black and still for the work he had to do, bury the dead dog, and he had changed his plan. He had meant to bury the dog in the woods, but to blunder about among the trees on such a night was not practicable, and he remembered that he was engaged in digging the garden. Freshly turned soil would not attract attention here, and if he laid poor Peter three feet deep in the soil, no casual spade would be likely to disinter him. Meanwhile, he had suggested that she should go to bed, for he was sitting up with the lights out until one in the morning. Even ghosts and late lovers would not walk at that hour, and in the soft soil of the garden his spade would be almost soundless.

He had to take her by the arm to the foot of the stairs, and here they stood whispering.

"I have slept in all sorts of places, my dear, in ditches and on cabin floors. Don't waste your pity."

"But take the mattress, John. I can manage with the blankets."

"I won't. Good night, dear. I'm sitting up late."

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then she put up her face and kissed him.

"Good night, my dearest dear."

She was gone, and he listened to her footsteps, and supposed that the argument about the bed was over. He walked back into the sitting-room, picked up a book and sat down. A deal floor, a rug and a blanket and a couple of cushions offered more space and foundation than a couple of basket chairs. Moreover, he was not one of your lean creatures whose bones make ready contact with concrete reality.

Time for reflection! But very soon a little sound disturbed him, movement

upon the stairs, the rubbing of some soft substance against the walls. He had left the door half open, and he might suppose that she had forgotten something, but why this secret, surreptitious descent? Something was pushed softly into the room, the mattress of his camp-bed.

She was half-way up the stairs before he reached the door. He followed her up, with the rolled-up mattress under his arm.

"Rachel."

Her voice answered him from the other side of the closed door.

"Please, John."

Trying the door, he found it locked.

"I'll leave the mattress on the landing."

"No, John, please."

And then he realized that it would be graceless to refuse her.

"All right. But you shouldn't have done it. Do you know how to make a sleeping-bag of the blankets?"

"Yes, I can manage, John."

When he had made up his bed, Luce put out the light and sat down at the open window. The dog's body had been brought downstairs and was lying in a cupboard in the vestibule. The night was very dark and still, no wind in the trees, a few stars visible, and to Luce there was a finality in the silence and the darkness. It was both obvious and mystical, cloaking and containing the complex collectivism of man. Neither metaphysics nor metapsychics could transcend the policed and placarded social scheme.

Yes, this was finality, outlawry, and yet he did not question the sanity of his choice. A great emotional experience carries its own justification. Two days ago he had been a middle-aged dilettante dawdling through the time-space illusion; now, he was a man, almost primitive man, alert, cunning. And how desperate indeed was their outlawry! They had taken to the woods. They could be hunted.

Had he been too final? What if he had tried finesse, spun a tale for her and persuaded her to tell it? But would she have told it, and if she had, would society have accepted the story? An angry man threatening to shoot a dog, a struggle for a gun, tragedy! And would not society have asked why she had run to take shelter with another man?

The inevitable sex nexus! Even a recluse can be wise as to the world's

cynical smile when sex becomes postulated, and no doubt the world was right. Subtilize the problem as you will, was not sex—even in its ultimate tenderness—the raw earth out of which all loveliness grew? Yes, he had been wise to choose a ruthless and desperate finality.

Even the burying of her dead dog was of profound importance, a secret and devoted act done in the darkness. He waited two hours since the quenching of the light. He had left the spade ready by the steps. The night should be safe now. He rose and stood by the window, and was just able to distinguish the shape of the big pear tree. The very stillness of the night reassured him. He went out with the dog's body, locking the door after him; he found the spade, and walked to where he had been turning up the weedy soil. Placing the dog on the ground, he set to work. It did not take him long to dig a deep and narrow trench. He laid the dog in it, shovelled back the earth, treading it down so that there should be no surplus soil. He left the top spit loose, knowing that he could go over the ground in the morning, remove any suspicious subsoil, and rake out all footmarks.

He had stepped back on to the undug ground, and had shouldered his spade when a sudden sound startled him. It suggested the cracking of a piece of dead wood. The night was so still that the fracture of a mere twig could make a noise like the snapping of a full-grown branch. Luce stood stock still. Woodlands at night could produce you strange noises, but on such a night as this nothing could be taken for granted. Was someone on the prowl? But who? A tramp? He stood rigid, listening. And then he was convinced that he could distinguish the movement of feet along the sandy path beyond the shaggy laurels. Thank God, he had locked that door. Some intuitive streak of cunning made him get slowly and silently to earth. He lay prone, flat among the weeds like a skulker in no man's land.

A moment later he was to bless this inspiration. A beam of light flashed out beyond the laurels. It seemed to feel its way like a finger probing the darkness. At the gate in the fence it became an eye whose glare lit up the wooden slats. Someone with an electric torch! Everything behind that white eye was invisible to Luce. He saw the beam swing in and strike towards the tower, and now the shape behind it could be distinguished, a man in dark clothes. Luce saw him steal up to the steps and flash his light on the green door. He mounted the steps, tried the door, and came slowly down again. Luce, lying prone with his chin on one fist, was suddenly aware of his other hand clutching the spade just as he had clutched his rifle amid those shell-holes in Flanders. He held a weapon and the elemental man in him would have used it. His teeth were clenched; he was breathing through pinched nostrils.

The torch was sending wavering beams hither and thither, and then Luce realized that the intruder was exploring the outside of the tower. That finger of light groped its way up to the lower window. Luce could see the man's back, and separated from it by a faint crescent of paler substance, the dark swell of his head-piece. A police helmet! His dear friend, P.C. Pook?

A second later Luce's face was down among the weeds. The light had swung round and was playing over the surface of the garden. Would it reach him? Would that damned fellow come trampling across the soil? By God, if he did——! And for a moment he was savage man, clutching his weapon. The edge of the spade smashing through that helmet! He could remember saying to himself, "Good God, don't be a wild fool!" He raised his head two inches, looked, and saw the beam of light travelling away from him.

It disappeared round the corner of the annexe, and Luce took his chance. He got on his feet, and stooping, put ten yards more ground between himself and the tower, and going to earth again, lay watching. He saw the beam of light re-appear beyond the tower. It wavered hither and thither for a few seconds, and then went on towards the gate.

Had he been seen? Most certainly he had not, or authority would have challenged him. And suddenly the light went out. He heard the click of the gate, and the sound of footsteps passing away along the path into the woods.

What an escape! He was sweating. If the thing had happened a few seconds later that damned limb of the law might have surprised him walking back to the tower with a spade over his shoulder. And what explanation could he have offered? That he had been burying the household rubbish at one o'clock in the morning? Or going to dig for a badger? The inevitable investigations by daylight, some patch of sandy subsoil betraying deep digging! He lay there with his chin on his fist. He did not move for fully an hour, for might not Mr. Curiosity be still on the prowl?

At long last when he did get on his feet Luce did not make straight for the tower steps, but went round by the back of the tower and came to them that way. He stood for a little while, listening, before mounting the steps. Would Authority send up another star-shell? He felt the flurry in his fingers as he probed for the keyhole with the key. He opened and closed the door with immense and deliberate carefulness.

That sudden craving for tobacco! Yes, just like the war. He filled his pipe, yet even the striking of a match seemed tempting providence. But a pipe was a necessity, and to kindle it and maintain the illusion of darkness, he put a blanket over his head, and lit a match. How good the tobacco tasted! And

again he was reminded of the war, and of a half-starved man's relish of simple things after some bloody occasion. Had he forgotten how to kill his man, smash in a head, as he might have smashed the head of that prying police constable? There was a wildness in him that night.

But he lay down and slept as he had sometimes slept in the war, like a fierce but tired animal, and next morning he was out early with spade and rake, prepared to parade a show of industry should anyone come exploring. The spot where he had buried the dog showed a powdering of lighter soil, and he raked the surface for some yards about the focus until the shades of colour were undistinguishable. Nor did his attention to detail end here. He dug for an hour, and here and there he purposely brought up some of the lighter subsoil and left it as camouflage.

About seven o'clock he was shaving when he heard her on the stairs, and he went and closed the window.

"Excuse my soapy chin."

Surely, outlaws should be gaillard people, but while smiling at her, he watched her eyes. Had she slept? Was she suffering from any flutterings of sentiment? He was beginning to despise mere sentiment.

"What would you like for breakfast, John?"

Admirable sanity!

2

When Brandon saw Mr. Temperley wearing his Panama hat and brown linen coat it could say that summer had come, and proceed to the casting of clouts. Also, it is probable that Brandon village assumed that it knew all that was to be known about Mr. Temperley, what he wore and what he ate, and when he went to bed, and what his old handmaids thought of him. In this particular case familiarity had not bred contempt, for this little old emperor of a man with his white head and his vivid face and those eyes that looked black in certain lights, was very much a person. Mr. Temperley was believed to know the whole of Brandon's business, and Brandon, in its cock-sure moments, could and did return the compliment, which was mere vanity. That there might be quite another and strange old gentleman concealed in that familiar flesh was beyond Brandon's imaginings, not the Mr. Temperley who sat in his cane-backed chair amid deed boxes and legal manuals and estate maps; nor was it the Mr. Temperley who pruned his standard roses. That other essential and secret self had not mortgaged itself to society.

Mr. Temperley, with a *coup de poing* in his hand, or pottering about in some hill fort, or prodding with his stick where rabbits had been burrowing on a Roman site was completely another person. Moreover, Mr. Temperley, the assumed conventionalist, had discovered in the sixties how little of the lawyer was left in him. He put on legality with his clothes, and became in his solitary moments, palæolithic and naked. The world's youth had recrudesced in him moods of primitive candour and of exquisite cunning. He had recovered a youngness that refused to conform. He prodded life anew and found it full of mischief and ironic provocations. Its solemn assumptions made him chuckle.

Mr. Temperley took his stick and his Panama hat, and leaving Mr. Maggs, his articled clerk, in charge of life's dustiness, he set out for Brandon Heath. The day was hot, and Mr. Temperley did not hurry, but within sight of the shade of the Brandon woods, he heard footsteps behind him that were both hot and hurried.

"Excuse me, Mr. Temperley, I believe?"

Mr. Temperley found a strange young man at his elbow, an undersized young man wearing spectacles.

"I represent the *Melford Argus*, sir."

“Ah, the Press,” said Mr. Temperley. “What can I do for you?”

“I understand the man Ballard was an estate tenant of yours, sir?”

“The man Ballard?”

“Yes, the fellow at Beech Farm.”

Mr. Temperley could be most debonair to people he disliked. Sweet suavity was the surest armour, and innocence could be double-tongued.

“Yes, that is so. And what do you want with me?”

“I wondered whether you could give me any information, Mr. Temperley, about these people.”

“Which people?”

“The man Ballard—and the woman who murdered him.”

They had reached the shade of the trees, and Mr. Temperley took off his hat as though he found it refreshing to walk bareheaded in the shade.

“Did she murder him?”

“The obvious assumption, sir, even though the police are a little reticent about it. But I suppose you knew these people?”

“O, hardly at all, Mr.——.”

“Soaper. I assumed that you might be able to give me some information that isn’t just gossip.”

“And what do the gossips say?”

Mr. Soaper was beginning to think that Mr. Temperley was a somewhat senile person.

“Ballard drank a good deal, and had a beast of a temper, sir. The woman ——.”

“Mrs. Ballard.”

“The woman Ballard seems to have been rather a poor thing, hysterical, I imagine. All the atmosphere necessary, sir, for an emotional flare-up.”

Mr. Temperley was tapping the wire fence gently with his stick.

“Excuse me, Mr. Soaper, but there is one thing that has always puzzled me.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“When exactly does the psychological moment arrive for the dropping of a prefix?”

“Prefix, sir?”

“Perhaps I should have said title. When we enter a lavatory we are welcomed either as ladies or gentlemen, but when we arrive at certain states of publicity we are not even Mr. or Mrs. Just Ballard, or Smith, or the woman. How do you decide, Mr. Soaper, when the psychological instant has arrived for your paper to become even less polite than a public lavatory?”

The young man stared at him. He was beginning to wonder whether Mr. Temperley was quite as senile as he seemed, but before he could discover any answer to that question they were out of the shade and in the sudden presence of a third person.

Mr. Temperley put on his hat.

“Good morning, Luce. Going shopping?”

Mr. Temperley welcomed the largeness of Luce, who, pipe in mouth, and with the sun upon him, might, like Apollo, dispel this little human miasma. Mr. Temperley did not excuse himself to the *Melford Argus*. He waited for Luce to come down the path between two banks of heather, and the Press, finding itself superfluous, left these two gentlemen together.

No. Luce was not going shopping, nor need Mr. Temperley accuse him of being crudely curious because he felt moved to take some human interest in the tragedy of Beech Farm.

“A bad business, sir.”

Mr. Temperley, satisfied that he had shed the young man in spectacles, took Luce into his confidence.

“Thanks, Luce, for preserving me from the Press. Yes, it’s a bad business. If you are going that way we can go together.”

The *Melford Argus* had not yet disappeared from sight. It had paused under a Scotch fir, to scribble in a note-book. Mr. Temperley, raising his stick, indicated the sedulous scribbler.

“Let that get on, Luce. If you are not careful he will have you down in print as the mystery man of the lone tower. But one shouldn’t be pert to the Press. One has to remember that they are our masters.”

Luce had his hands in his pockets. He withdrew one of them to take his pipe from his mouth.

“They have left us no adjectives.”

“Even less than that, Luce. Everything on the front page in large letters. Plenty of blood and brains splashed about. And the world likes it.”

Luce took a pull at his pipe.

“Would you like to repeat the Noah legend, sir?”

“Yes, but for the knowledge that the whole business would repeat itself, just as one repeats one’s past. At the age of twenty-three I was a hot-hearted young rebel. At the age of seventy-three I am again a rebel.”

Luce gave him a glance of profound attention.

“In this particular case, also?”

“Absolutely so. Call it an accident or an act of God. Because an impossible brute like Ballard gets himself shot, why should we agree to let the real victim be hunted by Tom, Dick and Harry?”

“It’s pretty damnable. And have you any theory, sir?”

“I imagine that Mrs. Ballard has drowned herself, or that she will be found dead somewhere in the woods. Shock, and exposure and exhaustion can kill. I would leave her in peace, wherever she is. There is one curious feature in the case, she had a dog.”

“And they haven’t found the dog?”

“No.”

“Rather puzzling.”

“Very. I had a few words this morning with the detective-inspector in charge of the case. The order of the day seems to be ‘Cherchez le chien.’ ”

He paused and prodded the soil with his stick.

“The fact is, Luce, I’m finding myself on the side of Nature and Mother Earth. If the poor thing happens to be alive, I’d like to see her escape society.”

“Rather a hopeless chance, sir.”

“Yes, damnably so. She is better dead, perhaps. No cage business. Death is so kind and final.”

Luce was silent. He was thinking of the night’s adventure, and how nearly a dead dog’s body had betrayed them.

“Yes, so kind and final. I suppose I ought to confess that I’m on my way to

help in the search."

"You, Luce?"

"Well, not quite as a bloodhound."

"And if you happened to be the one to find her?"

"One might be a little more gentle than the official world."

"No ultimate salvation in that, Luce."

"No, sir; I'm afraid not."

So, coming to the farm, they found it very much Tom, Dick and Harry, for the official world was organizing a methodical combing of the woods and heaths. Here were the police, and a little crowd of volunteer beaters, and Boy Scouts. Boy Scouts! Mr. Temperley's eyebrows bristled. Why introduce these damned urchins into such a blood hunt? Luce stood smoking his pipe and watching Inspector Ford talking to a new autocrat in a lounge suit and a bowler hat. They were going to draw Chellworth Heath.

Luce knocked out his pipe and put it in his pocket.

"I think I'll go with them, sir."

"I hope you will draw a blank, Luce."

"So do I."

The pack was ordered out to work across the fields and to search hedges, coppices and ditches on the way to Chellworth Heath. Luce found himself between Brandon's half-wit and an under-keeper from a neighbouring estate. Brandon's half-wit kept up a perpetual sniffing. He was of the loquacious, word-picking order. The keeper was a laconic and hard-bitten person, accustomed to solitude and to using his ears and eyes. The day was hot, and the search went forward into the glare and gorse of Chellworth Heath. There were stretches of heather to be waded through, bramble patches and nests of dead fern to be probed. But Chellworth Heath delivered up no secret. The only living creature they disturbed was a very dirty tramp asleep in the heather.

3

It was on the way home that Luce passed the caravan. He had broken away from the body of searchers, and had turned back from Chellworth Heath, and having discovered as an amateur tramp that he possessed the wild man's flair for finding his way through strange country, he had attempted a short cut. He came quite suddenly upon the caravan tucked away in a corner of a little meadow where Chellworth Heath touched cultivated country. He saw a blue car parked under a tree, with a green canvas bivvy beside it. The caravan itself stood a little apart; its door was shut, the curtains drawn across its windows.

This house on wheels had more than one suggestion to offer him. From a diminutive clothes-line suspended between the tree and the hood of the car dangled two pairs of stockings, a pair of socks, three handkerchiefs, a dishcloth, and a shirt. Obviously, the caravan was bi-sexual, and its lady had been busy washing, but for the moment the camping-ground was deserted. He found himself coveting a pair of those stockings, for he was wise as to the state of Rachel's hose, but the risk of being caught as a petty sneak-thief was too great. Moreover, this motor-caravan had other inspirations to offer. He could drive a car, and how easy it would be for two people to disappear in a caravan, slip half-way across England in a night and become just casual caravaners.

There was a field gate leading into the meadow. Luce had a foot on one of the stretchers of the gate when an unseen dog lying under the caravan woke up and spotted him. The dog was chained to a wheel, and he emerged to the full length of the chain and barked vigorously at Luce. His protests were adequate. Luce waved a friendly hand at the animal and walked on, but the inspiration of that house on wheels remained with him.

What were the immediate necessities?

To keep Rachel Ballard hidden until the mystery of her disappearance had become still more mysterious, and then to smuggle her into some temporary refuge until they could dare the final adventure. To get her out of the country, that was the ultimate problem. But how? He had begun to appreciate the difficulties ahead of him, and in appreciating them and reflecting upon them to caution himself against flurry and precipitation. Had not too much haste ruined many a getaway? Ruthless, mathematical deliberation was the thing. Authority would be watching the ports, combing the cities and sea-coast towns, but

would it cast an eye upon two people idling in a caravan somewhere in Wales? He might assume that Authority had no reason to suspect its victim of being associated with a man.

Meanwhile, clothes were the dilemma, stockings, shoes, a hat, a coat of some sort. How the devil did a lone man set about purchasing a woman's wardrobe without stimulating suspicion? Caravaners might be regarded as casual people, but she must have shoes.

And then he remembered telling old Temperley that he was going to Switzerland. Well, would it not be possible to vary the plan, let it be known that friends had asked him to go caravaning? And his ultimate leaving of the tower? He would have to stage a return to it before his final exodus. Rachel would have to be concealed somewhere. And how to explain that final exodus, and to rationalize the sudden ending of his tenancy?

What if he set the place alight, and pleaded crass carelessness? The building was insured, and his furniture mere rubbish.

But to leave the country? Two passports would be necessary. How was he to procure a passport for her? And then—he remembered.

XIV

BUT he was to be confronted by other emotional realities, and to be made to realize that a sensitive woman cannot be left locked up for long hours in an empty building without beginning to suffer from doubts and self-accusations. He had come back full of his inspiration, to find her sitting quietly with a book. Her quietism was illusive. She sat and watched him drag an old leather attaché case from a cupboard and spill its contents on the table, maps, old letters, note-books. He was rummaging sedulously, fiercely. She heard him emit a sound of satisfaction; it was almost the exultant "Ha!" of a man whose sword has touched his enemy. He held something that looked like a very slim, blue-covered book. He opened it, turning over pink pages.

"By Jove, it's still valid."

She rose from her chair and stood beside him. The passport lay on the table, held open by his thumb and fingers. He was looking at the photo of a woman, with a signature below it.—N. F. Luce.

And then he seemed to become conscious of her standing and looking with him at the photo of his dead wife. That it had caused him sudden qualms and stirrings of old memories was like the intervention of some other person. He withdrew his hand from the little book, and it closed itself to display the white number and name spaces, the coat of arms in gold on a dark blue ground.

He glanced at her. He seemed to divine in her a shrinking from the issue. Something had to be said. Had poor Norah been with them in the spirit, would she have been petty and possessive, and reproached him for putting her travelling-shoes at the service of another woman? Had they not agreed not to let dead presences exercise domination. He picked up the passport, and tapped it with a finger.

"One has only to change the photo. The description tallies amazingly."

She was reading the gold letters on the cover. British Passport. His dead wife's passport. A little inward shudder went through her. Stepping into dead shoes! Though her shrinking from the issue was dressing itself in this mood of the moment.

"I don't know whether——."

She seemed to move a little away from him, and he had a feeling that she did not want to be touched. She did, and she did not. It would depend upon his manner of doing it.

“Doubts? Why not tell me?”

He had replaced the passport on the table. They had forgotten that the window was open, and with an exclamation he went and closed it.

“Isn’t that a sign of finality?”

“It is not too late to turn back.”

“Think so?”

“I could walk out of this place and no one need know. I could go and say that I had been in the woods.”

Some impulse made him pick up the passport and slip it into his pocket. Had that photograph upset her, roused some emotional reaction? He looked at her. He would have said that once again her face had become the face of her tragedy.

“Were you happily married, John?”

“Yes.”

The fingers of one hand were moving over the surface of the table like those of a blind woman touching embossed letters.

“Much better let me go, John. Better for you, dear. What am I bringing to you?”

“Isn’t that my business?”

“A happy memory. And this horror! O, my dear, if I should bring you—bad things? Much better let me go.”

With a tenderness that was wiser than he knew he took her gently by the shoulders.

“Didn’t we settle that question yesterday? I’m not going to let you go.”

“But haven’t you thought, John? I’m nothing; I have nothing. It might mean that your whole life——.”

“My dear, in these matters one decides first and does the thinking afterwards. That’s Nature’s way, I believe. It was decided for me—I rather imagine—all in half a minute—when you stood on my doorstep. It seems to me inevitable now. If I had been just a greedy, unimaginative beast——.”

“I shouldn’t have come to you, John.”

“Well, doesn’t that prove that the thing was meant?”

“But, my dear!”

“Someone is being sacrificial? Is that your—trouble? Well, let me tell you that I was one of those people who was in danger of becoming a potterer. No real urge left, and that’s not good for a man.”

And then he picked her up and sat down in a chair with her in his lap. “Now, listen to me. I’ll tell you what we are going to do.” She let her head sink down on his shoulder. This was the love that she needed, a love that refused to argue with a hypersensitive conscience, but took it in its arms and spoke of the open sea. She wanted her conscience ravishing; she wanted to be carried away in the arms of this sea-rover. She had been distracted and hesitant for his sake, and now that he was strong enough to smother her struggles, she surrendered and lay still.

“Listen to me.”

Did she ask to be convinced that all these impossible things could be possible? Did not those big arms of his make them seem possible?

“I’ve got to get you a hat and shoes.”

“Yes, John.”

“It looks as though I shall have to go shopping in London. The caravan business will be easy. We can get away at night. Now, about that passport. Put the kettle on; we’ll get to work at once.”

She did not quite understand what was in his mind, but she slipped off his knees and lit the stove.

“Steam, my dear; we’ll try it. I happen to have a camera here. I shall have to buy a small developing outfit.”

She put the kettle on the stove.

“It seems rather—horrible, John. Do you think?”

“That she would have minded?”

“Yes.”

“My dear, she was not that sort. Besides, if there is any survival—one hopes and believes—that selfishness is purged.”

“Aren’t we being selfish, John?”

“Yes, utterly, and why not? How else can we be saved?”

It was a delicate business steaming off that photo without discolouring the pink page or causing it to pulp or blister, but Luce had hands and the patience of a large and resolute creature. A clean table-knife and some blotting paper assisted, but before attempting the steaming process, he had taken the precaution of cutting out a cardboard frame to protect the page. She stood and watched him sitting at the table, and his deliberate and deft handling of this other problem. Would that vital page be soiled or made to crinkle? She was aware of him drawing a deep and almost joyous breath.

“Done it. Look!”

He pointed out to her that the upper portion of the Foreign Office embossed stamp had come away with the original photo, and that it would have to be cut away and imposed upon the new photo. Also, the Foreign Office date stamp in violet ink would need reproducing. Probably, the final product would not bear too close an inspection, but the very success of the plan depended upon a perfunctory scrutiny of their two persons and their passports.

“I shall have to buy a rubber stamp and fake that date. It is not so simple as one thought, but nothing worth while is.”

She was looking at the photograph of his dead wife.

“It’s such a risk, John. I hope she won’t haunt me.”

“Does she look like it? Good memories don’t bear malice.”

She seemed glad to surrender the photo to him.

“Won’t you have to take one exactly the same size?”

“Yes, I can manage that.”

She touched her dress.

“Is this the right sort of black? The black part of that seal will have to match.”

“Yes, that’s so. But I think it will do.”

“And I shall travel as your wife, John?”

“Of course,” but the question was not so naïve as it seemed. It contained—within itself—the implications of a far more delicate challenging of fate. Was she sufficiently of the old conventional world to care about society’s passport? He put an arm round her waist and held her.

“Worrying about the conventions? We were outside the conventions—

from the moment we came together. Well, try and think of it as a beginning over again in a little world of our own."

"I'll try to, John."

"You'll have to, my dear."

2

That night something happened between them, but not quite as it happened to Adam and Eve. There had been another argument over the mattress; he was for returning it to her room, she for insisting that she would not take it from him. And there had been sudden tears.

“Let me give—something. I feel so guilty.”

As though to make certain that the mattress should remain where it was, she had sat down upon it like a distressed and naïve child. This sudden emotion was a little tempest in the woods, wet and shuddering, and it so moved him that he sat down beside her.

“Dear heart, you mustn’t feel like this.”

“But I do, John. I’m taking everything from you, everything. I’m making you a kind of——.”

He had held her and she had clung to him.

“O, love me, dear, let me give something. I’d give you everything—and then—go.”

It had seemed so easy then to lie face to face, kissing and speaking broken words, and what he had told her and what he had not taken had been more assuaging than any act of passion. She had lain there, feeling his face with her fingers, and feeling within herself the realization of the kind of love he was giving her, the love that many a sensitive woman dreams of and never finds.

“I didn’t know a man could be like this.”

“Yes, you did, somewhere——.”

“Yes, perhaps,—in dreams.”

“Life’s a dream, dear, when it’s—real.”

She had kissed him with a kind of deliberate and innocent ardour.

“Oh, I’ll try and make everything up to you. I’ll try to give you——.”

“It won’t be very hard, dear.”

There had been more rain in the night, and the morning, with its fragments

of very blue sky and embattled clouds, was a lover's day. Changeable weather. But as a northern man did he ask for the eternal glare of a land without temperament or atmosphere? He was for Brandon village with his haversack, and as he turned into the village street by the funny old white house with the green shutters the sun came out in sudden strength. He saw the sign of The White Hart inn, and its old pollarded elm with the hollow trunk, and a little crowd of people, and in the white doorway of the pub, P.C. Pook sardonically on duty. What was the occasion? And then he realized it—the inquest on Ballard, twelve plain men collected to view the body and to decide how death had come to it.

Luce hesitated on the footpath. If he was conscious of being observed it was by the eyes of a particular person. Why should life always give him this goat-faced creature as a human contretemps? Some impulse made him cross the road. He had come to Brandon to shop and the world and officialdom should see his haversack.

He nodded at P.C. Pook.

"Good morning, officer."

The other man's face was both stupid and satirical. If he regarded Luce as nothing more than a gentlemanly joke, a kind of cultured Bottom, that was good Englishry. Anything strange and outlandish was worth a snigger or a sneer, or you might elect to treat it with suspicion.

"Morning, sir."

But even the title was satirical, like a gesture inviting other people to observe this funny creature, and to enjoy him with P.C. Pook.

Luce found a large and innocent smile.

"What's the occasion?"

What a word to use! The man in blue seemed to smirk.

"Ever attended an inquest, sir?"

"No,—I don't think I have."

"We might have called on you."

"I don't think I'm on the register."

Authority must have its joke, but it mistrusted any answering glimmer.

"We'll get you put on, sir. Now then, none of that, you boys."

He turned upon some youngsters who were hanging on the White Hart

fence, and Luce moved on. He felt that Arcady was staring at his back. Someone asked a question.

"Who's the gent?"

Someone replied to the question.

"Dunno. Never seen 'im before. Ought to get 'is 'air cut, anyway."

Luce did his shopping, and if he indulged in a few imaginative touches, they were the inspirations of the human dramatist. He said that he expected a couple of men friends to spend the week-end with him. He filled his haversack and a large brown paper bag which Mr. Smith found for him. Brandon was not equal to supplying him with an outfit for developing and printing photographs, and Melford would have to be visited. A Frenchman meeting him in Brandon street might have exclaimed "Voilà le mari," for Luce looked domestically laden. The crowd outside the White Hart had deliquesced, but P.C. Pook was still on duty in the doorway.

Luce turned his back on Brandon. He was passing along the red brick wall of the local brewery, and enjoying the smell of it when yet another inspiration arrived. He remembered his married sister who lived in Canonbury. Could not Christine be used in the crisis, not as a confederate but as a friend to be plundered? Christine and Rachel were much of a size. If he went to visit Christine would it not be possible for him to purloin a pair of his sister's shoes, and a hat? But how to get them away? A man who was supposed to be in town on business might surely be allowed to carry an attaché case?

They were unpacking his haversack when he told her of his plan for providing her with shoes and a hat. He had said nothing of the inquest upon the dead man. She met his proposal with the most obvious of questions.

"But won't your sister miss the things?"

"I suppose she will."

"Has she a maid?"

"She had."

"Would not that mean her suspecting the maid?"

"It might."

"I don't think we ought to do that."

He did not quarrel with her sensitive seriousness. So she could flinch—even in a crisis—from foisting a small suspicion upon some other woman.

“I might ask my sister if she has a hat and shoes to spare for someone.”

“Yes, you could do that, John. It would not hurt anybody, would it?”

She was putting the stores away in the cupboard, and as she came back to the table he took her face between his hands and kissed her.

“What a pair of sensitive idiots! But better to be like that.”

3

Four o’clock, the window open, and the tea-table laid for two. Rachel had put the kettle on the oil-stove, and was cutting bread and butter. Luce, sitting at the table, had begun a letter to his sister, for it was as well that Christine should be warned of his visit.

Voices in the garden, laughter, a man hailing the tower.

“Hallo, there, anyone at home, anyone at home?”

Luce’s head came up with a jerk. His eyes met Rachel’s. She was standing on the other side of the table, suddenly motionless, her left hand steadying the loaf, the knife arrested in the act of spreading butter.

He stood up, pointed towards the door, and saw her leave loaf and knife and go quickly across the room. She turned, pointed meaningly at the table, and disappeared. There had been no need for her to prompt him, and he seized the second plate and cup and smuggled them into the cupboard.

The voices were active without.

“No one at home, H.P.”

“Hallo, there, Jonathan. Show a face.”

Luce walked to the window and looked out. Ye Gods, that ass Pusey, and Lottie Reubens the novelist!

XV

LOTTIE REUBENS had a cigarette stuck in her mouth. Her greasy and sallow cleverness were as familiar as her face to those who were supposed to take literature seriously. Gossip had ascribed all the more modern vices to her; she drugged, she drank; and, as a matter of fact, she did neither. Being a Jewess with a feeling for finance, a scalding tongue and infinite assurance, she collected such decorations and wore them in the cause of publicity. Her books might have an insolent smartness. She was catalogued as a highbrow, but under her greasy black hair was the brain of a business woman.

She possessed an insatiable appetite for men. She wallowed in the male, analysed, pretended to despise, but devoured him, and Hugh Pusey was her latest, one of those busy and genial little chatterers who attach themselves to the world of letters. He had scribbled poetry, produced two or three indifferent biographies, served as a sub-editor on one of the society illustrateds, and written one bad novel. His association with Luce had dated from their Oxford days, and Luce had not shed him because he divined pathos and futility in this bald-headed, good-natured little ass.

"Hallo! Well—I'm damned!"

It was the sort of greeting that one gave to Lottie. She was in one of her fish-wife moods. She had been damned by far better men than Luce, and said so. She held Hugh by his puddy little hand, and looked at him obliquely with eyes that suggested that they were covered with fish scales. Was she going down with Hugh in the heather? O, possibly! And damn the public! There was a zest in the chance of your being surprised. It was like undressing yourself in a book or a shop window.

"Where did you drop from?"

Hugh raised the lady's hand and kissed it.

"We did not drop, John; we adhered to the Portsmouth road at fifty. We got the car up as far as we could."

"We—my dear!"

"O, yes, I just sat and gibbered. My liver nearly fell out in that snotty lane."

"Veridical," said Miss Reubens.

She liked such words, and used them. She manufactured words. She referred to Hugh's courage as slubby.

But she looked at Luce up above, and she looked at the tower. He might be a little remote but he was hairy and actual. She was not sufficiently romantic to think of him as a Norse jarl in a ship.

"Are you coming down, or do we float up?"

Hugh giggled.

"He's been napping. I see the sleep in Thor's eyes."

Luce, more concerned with other concealments, smiled down upon them.

"I was just going to have tea."

Lottie had stuck her cigarette back in her insolent mouth.

"Tea—in a tower! Strike me a match, Slubby. My septic fag's gone out."

Luce, with one more comprehensive and careful glance round the room, went to open the green door for them. It would save time and tissue for him to give them tea, while poor Rachel would have to go tealess, shut up in her secret room. And what contrasts these two women were, Cinderella and this chalk-faced sensualist with her brutal mouth and her eternal posing.

"Come in."

"Say, John, Lottie's been combing the country for a place like this."

"Really?"

He stood aside for them to pass. Miss Reubens winked at him.

"Did he always bubble, Mr. Luce? Say, Slub Rep, what about carrying me up these steps?"

"My dear!"

"Doesn't that sound marital!"

She looked at Luce as though passing him the right to pick her up and treat her like a Sabine woman, but Luce had always been shy of such ladies.

"Interested in houses?"

She crinkled up her nose at him and prepared to ascend.

"Am I as adipose as all that? I've got a tale stewing and it wants a focus, or a blocus. Do you know what a blocus is, Slub?"

“Roman for bloke. Get along up, my dear.”

She turned and smacked him.

“Don’t be—so—marital.”

And Pusey retorted by smacking her large posterior. She liked that sort of thing.

O, yes, easy people. There would be no gaps in the conversation, but when Miss Reubens saw that most ascetic room, she pulled off her hat like a soldier unhelming, and crammed it upon Hugh’s head. “Let it stay—there. Say,—you seem some cenobite.” She went and sat side-saddle on the window-sill, while Hugh removed the hat from his head. “Where do you put hats, John?” Luce had gone to the cupboard, and was collecting the necessary china. “Oh,—anywhere, my lad.” Miss Reubens sat observing her host. She found him an appetizing person after the smooth and obese hairlessness of Hugh. Hairy men were supposed to be so virile.

“No frocks here, I see.”

Pusey had placed her hat on a Windsor chair. He waggled a finger at her and sat down.

“Carlotta—no understand. Temple of Virtue.”

Luce was as grave as a Trappist.

“Do you take tea, Miss Reubens?”

Did she take tea? How very remote he sounded! Rather provocative this Stylites person.

“I take anything—with a temperature—above normal. And how do you manage baths?”

“Just take them,” said Luce.

“Hear that, Slub Rep? He just takes them. How formidable!”

Hugh giggled.

“He always did. Remember Ponder up at Magdalen, John? Whenever there was a binge, he used to finish it by being sick into his bath.”

“No, I had forgotten that,” said Luce.

Miss Reubens stroked her thigh.

“Sublimation—I presume. Your subconscious isn’t allowed to come up the pipe and wiggle its wicked toes at you.”

Luce smiled at her.

“Does everyone take sugar? Afraid you’ve caught me cakeless.”

It could not be said that Luce’s extemporized tea-party was a difficult meal, in spite of the absence of cake, for both Miss Reubens and Pusey were great talkers, and as often as not they were talking together. Miss Reubens had undertaken to write a weekly criticism of current literature for one of the London dailies, and Pusey devilled for her. He happened to mention Peter George’s latest novel, the review copies of which had just been distributed. Pusey was interested financially in the publishing house who dealt with Peter George, and Peter George, as a commercial asset, was to be boosted. And there the argument began, or rather—Miss Reubens spiflicated Hugh. To Lottie Reubens Peter George was a particularly popular and nauseous person, a crapulent humanist who spread sentimentality like birdlime to catch housemaids. Peter George was her pigeon; let there be no doubt about it. She was not going to leave a single feather on Peter George’s latest product.

Luce, listening to the hubbub, contrived to change the conversation.

“By the way—you know about cars, Miss Reubens.”

She knew about everything. She could drive a car with the same insolent and crashing efficiency with which she would splash vitriol over Peter George.

“Want a car?”

“As a matter of fact I’m thinking of hiring a motor caravan for a month. Just a modest affair. I suppose one can hire——?”

She could give him all the information that he needed. She had caravaned for a month last year with a young man who was a dancing pro. in town. Custs were the people, Custs of Edgware. They supplied you with everything, including an insurance policy. She could give Luce an introduction to Messrs. Custs; they were under an obligation to her, for she had presented them with some publicity in one of her novels.

“I suppose they can arrange for a car?”

“Certainly. But surely a civilized man could not exist in this isolated ruin without a car.”

“But I do, somehow.”

“Without even a good girl Friday?”

“Yes, even without that.”

Miss Reubens lit a cigarette and stuck it in her mouth. How did he

manage? How did he satisfy sex? She was quite capable of asking him such a question.

“Prodigious! The happy celibate, Slub Rep. Make a note of that.”

Luce had risen to refill the teapot. Did anyone desire more tea?

“Carlotta wants to explore the tower, John. She’ll turn you into copy.”

But Luce was not listening to Pusey. He had heard someone knocking at the green door.

2

For a moment he hesitated. Should he ignore the sound? But realizing that the others had heard or would hear it, he put the kettle back on the stove, and with an “Excuse me” went out to take up this second challenge. Assuredly, on this summer afternoon he was suffering from a surfeit of human interest. Who the devil would he find on his doorstep? And yet, might not the presence of this literary lady and her cicisbeo provide him with an atmosphere of social rectitude? He left the sitting-room door wide open, and willed Hugh and the lady to go on talking.

P.C. Pook!

But a P.C. Pook in mufti, with brightly polished brown boots, and a grey squash hat on his head. Luce was inwardly conscious of swift diplomatic adaptations. He discovered the easy geniality of the gentleman whom nothing could disconcert.

“Good afternoon, officer. What can I do for you?”

P.C. Pook appeared less formidable in mufti. In fact he had shed some of his official assurance in putting off the official clothes. And he had put on manners.

“I hope you’ll excuse me, sir.”

“Certainly, officer.”

“Fact is, I’ve always been interested in this old tower. My great grandmother was in service here.”

“Really?”

“With a naval officer, sir, when they used to signal.”

“That’s very interesting,” said Luce, “very interesting. And you never explored——?”

“No, sir. I’m off duty, and——”

Luce stood back, smiling.

“Come in. It’s a queer old place. I’ve got friends here for the afternoon, but I’ll show you over.”

P.C. Pook removed his hat.

“I don’t want to take up your time, sir.”

“Come right in,” said Luce.

Being convinced that the constable’s interest in the Signal Tower as a historical relic was fictitious, and that Pook had manufactured an excuse that would get him into the place without a search warrant, Luce could thank God and Hugh Pusey for the linking of these coincidences. He blessed that open door, and the tea-table, and Miss Reubens and her cigarette. Could circumstances have shaped themselves more happily? Those whom he had cursed had come to bless.

“Excuse me a moment, Hugh, will you?”

“Certainly, old man.”

Luce paused in the vestibule to fill a pipe, so that his visitor should be kept standing in a position to survey that social scene. Let him make what he pleased of Miss Lottie Reubens and Mr. Pusey. And then, having lit his pipe, Luce closed the sitting-room door, and prepared to mount the stairs.

“Ever read novels, officer?”

“Can’t say that I do, sir.”

“That lady is Miss Reubens. Quite a celebrity.”

“Is that so, sir? I’m afraid I’m taking you away from your friends. If you’ll excuse me——.”

Luce smothered any suggestion his visitor might be contemplating, and began to climb the stairs. Half-way up the first flight he was attacked by a dreadful fear. What if Rachel had not acted according to plan, and had taken refuge in the bedroom? For he had intended opening every door but the one on the top floor. He covered the remaining steps in five strides, threw the door open and went in as though there was something in the room he needed. He saw that it was empty.

“Just remembered, officer,” and he came out smiling; “a bachelor house, you know, and the lady may want—to titivate. I thought I might have left a certain article.”

P.C. Pook understood him.

“Quite so, sir.”

“Jerry’s under the bed. Nothing of interest in here.”

He left the door wide open and started the next flight. He had something to show his visitor in the third floor room, the remains of the old signalling gear cased in a central pillar. Pook followed him up the stairs and into the room, and here Luce paused to apply a second match to his pipe. Then, having got the tobacco comfortably alight he proceeded to give Mr. Pook a lecture on the system of semaphore signalling. Yes, most people imagined that arms like railway signals had waggled up and down, whereas the code had been carried by shutters being raised and lowered in an oblong frame.

"You see the crank and rods here. The signalling frame was a timber structure on the top of the tower. You'll get a better idea if we go out on the leads."

Still talking like the official guide Luce conducted P.C. Pook to the top landing. He spoke loudly and emphatically so that the refugee in the locked room should be wise as to the occasion. He indicated the closed door.

"Nothing in there—of interest. As a matter of fact I have mislaid the key. Shall I go up first?"

He mounted the ladder, raised the trap-door, and waited for his visitor to join him on the leads. It was a day of deep and blue distances, and Luce stood smoking his pipe, and pointing out to P.C. Pook various points of interest on the horizon.

"Yes, you can see the Chilterns to-day."

"Wonderful view, sir. I suppose there was a chap up here to read the signals."

"That's it. They became very quick in sending and receiving messages. There was another chain of signal stations from London to Dover. History has it that they could send a message to Dover and get a reply back in seven minutes."

P.C. Pook bent over the parapet, and it did occur to Luce that it would be horribly easy to give a man a push, and send him crashing. But he was prompted by a far more useful inspiration.

"O, by the way, officer, my friends want me to go caravaning. I suppose—if I locked this place up for a month, and left the key with the police——"

Had he money on him? He had. He found a pound note in his wallet.

"You'd like us to look in, sir, now and again?"

"I should be very grateful if you would. Nothing much of value here, but

one would like to feel that the place was visited."

P.C. Pook accepted the note.

"That's all right, sir. I'll see to it for you."

"I'm very much obliged. And now, I ought to look after my friends."

"Of course, sir."

They descended, and half-way down the tower stairs, Luce suggested that his visitor might be thirsty.

"What about a glass of beer, officer?"

P.C. Pook had his glass of beer. He drank it in the open doorway of the sitting-room, and was asked by Miss Reubens to explain why the police did not deal with nit-wits who left their cars parked in Melford High Street with their tails sticking out into the road.

"Graft, Miss, if you want the truth. The shop-keepers know how and why, but that's—unofficial. If I had my way I'd put that street in order in a week."

Hugh Pusey offered him a cigarette.

"Of course you would."

Miss Reubens went on to say that Melford High Street was a sanguinary scandal.

"Babies—in—prams, constable."

But P.C. Pook, having finished his beer, became suddenly and formidably self-conscious. He saluted Luce and his guests, and resumed his squash hat and an air of arid and official aloofness.

"Much obliged, sir. I'll be getting along, sir. On duty—to-night, sir."

Luce showed him out.

"I'll let your people know, officer, when I start on my caravan tour."

"That will be quite in order, sir."

3

Afterwards, Luce was moved to reflect upon the almost farcical quality of some of the day's incidents. Tragedy, like its expression on the stage, may be only canvas deep, and a distracted Hamlet but first cousin to the man waiting for him with a pot of beer, but Luce did perpetrate one last and wilful cliché. Returning from showing authority from the tower he sat down with deliberate carelessness on Miss Reuben's hat.

"Good heavens, what have I done!"

His assumed consternation delighted her.

"Lucky for your backside, sir, that there were no pins in it."

Luce displayed the crushed article.

"Really, I'm devastated. If you will allow me—I would like to replace it."

"My dear, why such woe? As a matter of fact, I don't wear the damned thing when I'm driving. Do I, Slub Rep?"

"She doesn't, John."

But Luce was the very gallant gentleman. He put the crushed shape away in the cupboard.

"Let me conceal my shame, Miss Carlotta, I shall be in town to-morrow. Having sat upon your hat, will you deign to sit at lunch with me and accompany me afterwards to a hat shop?"

She was piqued both by his maleness and his invitation. Had he sat on her hat designedly?

"Something doing. Cause and effect—obvious. I will."

"Florio's at one o'clock?"

"I'll be there, Big Boy."

This somewhat intimate interplay caused Pusey to pull out his watch. He was very much interested at the moment in Carlotta's person, and Carlotta was incurably promiscuous.

"I say, Lottie, six o'clock."

“Don’t get rucked up, Slub. What’s the crashing haste?”

Hugh giggled.

“That’s just my subtle way.”

But Miss Reubens was not feeling subtle towards him. She was scenting the perfume of yet another emotional experience. Besides, she had not explored the tower. She insisted upon Luce conducting her to the summit, and when they were mounting the ladder she made it obvious to him that she had fine legs.

“I like ’em black, my dear, uppers as well as lowers.”

Luce, who had been making careful conversation all the way up the stairs, wondered what love’s hidden ears would make of Lottie Reubens. She stood on the leads and waggled her large hips at the landscape.

“I must spill a book about this. Mind if I crash down again some day?”

“May I write and fix it up—when I get back from my caravan show?”

“Clever boy. I’ll leave Slub Rep behind.”

“Yes, do.”

It was seven o’clock before he was rid of his party, and he walked down through the woods with them to where they had left the car. It was a bright red car with cream wheels. Miss Reubens got in and stuck a cigarette in her mouth; she never drove without that attachment.

“Slub Rep keeps me primed. Got the ammunition clip full, my lad?”

“Yep,” said Hugh. “How many shall I have to light for you between here and Chelsea?”

“That’ll depend on the bloody traffic blocks, my dear. So long, Siegfried. See you to-morrow.”

And with éclat and insolence the red car rolled away down the track, with Hugh Pusey’s bald head bobbing up and down beside her black one.

Luce faced about. He might have exclaimed “My hat!” but his mood rushed back towards the mystery, the mystery of a lover’s tenderness. The green curtains of the woods seemed to slide together, shutting out vulgar comedy, and sealing him in with the soft splendours of a summer evening. He walked back to the tower, unlocked the green door, relocked it, and became conscious of a profound silence.

Was she still mewed up there? Of course. And during all that silly, perilous

by-play what had she been enduring? How strange was this magnanimous, sweet madness! He went up the stairs, smiling. He stood outside the door of that upper room.

“Rachel. All’s safe now, dear.”

Had she been very frightened? When she came out to him, he put his hands upon her shoulders, and made haste to reassure her.

“All’s well that ends well. Our luck was in this afternoon. But you lost your tea. And you were in there three whole hours.”

“It did not seem so long as that.”

“Things could not have worked more kindly. The police called, my dear, right in the middle of my party. If we had needed evidence to convince the curious, it could not have been better. I took the gentleman upstairs and showed him the view.”

“How clever of you, John.”

She displayed to him calm, deep eyes. If she had been afraid, she had had faith in her lover.

“Come downstairs. I have something to show you. And I have managed to arrange a shopping expedition for to-morrow.”

They went down the stairs with arms linked. He led her to the cupboard, opened the door, and took out Miss Reubens’ hat.

“Yes. I sat on it. I suppose the thing can be straightened out. I don’t like the idea of your wearing that female’s hat. Will it do?”

She took the hat from him, pulled and caressed it into shape, and put it on.

“These hats don’t crush badly, John. She must have wanted a new hat.”

He laughed and kissed her.

“I have promised to give her a new hat.”

XVI

THE window of Mr. Temperley's room looked south. It was a large window kept very clean, and when Mr. Temperley was seated at his desk it gave him a view of a grey stone wall, and the towering tops of the elm trees about the church. Brandon's dead lay in peace on the other side of that stone wall, and in the course of time Mr. Temperley expected to lie there too. Meanwhile, the rooks brought up their families in the tree-tops, and the sun, climbing towards the summer solstice, shone less deeply into the room, but continued to light up the legal litter on Mr. Temperley's desk. Its exhibits were various and characteristic, a bowl of pipes and a packet of pipe-cleaners, an old knife, a big wooden inkstand with pens and pencils of various colours, a blotting-pad, two basket letter-trays, matches, scissors, a marble letter-weight in the shape of a gravestone. Each object had its appointed place like the dead in the churchyard over the way.

Mr. Temperley was seated at his desk when he heard the ringing of the office bell. He was unable to see who stood upon the doorstep, but the familiar bell had become like the voice of some confidential clerk announcing particular clients. Sometimes the summons was deprecating, sometimes emphatic, and on this occasion there had been emphasis in the clangour. Mr. Temperley laid aside his pipe, and waited. He would have said that the familiar and ancient bell had been rung by a stranger.

A junior clerk appeared.

"A Miss Ballard, sir."

"Miss Ballard. From Beech Farm?"

"Yes, sir. She says she has no appointment, but she insists——."

"Show her in, Saunders."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Temperley got up and stood with his back to the white marble fireplace over which hung the portrait of some Georgian worthy. Mr. Temperley liked to confront a stranger. He believed in the significance of a first and sudden scrutiny, especially so when the stranger was a woman.

Miss Ballard appeared in the doorway as a tall and very erect woman in

black. Her gloved hands were also black and gripping an umbrella and a small handbag. Facially she was remarkably like her brother, narrow of eye, and with high cheekbones over which the skin was tight and red, and from the first glance Mr. Temperley disliked her. Patently, Miss Ballard was a woman who could be vindictive and dangerous.

"Miss Ballard, I believe? Please sit down. What can I do for you?"

Her sitting down was characteristic, a sharp bending of the knees, while her back remained as stiff and straight as a poker. Her stare was persistent and aggressive, and her eyes made Mr. Temperley think of the eyes of a goat, cold and stony, and secretly sensual.

"I have come about my brother."

Mr. Temperley remained standing, his hands clasped across the small of his back. What a wooden face the woman had, and what very unpleasant eyes!

"About your brother?"

"Yes, I'm not satisfied, not at all satisfied."

"In what way, Miss Ballard?"

"With the police."

"Indeed."

"It is perfectly scandalous. My poor brother has been lying dead for three days, and they haven't yet found that woman."

Mr. Temperley crossed the room to his chair, and sat down with nice deliberation. Why was it that people like the Ballards roused the primitive and combative creature in you?

"If I may say so, it is rather a sad case, Miss Ballard. But may I ask why you have come to me?"

She gave a jerk of the head.

"I want something done. My brother was your tenant. I want that woman ____"

"Please excuse me, Miss Ballard, but may I say that this is a case which is not quite in my province. Besides, if you will permit me to be frank, I have a good deal of sympathy for your sister-in-law."

He saw those red patches on her cheekbones deepen in colour.

"Indeed! I shouldn't have thought a gentleman in your position would

defend murder."

"If you will excuse me, murder has yet to be proved. After all, Miss Ballard, your brother and his wife were two very unhappy people."

"And whose fault was that? I used to think of her as a useless little fool, but she was more than that, Mr. Temperley. I tell you I have my own suspicions. My conviction is that there was some dirty sex business behind it all. There is a man in the case."

"From what I know of your sister-in-law, I think that is most unlikely."

"I say that someone is shielding her."

"Who?"

"A man."

Mr. Temperley put his fingers together.

"You will excuse me, but I think you are talking nonsense, Miss Ballard. I can quite understand your being——"

Her thin lips retracted.

"Thank you. I don't require sympathy. And I did not come here to be told that I am a fool."

"Isn't that an exaggeration?"

She was up and standing.

"I'm wasting my time here. I am going to see the Chief Constable at Melford."

"By all means do so, madam. But before you go, may I ask you a question?"

She looked at him with contempt.

"Is bitterness of any use in a tragedy such as this? Your sister-in-law had much to bear."

"Yes, and she has a pretty face. You men are all alike. I may as well tell you that I shan't rest until I have seen justice done."

Mr. Temperley rose, went to the door and opened it.

"What is justice, Miss Ballard? Yes; I don't think there is anything more to be said. Good day to you."

He heard her bang the outer door, and selecting a pipe from the bowl, he

filled it. What an exceedingly unpleasant person! No rest until justice had been done? So like the *Melford Argus*! Well, the only human thing to hope for was that poor Mrs. Ballard was beyond the reach of that woman's black claws.

2

Was it safe to leave her for a day? Would she be safe with herself? But he had so much to do, so many things to be crowded into this one day, and the hazards would have to be accepted. He had put on his one presentable lounge suit, and he had his cheque book in his pocket, and in the vestibule stood the empty suitcase he was taking with him.

He heard her on the stairs, and in listening to her footsteps he divined in her mood of the morning a naïve courage. She came into the room and kissed him.

"I meant to have been down earlier, John, but I had to let you dress."

"This life's a little complicated. But wait."

"Breakfast."

"Wait. You are not going to be afraid, dear?"

"It's not—like it was, John."

"That's brave. Now, keep that window shut. I don't suppose we shall have any visitors to-day, but you will know what to do. I'm in town and naturally—the place is empty and locked up."

He was to catch the five minutes past nine train from Brandon; he happened to have the time-table that he had acquired when he was staying at The Chequers, and at eight-fifteen he locked the green door behind him. His last words to her had been "We're winning. Don't be afraid." Smoking his pipe, and carrying the empty suitcase he set out through the woods, feeling somehow sure that his words had not been idle boasting.

Two or three London business-men who had houses at Brandon were waiting on the platform. They were more interested in their morning papers than in a large and anonymous person whose lounge suit certainly needed pressing. Luce travelled third, partly because his petty cash was low, and because to be third was to be more comfortably inconspicuous. At Waterloo he left his suitcase in the cloak-room, and took a taxi to the West End branch of his bank. He wrote and cashed a cheque there for a hundred pounds.

"Do you mind just looking up my balance for me."

His balance stood at £517 3s. 11d.

"Many thanks. By the way, I may want to open a local account in Surrey. You could do that, yes. I'll let you know the details later."

Since time was precious he took a taxi to Edgware. Miss Reubens had written down the address for him, and Messrs. Custs were easily discovered. He told the taxi-man to wait. Messrs. Custs' motto appeared to be—"Write a cheque and leave the rest to us, sir." Luce was fathered by a bright young man who could be disconcerted by no difficulty. Luce wanted to hire a car as well as a caravan. Could it be done? Of course it could be done. Messrs. Custs operated a "Drive Yourself Service" in addition to supplying caravans. The young man proposed to supply Luce with a 14 h.p. Mostyn, and one of their new "Arcadian" caravans. Yes, everything would be complete, the outfit included two hot-water bottles and a corkscrew! And the price?

"Eight guineas a week, sir."

"I can pay you cash for a month's hire."

"Our usual terms, sir, are half the money down before taking over, and the other half on handing over. We have a form of contract. We insure you."

"Splendid," said Luce; "can you show me the type of caravan?"

It was exhibited to him, a white and green vehicle on two wheels, with chintz curtains at the windows. It contained two curtained bunks which could be folded away, a minute oil stove and etceteras. The young man explained that the equipment could include a small tent for use at night, if the occupants desired more space and individual privacy. The neatness and efficiency of the outfit were astonishing. The equipment was stored in little painted cupboards and lockers; a water-tank was fitted under the tailboard.

"I think I'll take the tent. By the way, could you have the whole thing delivered to me in Surrey?"

"Certainly, sir. It would be an extra. Our driver's time."

"Naturally."

Luce put down his money, gave his bank as a reference, signed the necessary agreement, and arranged to have car and caravan delivered at The Chequers, Brandon, in three days' time.

Hurrying back in the taxi he found he had half an hour to spare before lunch at Florio's, and at Sandersons in the Haymarket he purchased a bijou photographic outfit for developing and printing. He was assured that the

G.P.O. could deal with the transporting of this outfit.

“I’m rather in the wilds, you know. Have it sent poste restante to Brandon.”

He hurried on to Florio’s. Florio’s was somewhat old-fashioned. It had known its smart and rapid days when good ladies up from the country could carry back with them the feeling that they had dared things dangerous and improper. Now, Florio’s was very domestic, and not at all à la carte. Women up for shopping used it; women who wanted to entertain dear friends economically found Florio’s three and sixpenny lunch quite adequate. Parents brought to it large, self-conscious, spotty sons. The hats displayed at Florio’s had certainly not been sat upon; they were helmets of wholesome virtue.

The lounge was obstructed by a party of women who were kissing and o-my-dearing each other, but Luce, edging round them, found Miss Reubens parked on a settee. She was in black, and wearing a red hat, and the habitual cigarette was stuck in a vivid mouth.

Luce apologized to her.

“Afraid—I’m late.”

She patted the settee.

“Sit down and listen to the old cats all telling each other that they don’t look a day older.”

Luce glanced at the ladies.

“They must have been—— Well, when a woman does fib, she does it thoroughly.”

“No, my dear, she overdoes it, puts on the paint with a shaving brush. I’d love a little drink.”

Luce signalled to the cocktail waiter. He was beginning to appreciate the fact that Florio’s was much too suburban for Miss Reubens. So was his lounge suit. Also, no one at Florio’s would recognize Miss Reubens as the celebrated novelist, and she liked to be recognized.

“I’m afraid this place is a little suburban.”

She supplied an adjective. “Double bedded. But so—stimulating. It simply stinks of blankets and sexual integrity. Yes, I’ll have a side-car.”

“One side-car, one dry Martini, waiter. You know, I’m still feeling—shocked—about that hat.”

She snapped her cigarette case at him.

“Have one. Your conscience, my dear, seems to have a large and very sensitive backside. Conscience has been this country’s curse. Yes, I like to be outrageous. One of my poses. What are we going to do when we’ve lunched?”

“Buy a hat.”

“That will take me—just five minutes. I suggest——”

The waiter arrived with the cocktails. Luce paid him, and began to suspect that he might find the shedding of Miss Reubens none too easy.

“I’m afraid I have rather a terrible lot to do. When a bumpkin comes to town.”

“He gets lost in—Soho.”

“I’m going to see my lawyer.”

“That’s one of my don’ts. Come and be introduced to my pet monkey.”

“Have you a monkey?”

“Christened—John.”

“That’s my name.”

“Well, doesn’t that make it rather more intimate?”

Two chairs at a table seemed less intimate than lounging on a settee, and Luce took her in to lunch. He might not look it, but there was a feminine streak in him that made him wise as to women, and to assume the part of the large, shy boy would only provoke Lottie to more outrage. She was not a sensitive creature, but a sensualist and a bully, and the way to handle her was to play the drover to a mischievous heifer. Almost, Luce blustered. He became autocratic about the lunch, and dictatorial with the waiters. Miss Reubens was delighted. This swashbuckling was stimulating after the amorous potterings of Hugh Pusey.

How seductive he was! And such a woman as Lottie can become fat and sentimental, for when the flesh melts no creature can be more silly than your conscious highbrow. She allowed herself to be ordered about by Luce, to be put into a taxi, and carried off to Lucille’s in Brook Street. She had become utterly and serenely snoopy, and sat on a chair, and tried on hats while her Zeus stood by and thundered.

“No. Take it off. Monstrous.”

At last he found a hat for her. He was sincere about that hat. It really was

her hat. He had it put in a box, and he packed box and lady into a taxi. No, he was not coming to meet her monkey. Let her wait upon his divine pleasure.

"I'll send you word when I am back from my expedition."

She held his hand.

"Promise. I won't bring H.P. We don't—need H.P., do we?"

"I should say not."

And he slammed the door and nodded at the driver.

3

What a woman! Cream bun, and sweetbread, and cascara! He put off his plumed hat and his swagger, and took yet another taxi, for the real business of the day lay before him. He had remembered that poor Norah had done much of her shopping at Terry and Goms, and to Terry and Goms he went. He had memorized his list of necessities, but how much he would dare to buy was quite another matter.

He found himself in the hosiery department. It was very full of women, both buying and selling, and Luce was attacked by a sudden absurd self-consciousness. Why not begin on something more easy in some less crowded department? His vacillation might have led him elsewhere had he not run up against a large and confident man in a bowler hat and spectacles who was buying stockings with supreme assurance.

"You are sure these are tens."

"Yes, sir."

"And pure silk? My wife insists——."

"If madam is not satisfied, we will change them for her."

Luce was inspired by this confident person. He waited and approached the same saleswoman.

"Curious coincidence, two husbands buying stockings. Can you serve me?"

She happened to be a pleasant person with a sense of humour.

"What colour, sir?"

"Black."

"And what size does madam take?"

"Nines."

"Silk?"

"Yes, silk. And perhaps I ought to take a pair of utility hose. Country, you know."

"Quite so, sir."

His conquest of the hose department had proved so easy that he departed from it with his parcels and an access of confidence. Why not dare shoes? He did so. He found that a smiling and confidential address gave results. His wife had been ill, and she had commissioned him to buy a pair of walking shoes for her, yes, black leather, suitable for the country, size three. The saleswoman was a little bothered. Was he sure that the shoes would suit the lady without a try-on? And Luce smiled. “My wife has normal feet, no etceteras. And—of course—if they don’t fit, you would let me change them?”

His confidence and his parcels were increasing. He passed on and up into the dress department. He stood and explained that he needed a simple costume and a coloured jumper for an invalid wife. The way three women came to his assistance should have restored his faith in human nature. Yes, his wife was a little on the small size. He was shown various garments, and he selected a yellow jumper and a simple beige-coloured frock.

“Can’t we have the parcels sent, sir?”

“No, I can manage. I was in the great war!”

He passed on decorated with parcels. He had to wear his hat. He found himself in the lingerie department, but there his courage failed him. Rachel would have to do some surreptitious shopping in a country town. But he did dare to buy her a collection of toilet articles; hair brushes, a comb, face gloves, a sponge, nail scissors, etcetera. He explained again that his wife had been ill; yes, she was laid up in the country and had asked him to buy her a new outfit. Hung around with parcels he managed to reach Messrs. Terry and Goms’ main entrance, and there a sympathetic commissionaire came to his assistance.

“I want a taxi, please.”

The commissionaire procured him a taxi, and piled him and his parcels inside. Luce gave the man two shillings.

“Thank you, sir. Where to?”

“Waterloo station.”

The commissionaire pocketed the florin, and wished that more gentlemen came shopping for their wives.

At Waterloo he retained the porter who opened the door of the taxi. “You might help me with these parcels.” He paid the taxi-driver, and marching to the cloak-room withdrew his empty suitcase, and assisted by the porter, stowed the parcels away in it. He was jocular. “Married man, porter?” “Yes, sir.”—“Then you’ll sympathize!” Seated in a corner of a third-class smoker, and

recapitulating the day's doings, he suddenly remembered that he would require a licence to drive a car. He possessed a licence, but it needed renewing, and in Brandon he could call at the post office and obtain the appropriate form. Also, he warned the young lady in charge that he was expecting a parcel, and that he would call for it when he happened to be in the village.

His next visit was to the Chequers Inn. He asked for the landlord.

"No, I haven't come to stay, Mr. Smith, but to ask a favour—at a price."

"What can we do for you, sir?"

"A friend and I are going caravaning. I wondered whether you would let me garage a car and a caravan in your yard for a couple of nights. My place doesn't welcome cars."

"It's just a question of room, sir."

"It could stand in a corner of your yard. I expect my friend to join me here, and I think he will want you to put him up for a couple of nights. I want to get a little practice with the van before starting out."

Mr. Smith was ready to oblige him.

XVII

On his way to the station that morning Luce had called at Mr. Temperley's, only to be told that Mr. Temperley was still in his bath, and Luce had left a message. "Please don't trouble him. Tell Mr. Temperley I will look in again another day."

At lunch Mr. Temperley was reminded by his parlour-maid that Mr. Luce had called.

"Thank you, Martha; I haven't forgotten."

Nor had he, though what it was that moved Mr. Temperley to think of walking to the Signal Tower was perhaps no more than an old man's restlessness. People like Miss Ballard made you claim a veritable provocation, and possibly Miss Ballard had roused in Mr. Temperley strange and primitive urges. He could say that he was in one of his palæolithic moods, a mood that antedated Sumer and the cuneiform script. He wanted exercise, wildness, trees, the potent and vigorous phantasms that solitary places invoke, those mysterious and wild tricks of nature that can thrill the eternal boy in an old gentleman of seventy-three. Yes, he was in a mood for the heathlands and the pines, and for the fantasies of the fern. He would walk over to the tower and perhaps take tea with Luce. The tower itself attracted him, suggesting the climbing of those hundred-odd steps, to find the woodlands surging round you like the sea. But what if Luce should happen to be out? Mr. Temperley rubbed his chin, and opening a cupboard door, contemplated two rows of hooks upon which hung a collection of estate keys. He was a believer in spare keys; keys were objects, the loss of which, caused waste of time and temper, and an appeal to some local locksmith. There was a third key to the tower, and it hung upon one of those brass hooks. Mr. Temperley took it down and pocketed it. Well, if the tenant did happen to be out, would a large and easy person like Luce seriously object to an old gentleman trespassing in order to enjoy the view? Also, let it be confessed that he was feeling vaguely mischievous, and not a little interested in the eccentricities of this modern eremite, who, as he had confessed, took his bath upon the leads, and was also something of a Chaldean.

It was a day when Mr. Temperley saw the green world as a young man sees it when first the eyes of his soul are opened, yet Mr. Temperley could

look upon all this loveliness and be content with it. At seventy-three did one desire to mortgage a mystery, or rush to express it in paints or words? Was any country more beautiful than England in June? Admittedly, there were other and different beauties, Norway with the birches in young leaf; the Tyrol where each upland meadow was a great basket of flowers; some Italian tower set on a high hill against the sunset. When Mr. Temperley thought of England it was the England of the Down country and the Weald, or the Cotswolds or the Welsh Marches, or Northumberland and the Wall. And so much of it was passing. Suburbia was the new flood, and Mr. Temperley might feel like God and Noah.

Brandon and its parkland, fields and woods had on this perfect day a new and yet familiar beauty for him. There were groups of trees which could cause him to stand and stare, gentle fields that made him linger at a gate and feel the lucid landscape to be a smile on the face of God. The wine of the woods! Why should such phrases come into an old man's head like word patterns of mystical meaning? Yes, friend Luce was one of the few who understood these things.

But in this very beautiful world Mr. Temperley could divine other poignancies, and ask of life inevitable questions. Why were there people like the Ballards, souls with sore and contorted faces; brutalities, stupidities? This green world held a secret. Somewhere, a poor mad Ophelia might be floating, or lying bleached and still amid the fern. The woods themselves seemed to have a peculiar silence. The tall trees looked down mistrustfully upon this little creature, man. Mr. Temperley could excuse himself to trees. "Have no fear, my friends. I do not come with an axe." And presently, as he climbed the hill, that curious tall building became visible. Its five windows caught the sunlight.

Mr. Temperley paused by the fence. He noticed the freshly-turned earth where Luce had been digging, and it provoked in him a question. Were some men superior to human contacts and content with the solace of the soil? But, surely, human contact was essential, some good-man Friday in a Crusoe world? Mr. Temperley passed on under the ragged laurels to the gate. The green door at the top of the flight of steps was shut. Was Luce at home? Apparently not, for Mr. Temperley had noticed that all five windows were closed, and as he stood there, this silent and solitary place provoked him. It was like a mysterious ruin to be explored.

Mr. Temperley opened the gate, walked round the building, and returned to the steps, stood savouring the silence and the solitude. Undoubtedly, friend Luce was not at home. But why not prepare a surprise for the gentleman, slip into his shell and wait for the return of the hermit? Mr. Temperley climbed the

steps and tried the door. Locked. He brought out his key and inserted it. There was the click of the mechanism and a faint creaking of the hinges, sounds that seemed tremendous in the tower's silent interior.

Mr. Temperley found himself in the vestibule, contemplating the closed door of a room, and the lower treads of the tower stairs. Convinced by the silence that the place was empty, he had turned to close the outer door when a sudden sound startled him. Footsteps on the stairs! The quality of them, their lightness and quick rhythm was like the beating of a heart, and not to be associated with a man of Luce's bulk.

Mr. Temperley's face seemed to sharpen. The footsteps were close upon him. He stood looking upwards, his eyes very bright under the rim of his hat. He saw two feet, a skirt, and then, the whole of her. Good God, Rachel Ballard!

He saw her pause, recoil against the wall. Her hands went to her breasts. He was aware of her eyes, large and dark and terrified.

"Mrs. Ballard!"

2

Luce set out with his suitcase, a little conscious of it and its contents. He had made sure that the thing was locked, and yet he could not help reflecting that if the lid were to come open and shoot some of those feminine objects on to the pavement they might take a devil of a lot of explaining. And how had the day passed with her? He had cause to feel anxious over those hours of solitude, and to dread the recurrence of an attack of conscience.

He did not hurry; his leisureliness was studied, and yet he confessed himself glad to reach the lane and the shelter of a high brick wall. He could see the distant woods hazed with heat. A moment later he was between hedges, and beyond the last of the cottage gardens. Thenceforward all gates would be field-gates opening into unsophisticated fields, and the thing that he carried no more than an innocent piece of luggage.

Luce had reached a little spinney on the edge of Brandon Park when he realized that someone was walking behind him. Well, what did it matter? He did not glance round, nor did he quicken his pace, and yet those following footsteps bothered him. They seemed to maintain the same distance; he dawdled, and so did they, but if the linkage was merely casual, it was all the more necessary for him to ignore it. But why not let the footsteps by, and then get a glimpse of the ghost? Coming to a field-gate, he turned aside, put the suitcase down, removed his hat, and leaned upon the gate.

The footsteps approached, and from their quality he concluded that the walker was a woman. Well, he would let her go by, and allow her to take the lead, for most certainly he was prejudiced against human shadows. The footsteps drew level with the gate. They paused, and a voice addressed him.

“Excuse me, but does this lane lead to Beech Farm?”

Luce’s reaction was both impulsive and controlled. He turned, raised a hat, smiled.

“I’m not sure. I’m afraid I am something of a stranger here.”

“Thank you.”

He maintained that smile, but the inner man was not smiling. The woman’s likeness to Ballard was remarkable. His sister? O, probably. Also, it impressed

Luce as being a most unpleasant face, like a piece of white board, with two dabs of red paint on the cheek bones.

"I'm sorry. I'm not quite sure."

"Don't mention it."

He was aware of her scrutinizing his suitcase, and then, without looking at him again, she walked on. He stood with his back to the gate, watching her and reflecting that if she was Miss Ballard her asking the way might appear a little superfluous. Meanwhile, her black figure with its high shoulders was becoming a little sinister streak against the dark woods.

Had she any reason for stopping to speak to him, a mere stranger who happened to be carrying a suitcase along a lonely lane? Had it provoked her curiosity? For if this woman with the unpleasant face was indeed Miss Ballard, she might feel herself very much interested in strangers. What might not a vindictive and suspicious woman read into the dark tangle of such a tragedy? Sex, the eternal triangle, the shadow-man behind the curtain? Surely, he had been a little foolish in pretending that he had been unable to direct her? The labourers might talk. She might discover the fact that he had been to the farm, and on more than one occasion. He picked up his suitcase and hurried after her.

He overtook Miss Ballard in the hollow way where the trees and rhododendrons made the place a green tunnel.

"Excuse me."

She turned and faced him.

"I'm afraid I may have misled you. Is Beech Farm the place where that sad affair has happened?"

"Yes."

"O, well, then, I do happen to know it. I was there once to buy milk. You turn to the left when you get to the heath. I am sorry I was so stupid."

She said, "Don't mention it," glanced again at his suitcase, and walked on.

Her interest in his suitcase so infected him that when she was out of sight Luce put the case down and examined it to convince himself that no feminine tag was treacherously protruding. But he could find nothing about the suitcase to attract attention, and the inference was obvious. In such a crisis a man could feel so sensitively guilty, so much John Luce *contra mundum*, that even the persistent buzzing of a fly might assume an exaggerated significance.

3

Luce came to the green door. He put his suitcase down on the doorstep, felt in his pocket for the key, and inserting it, gave a turn of the wrist. Nothing happened, save that the key's resistance caused him the inward shock of realizing that the door was not locked. He had no doubt at all about his locking of the door, and in making that trivial yet most significant discovery, and the whole human tragedy and its emotions seemed to come tumbling about his ears. Very gently he turned the handle, opened the door a couple of inches, and then reclosed it. He felt that he wanted to stand there for a few seconds, and let this objective fact translate itself into the inevitable inferences. Someone had unlocked the door. The second key had been with her. So, she had let herself out. Her courage had both failed her and dared the finality of surrender. She had gone out and given herself up.

Luce was conscious of a sudden anger, not against her, but against all those social forces that had pressed so remorselessly upon her too sensitive nature. This day must have been for her a day of anguish and of self-martyrdom. But was he sure? Had the final and fatal thing happened? Leaving the suitcase on the step, he reopened the door and entered the vestibule. The sitting-room door was wide open. Someone was sitting in a chair by the window with a pipe and a book. There were tea-things on the table.

Mr. Temperley!

He was aware of Mr. Temperley putting the book aside and looking up at him with astonishing serenity.

"No need to look at me, Luce, as though you wanted to cut my throat."

"Why are you here?"

"Shut the door, my dear man, and lock it, and I will tell you. Yes, she is upstairs. Let her stay there for a little while."

The blue glare went out of Luce's eyes. He turned to the outer door, brought the suitcase into the vestibule, and locked the door. Had he indeed felt moved to wring that old man's neck? Good God, how primitive one could become in such a crisis!

"Well, Mr. Temperley?"

“You will notice, Luce, that she has given me tea. I know everything, and nothing. Don’t glare at me like some mad Norseman.”

“I’m sorry, but——”

“Take your pipe out and smoke, man, while I explain. It would appear that old gentlemen should not carry spare keys with them when they come to call.”

“What were you doing here?”

“Mere friendliness, Luce. I found no one at home, so having a spare key, I trespassed. No, it wasn’t that I had any suspicion. I thought you would not mind if I went up to look at the view.”

“And then?”

“I was standing out there in the vestibule when I heard footsteps on the stairs. Well, the shock was mutual. Why don’t you light your pipe? I shall feel so much more comfortable.”

Luce walked to the window, and threw up the lower sash as though he needed air.

“I should not do that, my dear man.”

Luce turned on him almost fiercely.

“Does it matter now?”

“It does. Shut that window. It was shut while she told me everything.”

“She told you everything?”

“Yes, poor child. And I believe everything she told me. What you and I have to say to each other, Luce, is so peculiarly intimate that we must take no risks.”

Luce’s big hand lowered the sash.

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t it occur to you, Luce, that I may be on your side?”

“You?”

“For goodness’ sake light your pipe, man. Now then, what sort of person do you see sitting in this chair? An old man to whom life has been somehow good, and who is by no means in a hurry to leave it. One is supposed to fear death, public opinion, the man in the wig or the helmet. There comes a time, Luce, when fear of these things dies in some of us. I’m beyond them. The conventions and the commandments are to me like mummy dust in the

pyramids. Possibly, you have never explored an old man's attitude to life, an old man such as I am. One applauds courage and cunning, particularly cunning. One comes to side with the fox, or with the last lion in Africa. One can even take a wicked and benignant pleasure in fooling the human pack. One wants to see life escape and not get caught in a trap. Yes, I am quite serious, my dear man, so serious that I may be able to help you."

Luce sat down on the window-sill with his back to the window. His large fingers were cramming tobacco into a pipe.

"This business goes to the bottom of life. It is not mere literature. I'm feeling pretty grim."

"Be as grim as you please, Luce. This secret is safe with me. But it is a damned awkward noose you have slipped over your head."

"I chose it deliberately."

Mr. Temperley smiled at him.

"Is such feeling deliberate? Yes, and it is often you quiet and deep people who go over the precipice. But what do you propose to do, Luce? She wouldn't tell me; you must."

"Must?"

"Yes, my dear man, for if I am to be a fellow anarchist I must know how to lie as comprehensively as you are lying."

Luce looked at him for a moment with profound attention.

"All right; I'll tell you."

So, very briefly he told Mr. Temperley of his hiring of a car and caravan, and of his ultimate plan to get Rachel Ballard out of the country. He had a passport of his late wife's, which was still valid, some faking would have to be done, and they would have to accept the risk of the forgery being discovered. But every turn of the adventure implied a risk.

"Even my trusting you is a risk, but you have us cornered. You may be amusing yourself at our expense."

"Do you really believe that, Luce?"

"As a matter of fact I don't, sir, though, in your case the motive is less obvious."

"I am just a mischievous old man, my dear Luce, who, before he dies, may throw his book of the law out of the window. Don't let my *bona fides* worry

you. I, too, am becoming an accessory after the fact. But this caravan idea?"

"There is one advantage of your being in the secret. I shall not have to come and present you with a parcel of lies. How to smuggle her out of the neighbourhood posed me until I thought of a caravan holiday. I had to make my own disappearance seem natural. I shall get her away after dark, and make for Wales."

"What about clothes?"

"That was one of our problems. She came to me with nothing. I have just been in London doing some secret shopping for her. The car and the caravan arrive in a day or so. I'm putting them into the Chequers yard for the night. More stage management! My story will be that I'm picking up a friend in Bucks."

"And starting after dark? Isn't that rather young?"

"No, I leave Brandon in daylight, and park my machine in the old gravel pit on the lower road. I have to carry down my stores. Also, my friend in Bucks will wire me that he is being kept in town till six o'clock."

"Is this hypothetical friend necessary?"

"What alternative have I?"

"Why not take me, Luce, at least as far as Shrewsbury?"

"You, sir?"

"It would be very useful camouflage. Everybody could be made to know that you and I had gone exploring Roman sites. They think me sufficiently mad for that."

"Do you mean it?"

"Most certainly I do. And if you have any doubt about my sincerity, consider how seriously I shall be compromised."

"It's an inspiration, sir."

"You can drop me on the Welsh border, and I can dawdle about up there for a few days. I want to see Viriconium again, and that rather charming person, Mr. Francis Jackson."

"Aren't you rather an extraordinary person?"

"No more extraordinary than you are, Luce. We, the eternally young, are attracted by acts of piracy. In the seventeenth century I might have helped Morgan and his buccaneers to sack Panama."

For some seconds Luce was profoundly silent. He remembered reading in some book that old age is cowardly and pusillanimous, but in Mr. Temperley's case the dogma did not appear to apply. Moreover, he was realizing that his acceptance of Mr. Temperley's help was an act of faith, and that as such it had to be humoured. Meanwhile, he had left the suitcase in the vestibule, and he went to carry it in.

"If anyone had had eyes to see through a sheet of fibre, I might have found myself in Queer Street."

He put the suitcase down behind the door, and returning to the window, stood there relighting his pipe. His impulse was to throw the spent match out of the window, but the window was shut, and suddenly he stood quite still, the match between finger and thumb, his left hand supporting his pipe. Mr. Temperley, who was watching him, thought for a moment that Luce was lost in the contemplation of things visionary.

"Do you mind coming here, sir?"

"Someone there?"

"Yes."

Mr. Temperley joined Luce at the window. His sight was as good as Luce's, and the figure standing by the garden fence, and just clear of the shadow was easily recognized.

"Hah, the good woman!"

"I fell in with her in the lane. Who is she?"

"Ballard's sister."

"I thought I had spotted the resemblance. She spoke to me. She seemed to be peculiarly interested in my suitcase."

"What did she want of you, Luce?"

"To know if the lane would take her to Beech Farm."

"Ingenuous creature. She knows that as well as I do. Miss Ballard, Luce, is a self-appointed Nemesis, and completely and suspiciously vindictive. We must settle this coincidence."

Luce turned quickly.

"Just a moment."

He left Mr. Temperley at the window, and climbing the stairs to the upper floor, knocked gently at the door.

“You there, Rachel?”

“Yes, John.”

“Don’t go near the window. Yes, everything is merciful and right. I’ll be with you in five minutes.”

He returned to Mr. Temperley—a Mr. Temperley who had put on his hat.

“We will confront her together, Luce.”

“But she has gone, sir.”

“I rather think we shall find her at your gate.”

When Luce opened the green door and stood aside for Mr. Temperley to pass, he saw Miss Ballard standing there with her hands upon the gate. He closed the door and, following Mr. Temperley down the steps, made it appear that they had been engaged in an archæological argument.

“I don’t think I agree with you, sir, on Massingham’s theory.”

“Why not?”

“After all, the finding of an Egyptian blue beard isn’t completely satisfying.”

“It strikes me as being good evidence. Hallo, there is someone at your gate, Luce.”

It was evident that Miss Ballard had not expected to be surprised in that particular situation. Luce saw her turn away, and disappear behind the laurels, but Mr. Temperley was moved to pursue. “You’ll excuse me, Luce. Yes, let me know finally about the caravan idea.” Luce went to the gate with him, and watched him walk with engaging briskness in pursuit of Miss Ballard. They were out of Luce’s sight before he overtook her, but Luce could hear the sound of their voices.

“Ah, Miss Ballard, taking a walk?”

He could be charmingly and cheerfully obvious, a gentlemanly old clown who had to be allowed his patter. Miss Ballard observed him obliquely with the air of a woman who had secret curiosities, and for their assuagement might leave this old fool to do the talking. Yes, it was a quite remarkable building, the Signal Tower, and occupied at the moment by a quite remarkable person, his friend Mr. John Luce. Had Miss Ballard happened to have read any of Mr. Luce’s books? She had not. She could have said, “I’ve never heard of the fellow.” But Mr. Temperley ignored both her ignorance and her wooden and supercilious face, and still making magpie conversation, walked with her as far

as the track leading through the woods.

“I think we part here, Miss Ballard. O, by the way, I think I owe you an apology.”

Did he? And for what? Genial senility?

“I quite forgot during our interview that I could not in any event have acted for you. I can’t think how the thing slipped my memory. I am joining Mr. Luce in a caravan tour.”

A caravan tour! At his age! Silly old creature. And as if, after savouring his silliness, she would have wished to employ him as her castigator of uninspired officials!

“Don’t mention it.”

He took off his hat to her.

“But, courtesy insists. You might have thought it rather disingenuous of me, Miss Ballard.”

He had persuaded her to think him an amiable old ass.

XVIII

LUCE climbed the tower stairs, reflecting that if he had suffered from the shocks of life's ambuscades, how much more terrible must this betrayal have seemed to her. He could picture her running down the stairs to welcome a lover, and to find, in lieu of the lover, an old gentleman who might have appeared dressed as the very judgment of Minos.

"Rachel."

The opening door showed her to him not as a creature of ravaged emotions, but one whose breathing had become tranquil. Nor was it fate. He would have said that the essential and sweet sanity of her was beginning to emerge from the flood of those unhappy years.

"Has he gone, dear?"

"Yes."

He felt that for the moment she did not wish to be touched, and that some sacramental mood held her a little apart from him.

"Have you told him what we mean to do?"

"I told him everything. There was no alternative. We are in his hands."

She leaned against the door frame.

"I am not afraid of that old man, John. I offered to go and give myself up. You could have been safeguarded. But he would not let me do that. He said, 'Wait till I have seen your lover.' "

"You feel you can trust him?"

"I do, completely. Life is being so strange to us, that his strangeness does not surprise me."

She gave him her hands now.

"Poor John, you must have been so frightened."

"I am afraid my first reaction was a little more savage. But that's not the end of the story. He is coming with us in the caravan."

"With us?"

“Yes, for the first stage or two. I can imagine nothing more helpful. Human camouflage. But now that we are out of the wood again, come down and see what sort of mess I have made of my shopping.”

She put her face up and kissed him.

“Why should you do all this for me?”

“Just because I like it.”

They went together down the stairs, and he lifted the suitcase on to a chair, and opening it, felt for the parcel that contained her shoes.

“Most important of all. Try them on.”

She unwrapped the parcel, and sitting down in a chair, slipped her feet into the shoes.

“All right?”

“Yes, John.”

She stood up and walked across the room.

“Just my size.”

Meanwhile, he could tell her that he had other and urgent things to do, and that he would leave her to try on the dress and stockings. Taking an old attaché case out into the vestibule, he closed the door, and after a minute’s rummaging found the driving licence tucked away with a collection of photos in a large envelope.

“I’ve found it. Say when you are ready to be inspected.”

“Ready, John.”

He went in and looked at her with the eyes of a lover.

“I think I can praise my own taste in frocks.”

She stood beside him with a hand resting on his shoulder. He had bought her so many things that it seemed graceless to comment on one serious omission. She had nothing to wear in wet weather.

“Outfit complete, for the time being?”

“Yes, John.”

“I think you had better keep all these feminine things locked up in that case.”

She nodded.

“O, by the way, I’m hiring a tent with the caravan. Old T. and I can manage in the tent. Or he can put up in a local pub or farmhouse. By Jove, though, I have forgotten one thing. What an idiot!”

“What have you forgotten, John?”

“To buy you anything to wear when it rains.”

2

Mr. Temperley had to confess to himself that not for many years had he enjoyed anything so much as this excursion into the land of make-believe. Here was an occasion when you could lie gracefully to your neighbours, boring people who had persisted in demanding from you the sesquipedalian truth. In a philosophic discussion he might have been compelled to allow that universal and artistic mendacity might wreck the social state, for, no community could be expected to survive in the atmosphere of a perpetual General Election. But Mr. Temperley's lying was both compassionate and playful. Brandon called on him to be genial and conversational, and he was so, and to anyone who was likely to spread a rumour. Comment was of no consequence so far as his own reputation was concerned. Let the lads of the village mock at an old fool who was proposing to go caravaning.

Meeting Inspector Ford outside the Chequers, Mr. Temperley hailed him.

"Oh, Inspector, it is not of any consequence, but I shall be away for a week or ten days. I am going caravaning with Mr. Luce."

The Inspector was thinking of other things or of nothing.

"Going away, sir."

"Yes, I should like to have had that tragedy cleared up. One feels, in a way, responsible. No more news, I suppose?"

"No, sir. We are thinking of trying to get some bloodhounds."

"It is a most extraordinary disappearance."

"Most, sir, and yet not at all. I'm pretty sure she is lying out somewhere, dead, poor thing."

"That's my view, Inspector. So much wild country to search. I can remember a case when a body was found on Wickham Heath. The evidence proved that it must have been lying there for two years. A sad business. I am going caravaning with Mr. Luce."

"Mr. Luce, sir?"

"The gentleman at the Signal Tower. We are both archæologists. Exploring Roman sites together."

The officer's very blue eyes were blandly bored.

"Roman sites, sir. Not much in my line. I hope you will have good weather."

No doubt the official world assumed Mr. Temperley to be a genial old gentleman, who was growing slightly garrulous and senile, but when Luce, after attending to various matters in Brandon, appeared in Mr. Temperley's garden, Mr. Temperley could smile at him shrewdly. "I have been creating an atmosphere, my dear Luce. And now for maps, and a cross-examination." Mr. Temperley's garden was a large one, and defended by a high, red brick wall. It was famous for its bowling green, which had been rolled and mown since Georgian days. A red brick garden house with a thatched roof, and belonging to the same period, stood on the edge of the bowling green. It contained nothing but a green table, a couple of deck chairs, and a croquet set which had not been used for years. Mr. Temperley left Luce in the garden house to watch the play of light and shadow on the lawn.

Mr. Temperley kept his maps in the upper, right-hand drawer of an oak bureau. He rang the library bell, and Martha found him spreading a map upon the table.

"I shall be in the garden, Martha, with Mr. Luce. I don't wish to be disturbed."

"Very good, sir."

"I suppose you and Eliza can manage while I am away?"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir. And will you be taking your winter underclothing, and a hot bottle?"

"Why winter underclothing, Martha? I am not going to the North Pole."

"I only wanted to know, sir."

"Well, you can put in a bottle."

Martha knew her Mr. Temperley, and made no more suggestions, though she would have liked to inform him that she and Eliza thought it ridiculous that an old gentleman of seventy-three should go on a camping tour. Very probably the result would be pneumonia or lumbago, but Mr. Temperley was a self-willed old creature who detested female fuss.

Mr. Temperley rejoined Luce in the garden-house, after assuring himself that his man was sticking a row of peas in the vegetable garden and safely out of earshot. Mr. Temperley spread a map on the green table and put on his

reading glasses.

"Any idea as to the route, Luce?"

Luce had worked out an itinerary. He was proposing to make for Marlborough and the Wiltshire Downs, and to camp in one of the hill forts near Avebury. Wild and open country. And if Mr. Temperley preferred a normal bed, there was an excellent inn at Avebury. From Avebury they could travel on to Cirencester and visit Chedworth. Mr. Temperley had never seen the Roman site at Chedworth, and no doubt some farmhouse could provide him with a bed.

"Your insistence upon beds, Luce——"

"We don't want you laid up, sir."

"I agree. That might be an awkward complication. Well, and after Chedworth?"

"I want to keep to the by-roads as much as possible. A place like Ludlow, for instance, won't be particularly welcoming to a caravan."

"Have you ever handled one?"

"No, but I am going to get a few hours' practice."

Mr. Temperley scanned the map.

"You could drop me near Shrewsbury, Luce. I should be quite comfortable at The Raven, and after a few days potter home by train. The excuse would be easy. That Anno Domini has to be respected. Now then, for the cross-examination."

"Go ahead, sir."

Mr. Temperley left the garden-house for a moment to satisfy himself that no one was in earshot.

"Now, what's the plan of campaign?"

"I'm putting the car and caravan in the Chequers' yard for the night. I shall get the man who delivers it to give me a demonstration. Then, late in the afternoon I pick you up, and take the lower road to the east of the hill. I told you about the gravel pit. We can park there for the ostensible purpose of loading up stores."

"And till dusk? Supposing some curious person?"

"I shall pretend that the engine is giving some trouble, and have the plugs out. They will stay out most of the time."

“I see. While I sit on the running-board and provide sympathy. And then?”

“We are going to clean up the tower, and efface any possible clue. I don’t want her to leave till after dark. She will have to slip out alone, lock the door after her, and make her way down through the woods. It won’t be very difficult for her. The woods are fairly open there, no coppice.”

“And when she reaches the road?”

“She won’t venture into the road until I whistle ‘God Save the King.’ ”

Mr. Temperley sat down in one of the deck-chairs, took off his glasses and polished them.

“Yes, it sounds quite rational. There is just one person whom we shall have to remember, the woman Ballard.”

“Is it likely that she will be strolling around after dark? Why should she?”

“A vindictive woman can be incredibly suspicious. And there is one thing, Luce, I heard to-day.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“The police talk of using bloodhounds.”

Luce looked grim.

“But what about the scent, sir? Remember she was in the pond, that she came without shoes to the tower, and through drenching rain. Would that leave the dogs any scent?”

“I don’t know, Luce. I have had no experience.”

“Well, we must get her away before they use the dogs. Wait a bit. Couldn’t one try laying a false trail?”

“How?”

“What if I went out at night with something she had worn and played amateur dragman?”

“It’s an idea, Luce. But if you go hanging round Beech Farm——”

“At two in the morning?”

“I expect the place is watched. I think it is rather too hazardous. Leave well alone. We must take the risk and count on the dogs failing to pick up a scent.”

“But if they did, it would take them to the tower, and remember, perhaps down to the road and the gravel pit. I would rather like to try the alternative.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I know. But if I could get to the pond and I could go west, over the fields to the river. The scent could end there.”

“It could. But what about your tracks?”

“Footmarks?”

“Yes.”

“Scores of people have been leaving marks all over the place, and some of mine are there already.”

Mr. Temperley tapped his chin with his glasses.

“I don’t like the idea, but perhaps——.”

“Is it a case of taking the lesser risk in order to block the greater one?”

XIX

HE had to tell Rachel why he needed that old black skirt of hers, and when she understood what was in his mind she was no more welcoming to the idea than Mr. Temperley had been. Its hazardous nature terrified her. What if someone who was watching the farm should surprise him and find him carrying that fatal skirt? She was not thinking of herself, but of her lover.

"Why take this terrible risk, John? There is only one more day."

"It might happen to-morrow."

"Then let me come with you. I know all the ways, and how one can reach the pond without going near the house."

"And what about the marks of your shoes, my dear, and the trail you might leave? You are going to stay inside this tower until the very last moment."

He was determined to attempt this somewhat fantastic adventure, though he could say with Mr. Temperley that his education had not included the habits and capacities of the bloodhound breed. But if dogs were able to pick up and follow a scent that was days old the result might be disastrous. He was determined to try and mislead them. So, neither he nor Rachel went to bed, for she was too strung up and anxious to think of sleeping, and at one o'clock in the morning Luce let himself out of the tower with her rolled-up skirt fastened like a sash under his coat.

"I should be back in an hour or so, dear. I wish you would go to bed."

"John, how can I?"

She sat in the darkness listening to the loud ticking of the American clock. There was a light and fitful wind blowing, and she could hear it in the trees, and now and again it made the window rattle. These sounds seemed to add to her inward agitation. Days of strain and of suspense had made this last ordeal seem almost unbearable. Also, the room felt cold. She sat and shivered. It was too dark for her to see the hands of the clock, and she did not dare to strike a match.

Surely, more than an hour had passed? Had someone surprised him trailing that skirt of hers across the field? And then, following a gust of wind she heard in the subsequent stillness a little metallic sound, the slipping of a key into a

lock. She sat holding her breath. The outer door opened and closed. Again the key was turned.

“Is it you, John?”

“Who else, dear?”

She ran out into the vestibule and clung to him.

“O, my dear, I have been so frightened.”

He held her.

“We are afraid of so many things that never happen. It was quite absurdly easy. I had no trouble at all, save in finding one of the field gates and a thin place in the last hedge.”

“John, you are all wet!”

“My nether garments are. I waded well and truly into the river and along it for twenty yards.”

“O, my dear!”

“The things will be dry in the morning, and if not we can do something about it. Here’s your skirt. Now, off to bed.”

But she was in no mood to be left alone in the darkness. The relief seemed too sudden after that hour of panic. She began to weep a little.

“O, why did I ever drag you into this? Something will surely happen in the end.”

For the moment he forgot those wet garments, and sitting down on the stairs he took her on his knees.

“There, my darling, there won’t be much more of this. One more day, and then sunlight and open country.”

She lay with her head against his shoulder.

“I shall never forgive myself. I ought to have given myself up. If anything happens to you——.”

“Dear one, you have had too much to bear. Just leave things to me. Good Lord, I had forgotten! I’m like wet blotting-paper. And your new skirt. Bed for you, bed for both of us.”

He rose and carried her up the stairs.

“We are getting quite clever, my dear, at doing things in the dark. But to-

morrow, or the day after, there will be more light.”

2

Next morning Luce studied his map, and while scanning it he was constrained to remember that he had never driven a car with a caravan attached to it, and that discretion suggested that to begin with he should keep to a main road with which he was somewhat familiar. He decided to follow the Basingstoke, Andover, Amesbury road, for, so far as he could remember, it was without sudden twists and snags, save at Whitchurch, where he fancied there was a sharpish corner. At Amesbury he would turn north for Marlborough, and from Marlborough make for Avebury along the Bath road. The chalk country was wild and open, and a legitimate camping ground for a gentleman who could assume some interest in the stone circle and earthwork culture. Some friendly farmer might give him permission to camp in one of the old hill forts.

His driving licence arrived on the very morning he expected the car and caravan at Brandon.

Together they discussed every detail of the plan. There was a spare key to the tower door, and Luce would lock the door, and carrying his last piece of baggage, walk down through the woods to the disused gravel pit. When darkness had fallen, she would make her escape and come down to join him, relocking the door after her. She was not to break cover at once, but to remain hidden in the undergrowth until she heard him whistling “God Save the King.” The signal would warn her that—so far as he could tell—the road was clear. She would get instantly into the caravan, lie down in one of the bunks and cover herself up. They would dare breaking the law with regard to caravans, that no passenger was allowed to occupy the van when it was being trailed.

“If we are stopped by any chance, lie still and leave things to me.”

They decided not to take too much in the way of stores, and to leave the tower looking with every appearance of being ready for reoccupation. Also, it was of supreme importance that no possible feminine clue should remain to catch the eye of interested intruders. It was not very likely that Authority would sneak in and look for finger-prints, and Rachel’s shingled head did not shed hairpins, but one black hair on a cushion or pillow might provoke questions. Luce knew only too well how often some seemingly trivial detail had betrayed a fugitive. He suggested that they should wash the floors, and the

stairs before leaving.

Then, there was the question of her flight from the tower, and the marks her shoes might make. Could she cover the first hundred yards in her stockings? Once in the woods she could resume her shoes.

“I’m leaving nothing to chance.”

She said that she could wash over the last of the floors, that of the sitting-room, while he was with the caravan, waiting for her and the darkness. And how would he explain his delayed departure, should it be necessary to explain it to some such person as that Paul Pry of a police constable? He had thought of that.

“They’ll find me pottering about—fussing over the loading—until eight o’clock. Yes, these long light evenings do complicate the business. Then, just before dusk, anyone who arrived would catch me cleaning sparking-plugs. Besides, old T. will be with me.”

“Might it not seem strange, our travelling at night?”

“People who use caravans may be credited with a little eccentricity.”

On the day when the car and caravan were to be delivered Luce walked over to Brandon about eleven in the morning. He had decided to lunch at the Chequers, and in Brandon High Street a telegraph boy got off his bicycle and spoke to him. It was the boy who previously had delivered a telegram at the tower.

“Mr. Luce?”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

Was the wire from Messrs. Custs to say that there would be some delay in the road-ship’s sailing? He tore the envelope open and read:

“Coming down to-day—on chance.—CARLOTTA.”

Damn the woman! He looked at his watch and wondered whether he would be too late to prevent her coming. What if he tried to get her on the telephone? He had her address but not her telephone number, but the directory would give him that. He was within ten yards of the post office when he saw the car and trailer swinging slowing into the Chequers yard. Damn Miss Reubens! He wanted to tip Messrs. Custs’ driver, and persuade him to take him out on a trial trip, and coach him in the handling of the machine. Miss Reubens could wait

for five minutes. He hurried on and into the Chequers yard, where the driver had switched off his engine.

"Good morning. I'm Mr. Luce."

"Morning, sir."

"Could you give me half an hour on the road? It's the first time I have handled a car and a caravan."

He produced a ten-shilling note, and Custs' man smiled at him.

"With pleasure, sir."

"Good. I've just got to go and telephone to a friend in town. I shan't be ten minutes."

The London directory was not crowded with Reubens and Luce found his lady. The telephone box was at his service, and he was put through to Carlotta's flat in Chelsea. Would she be in? She was in. She answered the ring in person.

"Hallo."

"Luce speaking. Just had your wire. Awfully sorry, my dear, but my motor contraption is here, and I hope to be off this afternoon."

"Bad man."

"Yes, very bad man. We'll have to postpone the adventure. So glad I've been able to catch you. You would have found the tower shut up."

Miss Reubens' voice sounded both gaillard and whimsical.

"Why didn't you ask me to come?"

"What, in the caravan?"

"Of course."

"My dear, a widower, and an old bachelor and a——."

"A lady! Quite—triangular! Well, good luck, bad man, and no punctures."

"Thanks—so much."

"Ring me up when you are back on the Stylite's stunt."

"I don't throw away charming opportunities. Good-bye," and he hung Miss Reubens up.

He returned to the Chequers, where Messrs. Custs' driver gave him genial

advice and a demonstration. The great thing to remember was not to cut your corners too fine, and when braking to allow for the additional weight on your tail. Moreover, if you happened to find yourself in an awkward place and compelled to turn, it was a very simple matter to disconnect the trailer, reverse your car, and manhandle the caravan. The driver showed Luce how it could be done. Finally, he took Luce out on the road, and in a quiet section, gave him the wheel. The Mostyn's four speed gear-box was a nice piece of work, and Luce found gear-changing easy.

"Now, swing into this lane, sir."

Luce cut his corner too sharply and the near wheel of the trailer bumped over the grass verge.

"Lucky for you, sir, there was no lamp-post. You—must—swing her more."

3

Sudden, summer heat, with the roads ashimmer and the tar sticky and dogs and humans seeking the shade. Brandon High Street was almost empty when Luce walked up it at three o'clock in the afternoon. He did not see Mr. Smith of the Chequers Inn, for Mr. Smith was taking a nap in a hammock under a chestnut tree, but Luce interviewed the young woman in the office.

"How much do I owe for garage?"

"Five shillings, sir."

Luce paid up, and went out into the yard to begin the great adventure. It was not unlike one of those moments during the war when you left the trenches to go on leave and found yourself wondering whether some chance but malevolent shell would not drop on you just as you were leaving the danger zone. Was he excited? Not a little. The yard gates were open, and as he settled himself in the driving seat and pressed the self-starter button, a large black dog appeared in the gateway and stopped to stare at him.

Absit omen! He drove with meticulous care into the street, and finding it empty, swung to the right. He was aware of the black road and the blue sky, and the great elms clouding about Brandon church. A little figure in a linen coat showed against the redness of an old brick wall. Mr. Temperley!

Luce drove on to Mr. Temperley's gate. A brown suitcase and a canvas hold-all reposed by one of the gate pillars. Also, both of Mr. Temperley's elderly maids were there to see him off, rather like hens superintending the absurd adventures of a ridiculous duckling.

Mr. Temperley smiled at Luce.

"Punctual fellow."

It did occur to Luce as he got out to deal with Mr. Temperley's luggage that he would have welcomed the presence of some representative of the official world. It would have added a *cachet* to the occasion. Meanwhile, Martha had picked up the suitcase, and Eliza the hold-all, and Luce had only to open the door of the caravan.

"Yes, in here for the time being."

“I’ve put your bottle in, sir.”

Mr. Temperley looked amused.

“I’ll have it iced, Martha, I think.”

But Luce’s wish was to prove the father of reality. Just as Mr. Temperley was inspecting the interior of the caravan P.C. Pook appeared, walking in the shade of the church elms. The passion to interfere was so strong in this petty official, even when it was exercising good-will, that P.C. Pook crossed the road and saluted Mr. Temperley. He had heard of the expedition, and he hoped that good weather would last, and did Mr. Temperley know that no man, woman or child was permitted to remain in the caravan while it was in motion?

“Yes, thank you, Pook, I do know that. I was just exploring the ship.”

“That’s all right, sir.”

P.C. Pook put his head into the caravan to inspect it.

“Neat little bit of goods, sir.”

“Yes, most practical.”

P.C. Pook stood on the footpath to watch them move off, and to salute Mr. Temperley.

“Quite a useful coincidence, sir,” said Luce.

“Quite, and unexpectedly so.”

“Do you mind if I attend strictly to business for a while?”

“That’s as it should be, my friend.”

Luce drove out of Brandon with particular care. The slope was against him, but even when the gradient flattened out he kept his speed below twenty miles an hour. There was very little traffic, but when Luce sighted the one-armed signpost marking the turning to the left, he saw the top of a tradesman’s van stationary above the hedge. The van had parked itself with inconvenient precision at this blind corner where Luce would have to swing wide in order to clear the ditch.

Luce pulled up on his near side about ten yards short of the by-road.

“I shall have to get that fellow to move.”

Mr. Temperley had opened the near door.

“I’ll do the stimulating, Luce.”

He found a lad and a girl deeply engaged with each other in the van's cabin, and Mr. Temperley refrained from sarcasm. After all, the world was human.

"Would you mind moving your van. My friend has to swing a car and a trailer round this corner."

Youth was courteous to Mr. Temperley.

"Sorry, sir. I'm just moving off."

The van and its lovers trundled off down the main road, and with Mr. Temperley watching for possible traffic, Luce swung out and took his corner. Mr. Temperley climbed aboard again, and the way was clear. A furlong from the main road the lane plunged into the high shade of tall trees. Patches of sunlight lay here and there on the green verges. Just opposite a big beech tree the mouth of the old gravel pit opened between banks of young fern. Luce pulled up so that he could unhitch the caravan and manhandle it tail first into the pit. His great strength served on this occasion.

"I'm not going to offer to help, Luce."

"No need, sir."

"So I see."

Luce backed the car in and connected it up with the van. Both vehicles were so well screened by brambles and young birch trees that they were almost invisible from the road. Any casual person who happened to pass might go by without noticing the radiator and wings of the car.

"Not so bad, sir. O, by the way, I tried that trick last night."

"Rash of you, Luce."

"I think it was worth it. No trouble at all. Now, if you don't mind I will leave you in charge, sir, while I go up for my first load of stores. What do you make the time?"

"Twenty to four, Luce."

"When I come back we'll manage some tea."

Luce set out to climb the hill by a forest track that left the road about fifty yards from the gravel pit. It had been scoured into deep gullies by centuries of rain, and the branches of the trees met overhead. This old pack-horse trail brought him to the plateau upon which the tower stood, and ten minutes' fast walking took him to the green door. He opened it to find two suitcases and a wooden packing case in the vestibule.

“Rachel.”

He heard her on the stairs. She came down to him with her sleeves rolled up, and he saw that her hands were wet.

“I’m just washing over the bedroom floor.”

“All’s well. Our stage coach is safely in the gravel pit.”

She gave him a breathless kiss.

“Am I really going? It seems too good.”

“Yes, open country, my dear. I am going to give Mr. Temperley some tea down there.”

“O, don’t leave me, John, more than you can help.”

He divined her horror of being alone.

“I’ll carry down that case and come back at once. And put out some tea and sugar and a tin of milk. He will understand.”

“And a slice of cake, John?”

“Yes.”

She made up three little parcels and slipped them into his pockets, and he hoisted the case on his shoulder and went out, locking the door after him. He found Mr. Temperley sitting on a waterproof cushion, with a map on his knees, and flicking a handkerchief to keep off the flies.

“I did not know I was so succulent, Luce.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I don’t expect you to apologize for Beelzebub.”

Luce put the wooden box down close to Mr. Temperley.

“Do you mind if I leave you to make your own tea? She’s a little afraid of being alone.”

“Poor child, I’m not surprised. Don’t worry about me, Luce. I’ll hold the fort.”

“There is a stove in the caravan, and water in the tank, and here is some tea and sugar and milk, and a piece of cake.”

He turned out his pockets, and Mr. Temperley folded up his map, and smiled at him.

“Did she think of the cake?”

“As a matter of fact she did, sir.”

“Bless her! I’ll forage for myself, Luce. I suppose you will be down again?”

“In about an hour.”

Luce went out into the road to assure himself of its emptiness, and then took to the woods. He found that last sacramental meal ready laid for him in the tower. Her mood was one of pale quietism. Had he been less sensitive to impressions he might have said that she was tranquil and resigned, and that the prospect of escape moved her not at all. That it was not so was evident by reason of the trembling of her hands when she filled and passed him his cup. But he did understand that at this moment in her life she did not ask for emotion. She was too secretly surcharged with it, and oppressed by the finality of the occasion.

He was casual, kind, reassuring. They might have been waiting for a train to take them away on their yearly holiday.

“You will have plenty of time to wash up. No hurry.”

She sat very still, looking at the tree tops. She was going away with him to strange places, and for ever. Would he always be kind to her, would he tire of the tyranny of their mutual exile?

“It’s so final, John. Think, for the last time.”

“My dear!”

He took her on his knees.

“It is not a question of thinking, but of feeling.”

“I’m so frightened.”

“Of me?”

“Going away may be easy. It’s the afterwards. You, everything will be in my hands.”

“You don’t quite know me yet, Rachel. I’m a rather stolid, habitual old thing. Because all this has happened to us so suddenly, it doesn’t mean that I don’t know what life is, and what we can make of it.”

She clung to him for a moment.

“O, my dear, I’m so afraid of failing you.”

“I’m not the least afraid. Get that idea into your head.”

He let her go, and with sudden calmness she began to clear away the tea things and to prepare for washing up. He understood this cherishing of her self-control. He filled and lit a pipe, and remembered one last precaution.

“Keep the cloth between your fingers and things when you give them the last polish. I think I ought to be going now.”

She answered him calmly.

“Yes, John.”

“When you leave the gate for the woods, remember the ground goes down all the way. There are only a few clumps of rhododendron, and the bracken. Keep on going downhill till you reach the wire fence above the road, and stay there till you hear me whistle.”

“Yes, John.”

He kissed her on the forehead, picked up the two suitcases and went out.

4

As Luce walked down through the woods he heard voices coming from the direction of the gravel pit. He recognized Mr. Temperley's voice. The other voice was a woman's, and somehow familiar, and associating itself like an unpleasant odour with some particular person. Luce came to a stand under a beech tree whose branches swept the ground, and putting down his suitcases, waited upon circumstance. The voices had ceased, and Luce could hear the footsteps of someone who was climbing the trackway. The beech tree under which he stood was about fifty yards from the sunken path, and he was able to distinguish the head and shoulders of a woman moving above the near bank. He recognized her. It was Miss Ballard.

Assuredly, this confounded woman was a kind of universal ghost manifesting everywhere, and at all hours, and Luce stood still and watched her. She did not appear to be sensitive to the strange compulsion an observer's eyes may exert upon the person who is watched, and she went by without looking in his direction. Damn the woman! But to Luce her prowlings appeared so sinister and so charged with potential danger that he left his suitcases under the tree, and broke back through the woods and away from the sunken track. He wanted to assure himself that Miss Ballard did not spread her curiosity about the tower, and reaching the brow of the hill and coming to a clump of rhododendrons within view of the gate, he took cover there. Nor had his inspiration been wasted, for in a minute or two he saw the black figure walking up the path in the shade of the laurels. She paused at the gate and stood contemplating the tower. And Luce cursed her. What if she were to sneak up to the tower and stand listening under a window? The slightest sound from within, the moving of a chair, might be sufficient to stimulate her curiosity. And what would she infer? That he, the official tenant, was still in occupation?

She did not venture through the gate, but turned back along the path. Yes, damn the woman! What if she had appeared at that gate at the very moment when Rachel had opened the green door? The thing did not bear thinking about, but so potent was his dread of any such contretemps that he left his shelter and, keeping to the open woods, shadowed Miss Ballard down the hill. He was able to catch glimpses of her black figure moving among the trees, nor did he cease from shadowing her until he was satisfied that she was on her way to the farm.

He realized that he was sweating, and that he still held between his teeth a pipe that had gone out, and knocking the pipe out against a tree and pocketing it, he went back to collect his suitcases. Emerging upon the road he found it as empty as the woodlands. The gravel pit showed him Mr. Temperley sitting on the steps of the caravan, reading a copy of *The Times* which the good Martha had slipped into his suitcase.

"Hallo, my dear Luce, you look hot?"

Luce was conscious of being assailed by a momentary and vile suspicion. Surely, this old man was not amusing himself at their expense.

"I am feeling hot, sir."

"I've had a visitor, Luce."

Luce put his suitcases down beside the steps.

"I both heard and saw the lady."

Mr. Temperley was looking at him with quizzical amusement.

"What would you do, Luce, if you caught me double-crossing you?"

"I might wring your neck, sir."

"Good man! I believe you would. But Miss Ballard appears to be a most energetic walker. A very restless person, Luce, a woman with a soul that pinches. I showed her the caravan."

"Was she interested?"

"Quite."

"Well, I followed her over the hill to make sure that she paid no other unwanted calls."

"I shouldn't worry, Luce."

"Why not, sir?"

"She happens to be rather pleased with life. Bloodhounds, Luce, the bloodhounds are expected to-morrow. She might have heard that Christ was re-appearing on earth. The bliss of the vindictive! Actually she said to me, 'The dogs will smell her out.' Nice person!"

Luce took out his pipe.

"That's consoling. It means that she can sit and contemplate to-morrow's possible ecstasy."

“Exactly so, Luce. But didn’t you say something about the car’s sparking plugs being dirty?”

“I did. They are as foul, sir, as some people’s nasty little souls.”

5

She sat and waited for the time to pass.

She would have said that the silence of the empty building was as complete as her silent acceptance of what the future held for her. But the room was not quite soundless. The clock on the mantelpiece was ticking. She had not been conscious of the sound, but its persistence penetrated her awareness. It roused her to sudden restlessness, an inward protest. It was like a hurrying and troubled heart. She rose, and going to the mantelpiece, took the clock in her hands and shook it, but the mechanism would not be thwarted. She resumed her seat, and her watching of the sky. The same trees were there. One of them, a tall Scotch fir, stretched out a flat bough like a hand held out for alms.

She thought of the dog lying buried there in the garden. He had not escaped tragedy. Would she? Would Luce? And then it occurred to her that she would never see these familiar trees again, nor would she feel the solace of being shut up in this strange old building. What would her memories be, if there were to be memories? Something stirred in her like an unborn child. She rose, and going up the stairs, stood looking round the room that had sheltered her.

Perhaps it was inevitable, this sudden troubling of her conscience, her shrinking from the final sacrifice he was making for her. It was not a question of remorse. Why involve him in this tragedy, in exile, in possible disillusionment? Had he not given her the one supreme thing? She should have blessed him for it, and strengthened by it, gone to give herself up. It was not too late. She could still shield him. And would he not come to understand that in surrendering herself, and setting him free she had given him a greater proof of her generosity?

The submissive impulse moved her. Yes, she would go and say that she had taken food with her and hidden herself in the woods. Her love would know how to lie. She turned to the stairs and began to descend them. Then, something startled her, a sound that seemed immense in the hollow of the tower. The brass knocker on the green door! Could it be Luce? But he had one key with him, and the other key was in her pocket. The knocking was repeated. What should she do? She sat down on the stairs, tense but trembling.

Silence. Almost, she fancied that she could hear the ticking of the clock in the room below. And her own heart! The courage had gone out of her. It

seemed to have ebbed away in that repressive silence. Was it that she could not endure life now without him? But to sit still was torture. She got up and returned to the bedroom, and moving round the wall, stood looking obliquely out of the window.

She saw a woman in the garden, a strange woman with a cigarette stuck in a large, red mouth. She was by the pear tree. What if the woman had seen her? She drew back along the wall. She remained for some minutes in a corner of the room, and then felt that she must look again, and covering the lower part of her face with her skirt, she crept back to the window. The woman had gone.

Who was she? Some casual picnicker who had come to ask for water? She returned to her seat on the stairs, but all thought of surrender had gone from her. She felt that she could not go out alone and face all those strange faces and the utter and human solitude that would be hers. The horror of being stared at, questioned, shut up alone. Her mood became like the instinct of a live thing that struggles and resists.

This waiting for the darkness seemed interminable. How incongruous things were! She would be wearing new shoes and another woman's hat. She remembered that Luce had advised her to go shoeless to the gate and into the woods, and she took off her shoes and sat with them in her lap. Would it never grow dark? But the light was failing. She had noticed a cobweb hanging where the curve of the stairs met the wall, and now she could not distinguish the spider's web. She rose, and descended the stairs, carrying her shoes.

The sitting-room window was full of the afterglow, the trees black silhouettes. The extended hand of the Scotch fir was darkly appealing, and from it seemed to rise a little tongue of flame. She sat and watched the sky fade. The walls and furniture grew dim. The clock ticked on. Surely it was safe for her to go? She was in fever to go, and to put this crisis behind her.

The tops of the trees merged into one dark mass. She rose, and going into the vestibule, unlocked the door and stood listening. Not a sound. She went out, relocked the door, and descending the steps, found them cold to her feet. Everything was obscure and still. What if she were to meet someone just as she reached the gate? But how unlikely. With frightened eyes looking this way and that she came to the gate, opened it, and passed out.

Almost instantly she was among the trees. She sat down at the foot of a larch and put on her shoes. It was open woodland, patched with fern and rhododendron. The silence seemed supreme, but under her feet pine needles and twigs were faintly crepitant. Picking her way between the dark trunks she descended the hill, and with each step she seemed to breathe more freely. No

one could have seen her. She came to the wire fence; she was touching it before she had realized its nearness. A rusty wire trembled. She stood there listening.

A moment later she heard footsteps in the road below. Deliberate and casual, they approached the place where she had paused. Someone whistled the first few notes of “God Save the King,” and bending down she slipped through between the strands of wire. Luce heard the vibration of the wire, and the sound her feet made as she slithered down the bank. She emerged from the darkness within three yards of him.

“God Save the King.”

She had been warned against speaking. She felt his arm about her, and surrendered to it. They came to the gravel pit, and she could distinguish the dim shapes of car and caravan. She divined that other figure waiting to welcome her in comprehending and careful silence.

She was quite close to Mr. Temperley, and the whispered words seemed to come to her out of the intimate darkness.

“May all your troubles be over, my dear.”

She put up her face in the darkness and was kissed. Life seemed to be an incredible, mute shadow-show. She found herself lying in one of the bunks of the caravan, and Luce was covering her with a blanket.

“If we are stopped, lie still.”

“Yes, John.”

“Frightened?”

“Not now.”

The door was closed, and she was aware of the little curtained windows becoming faintly light as the car’s lamps switched on. The engine came to life. She felt the caravan moving out into the road.

XX

SHE was lying on the grass on the edge of a beechwood. The sun was behind her, and the downland landscape, like luminous silver, piled hill beyond hill under a sky that was cloudless. This high and open country was new to her, with its pale hills hazed with heat. The day was windless, and its stillness might have been part of her inward self which lay below the vallum of the old hill-fort, and gazed and wondered. Was it possible for life to be so spacious and tranquil and so full of fair weather as this landscape?

She could see the road down there in the valley, a solitary farm, and sheep grazing. They looked like grey stones scattered about on the hillside. She felt very far from houses and people. A grass track led from the highroad into the calmness of these hills amid which her breathless self felt solitary and secure. Escape! Had the thing really happened? Not a leaf was moving on the beech trees. The silence was supreme save for the singing of a lark.

From where she lay she could see the white roof of the caravan topping the green bank of the hill-fort. Luce had driven Mr. Temperley into Avebury, where the local inn would house him for the night. She watched the road, and felt like some little animal that had been let out of a cage into the sunlight.

A sudden sound! It came from the wood behind her, and she was startled by it until she realized that the green tongues of innumerable leaves had been moved by a little wayward breeze. The flutter spread through the wood until every tree joined in the chorus. Why this agitation? What were the trees saying?

A car had appeared in the road, a spot of dark blue, their car. She saw it pass the farm, and turn to take the grass track. It climbed slowly, with a slightly rolling motion, its radiator catching the sunlight. The breeze had died away, and the trees were still. She found herself at this moment more girl than woman; she was up and running down the hill to meet him.

The car slowed down. She was aware of his very blue eyes searching her face.

“Get in.”

“No, I’ll stand here.”

She climbed on to the running board, and the car went on past the beechwood, and through the break in the bank into the fort. A green canvas tent had been pitched close to the caravan, and in the shade of the van she had spread a white cloth and arranged on it her plates and cups, and a cake and a dish of bread and butter covered with a clean cloth.

“Will Mr. Temperley be comfortable there?”

“I think so.”

“Somehow he’s so wonderful and precious, John.”

“Our miraculous joss! But there are other people who can be included in the same category.”

He had parked the car beside the van, and, leaning over half-timidly, she kissed him.

“Did you remember the milk?”

“I did.”

She stepped down and instantly her face grew serious. It was as though that one word had become a symbol, bringing back to her all the beginning of things. She was conscious of a spasm of pain, secret stresses, a foreboding that seemed to have followed her even into this solitary place.

“I’ll put the kettle on, John.”

He was looking at her intently, and with compassionate understanding, but he did not look at her too long.

“Yes, tea. I’m ready for it.”

He could have argued that it was good for her that she should do things, the simple things that fill the lives of so many women. It might even be good for her that he should behave like the exacting male. She was down on her knees by the stove, and he could see the cleft between her breasts, and the curve of her neck under her very black hair. But if he chose to observe her as physician as well as lover it behoved him to censor and control big adjectives, and to remember that the thing one called sanity had to be cherished. He had seen men lose their precious sanity in the war, and stand mute and shivering, or tear at the soil like terrified animals trying to burrow into the earth. Fear had to be taken by the shoulder and thrust out of her life, and he knew that his hands would have to be both strong and gentle.

He took the bottle of milk from the car, placed it on the cloth, and lay down on the grass.

“Good to watch somebody else working.”

She remained on her knees, somehow apart with her inward self.

“Yes, John.”

“I think our outfit is pretty complete. Found anything lacking?”

“No.”

He pulled out his pipe and pouch, and laying them beside him, turned on his back.

“There’s a lark up there. Just a speck. He doesn’t seem to be worrying.”

“He was there before you came.”

“Good omen. Tell me, how long does the kettle take to boil?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Kettles vary, I suppose? Large ones like men must take a devil of a time. Hallo, I hear a murmur.”

She bent her head to listen.

“Yes, just beginning.”

“You know, Rachel, it always gives me a shock when I remember that the interesting primitives who lived up here had no tea and no tobacco.”

“Hadn’t they?”

“Hardly!”

He was sensing her apartness, her absorption in some mood, the secret distraction of unresolved suspense. She seemed to be hiding herself from him behind the little pragmatical needs of the moment, her watching of the kettle, the putting of tea into the pot. What was it that she feared? Some last and fatal mischance, the drab face of the thing called justice, the dissolving of a dream? Such soul-shocks as she had suffered would not be healed in a day, and there was their final crisis waiting to be dared, the ultimate hazard of escape.

She passed him his cup, and her eyes seemed to avoid his.

“Do we go on to-morrow?”

“Just as you please. I think Mr. Temperley will be quite happy pottering round Avebury.”

She looked at the beech trees.

“It is so very peaceful here. I have never seen country like this before.”

“Plenty of sky. Switzerland will be full of sky and mountains.”

Again she was silent, and he suffered her silence to remain like still water in which he might discover the reflection of things actual. He could understand that all the features of this new world must seem very strange to her, and that he himself was half a stranger. His complete involvement in her tragedy might convince her that he was no mere cad, a sexual opportunist, but might she not question the afterwards?

They had finished the meal, and he was filling his pipe when she asked him that question, and he could imagine that it had been gathering shape and substance behind her silence.

“Won’t you miss so many things, John?”

“What things, my dear?”

“People and places, and work?”

He began to be wise as to what was troubling her.

“People? I’m not a very sociable beast. Should I have taken the tower if I had liked chatter? It pleases me to watch people, sometimes, but I have found that when you have made contact with them one loses interest.”

She gave him a slanting look.

“Isn’t that rather a problem for me?”

He smiled at her, and pointed with the stem of his pipe.

“Wait a moment. We have got to get this matter settled. Besides, I’m not the only person to be considered. This sort of thing has always satisfied me, country and plenty of sky, and stodging about on my big feet and thinking about all the things that puzzle man. I like being quiet. But you?”

She passed her hand over the grass.

“I could go on like this for ever and ever.”

“Sure?”

“Peace, someone I can trust, who won’t make me afraid. Can’t you realize that after——.”

“Yes, I can realize that.”

“But I’m not at all clever. You are so much cleverer than I am.”

“I have always hated clever people.”

“But, John——.”

“Yes, the little monkey minds, the people who are always advertising their nice tricks. You have what I want, what every man who is not a fool wants, gentleness and understanding.”

She gave him a deep, devout look.

“Have I, dear? I hope so. My only fear is, now, that I might spoil life for you.”

He put out a big hand.

“Come here, come and sit by me. Any other fear?”

“Yes, I can’t help it, John. Every morning when I open my eyes I shall think, ‘They will find me to-day.’ ”

He held her close.

“No they won’t. This affair of ours is going to be one of the unsolved mysteries.”

She did not answer him then in the way she wished. The inevitable words were to be uttered later. He was sitting in the mouth of the green tent watching the hills grow dim, and listening to little movements in the caravan. The near window was lit up, and suddenly he saw it grow dark. She had left the door half-open as though to let in the night air and a glimpse of the stars.

“John.”

He got up and went to the steps.

“Not sleepy yet?”

“No.”

“Try counting sheep.”

“John, I wish I could lean across and touch you if I wake in the night.”

2

Three people in a Mostyn two-seater made life appear somewhat crowded, especially so when Luce and his fifteen stone took up more than their just share of the space available, but Rachel, wedged in between these two men, was made to feel buttressed and secure. Mr. Temperley insisted upon a respect for the law, now that the breaking of it was less urgent. Also, he became curious as to the contents of Luce's pockets.

"What do you keep in them, my good man?"

Luce was persuaded to turn out his pockets, and the exhibit included two pipes, a pouch, two boxes of matches and a note-book.

"Three additional inches added to a figure that doesn't err on the side of modesty."

"Sheer innocence."

"I suggest you transfer innocence to the door-pockets."

They steered for Cirencester and Chedworth, and near Cirencester Luce proposed that Rachel should wear a pair of tinted glasses. "Must I, John?" He smiled down at her serious face. "Does it matter? Moreover, you need another hat and mackintosh." They did not drive into Cirencester, but Luce turned into a Roman road, and parked the car and caravan on the verge. If Mr. Temperley felt equal to it, he and Rachel could walk into Cirencester while Luce waited. Mr. Temperley agreed.

"You are a damned autocrat, Luce."

"I think I look less evidential than you do, sir."

Mr. Temperley and Rachel walked into the city, and Mr. Temperley, discovering a shop that sold spectacles, entered it with Rachel.

"I want a pair of tinted glasses for my niece. We are motoring. There's a good deal of glare."

Rachel was fitted with glasses while Mr. Temperley sat on a chair and looked casual and benignant.

"I think I'll have a pair, too. Yes, something quite inexpensive."

Afterwards, he went with Rachel in search of a shop where she could buy her hat and mackintosh. She was wearing her giglamps, but Mr. Temperley had pocketed his. When they found a likely shop he became aware of her hesitation.

"Any money, my dear?"

She hadn't. Luce had forgotten this detail, only to remember it and curse himself ten minutes after they had left him. Mr. Temperley took out a pocket-book and handed her three pound notes.

"I'm so sorry."

"Nonsense. Uncles are privileged."

"Do come in with me."

"Another avuncular privilege."

Rachel bought her mackintosh and hat, with Mr. Temperley displaying sufficient interest in his spectacled niece to satisfy a mild convention. He criticized the hats but was mute as to the mackintoshes. Art and utility! And how a pair of spectacles transfigured a pretty face! In fact, it seemed to him that the wearing of those glasses made Rachel's trying on of hats a distrait and casual business.

"Oh, I think this one will do. Don't you, uncle?"

Mr. Temperley looked at her with his head on one side.

"Yes, not so bad, my dear. Besides, I haven't to wear it. Turn round. Yes, *pas si mal*."

The shop assistant, an anæmic young woman, was interested in neither of them, and as a saleswoman she was perfunctory. Rachel chose to wear the new hat, and to have the old one put in a bag, and with her mackintosh over her arm she walked beside Mr. Temperley on the sunny side of the street. It did occur to her to wonder whether the constable who was directing traffic at the top of the market place knew that a woman who had murdered her husband in a Surrey farm was still at large.

"Do you think the woman in the shop was at all curious about us?"

"Complete apathy, my dear. Even if I had been forty years younger I don't think I should have been noticed."

They rejoined Luce under an ash tree on the Roman road, a Luce who wanted to apologize for a piece of absent-mindedness. They drove on for Chedworth, and finding a complaisant farm, parked themselves in a field

within half a mile of the Roman site. Luce, climbing into the caravan to extract the tent and other impedimenta, found that Rachel had taken off her glasses.

"I needn't wear them now, need I?"

He was touched by her very innocent vanity.

"I think so! I'm sorry I was such a fool about forgetting the filthy lucre. I'll pay the good uncle."

She put up her face to be kissed.

"Why is it you have to give me everything?"

"Perhaps because I like life like that. I'm not much of a believer in formidable women."

"I'm afraid I'm not very formidable, John."

"Thank God," said he.

She remained in camp to wash up the tea things and prepare supper while Luce and Mr. Temperley walked to Chedworth Villa, and for quite a part of the way they argued about those three pound notes. Luce tried to press three other notes upon Mr. Temperley, and Mr. Temperley refused to take them. "Don't be silly, Luce. Even adopted uncles can make presents. Of course, if you are feeling peeved because you forgot——?" Luce laughed and put the notes back in his pocket. "You have me. I was. I'll chalk it up against myself." But this was mysterious country, deeply cleft and high wooded, and strange old dead things seemed to steal back through the centuries. They forgot their argument in that almost haunted valley with its towering trees and its grey relics spaced amid mown turf. The place was beautifully kept, like some sacred acre in which memories slept, and in the little museum there was no sound save the fantastic ticking of a busy clock. Luce had bought postcards at the curator's house, and had said to the woman who had taken the admission money, "A lovely spot this." She had answered, "Yes, sir; when the sun shines." Mr. Temperley disliked other people's reconstructions, or rather he preferred to reconstruct things for himself. He had his own views to air. The villa had been a dye-works? Fudge! He did not believe it. Look at the plan of that colonnade. And were there signs of much water and excessive cleanliness? Well, the Romans were excessively clean people, and even a Romanized Celt was a gentleman. Luce might take it that the Roman was the first gentleman. No, your Greek was a clever cad, and too literary. Had not some superb old Roman pragmatist referred to the Hellenes as "Those damned Greeks!" Yes, the great Julius would have scorned Chelsea or Glasgow. Mr. Temperley was a refreshing person to trail around with in such a place.

“Too much humbug in history, Luce. This must have been a pleasant, autocratic piece of property.”

“It would have suited you, sir!”

“Down to the bone, Luce. If any petty provincial official had shown his face up here I should have had him soused in one of those vats.”

“I thought you said they were not vats.”

“No, foot-baths, Luce, foot-baths!”

Mr. Temperley slept that night in the green tent on a bed over the making of which Rachel and Luce left their own bunks heavily plundered. Luce liked to travel early before the world was too inquisitively awake, and soon after four o’clock someone rapped on the tent. Mr. Temperley had gone to sleep with the flap open, and in the triangular space he saw both the sunrise and Luce’s large figure.

“Your early tea.”

Mr. Temperley sat up like a boy.

“All the luxuries, Luce. What’s the time?”

“Soon after four, sir.”

“Imagine a very large Jove serving me with early morning tea! Rabbits up yet?”

“Scores of them. I saw a fox come down that hedge and go into the wood.”

“What about shaving-water, Luce?”

“I’ll bring you some.”

At half-past five in the morning they took the Cheltenham-Tewkesbury road, and they passed through Worcester just as the shops were opening. Luce seized the opportunity to replenish stores, leaving Mr. Temperley and Rachel in the car. She had put on her smoked glasses before entering Worcester, and she was wearing them when they were confronted by two police constables at some crossroads about six miles beyond the city. Luce felt her stiffen beside him. He was aware of an arm raised and signalling him to halt.

“Just licences, I expect.”

He was conscious of pressing his left arm against hers, and of Mr. Temperley leaning forward, and showing a set of very white dentures between retracted lips.

“Leave it to me, Luce.”

“No. They’ll regard me as the fellow in charge.”

He pulled up on the left side of the road, and one of the constables came to the offside of the car. He was mature, and blue eyed and good-humoured, and Luce smiled upon him.

“You want to see my licence, officer?”

“Yes, sir. Anyone in the caravan?”

“No. As you see, we are very much all here.”

The constable returned Luce’s smile, and having examined his driving licence, went round to the back of the caravan and opened the door. Luce heard it slammed.

“All right, sir.”

“Good morning, officer.”

“Good morning, sir.”

Luce blessed him, and with a friendly twiddle of the hand in the direction of the other constable, drove on. He was conscious of a deeply-drawn breath, the relaxing of the body that was pressing against his. To Rachel this had been no fortuitous and trivial incident, but a moment of stark fear, and now that the tension had passed, he could feel her knees trembling.

Said Mr. Temperley, also conscious of those tremors:

“Decent fellows, the police. Good evidence that; no one is worrying about us.”

Rachel was sitting with closed eyes.

“We shan’t be bothered again.”

“Kidderminster next. What’s Kidderminster famous for, my dear?”

“I don’t know.”

“Carpets! That’s all we know, and all we need to know.”

Luce took his eyes off the road for a second to glance at Rachel.

“Magic carpets, what! Yes, I think I have one.”

3

Mr. Temperley spent his last evening with them in an orchard between Much Wenlock and Shrewsbury. The ground fell away towards a lane, and after supper, while Rachel was washing up, Luce and Mr. Temperley sat under an apple tree, smoking their pipes. They had their final arrangements to make, synchronizations in time and space, the mutual assurance that each would be reading from the same map. Rachel was just out of earshot, and while Mr. Temperley talked, he watched her on her knees, drying plates with a red and white check glasscloth.

"So, Bruges is the first resting-place?"

Luce had explained his plan. On the way home they would camp somewhere within easy distance of London.

"I shall rig up some excuse to leave the car and caravan there for a day or two, and rush her across to Belgium. That's our last hazard. I'm taking the Ostend route. It will all depend upon their querying that passport."

"It is a fairly neat fake, Luce."

"It caused me much heavy breathing. I shall stay in Bruges with her for a day or two, and then leave her there. I shall have to come back to clear things up."

"That is where I may be able to help."

"Haven't you been doing that already, sir?"

"I have enjoyed it, my dear man. It is just as well that I should be at headquarters, and able to observe the activities of the official world and of that nice Miss Ballard. And supposing I should want to warn you, Luce?"

"I'll post you my final address; also I shall want someone to write me a letter saying that my wife's mother is dangerously ill."

"My imagination could rise to that. And if I want to warn you to be on your guard?"

"Send me a curt message to say the rent is due."

"Excellent. But I shan't know in the final event whether you have

succeeded, unless——.”

Luce was looking into the distance.

“You’ll see it in the papers. Headlines, if you take one of the penny sensationals. Otherwise you won’t know till you see me.”

“I would rather like to be warned.”

“All right. If we get away, I’ll write from Bruges.”

Mr. Temperley knocked his pipe out against the tree.

“Splendid! Good luck to your lying, Luce. Before I die I shall see a case in equity settled out of court.”

They were on the road by seven, and finding the landscape dominated by that strange and ominous hill, the Wrekin. It was in one of its black moods, for the day had opened with heavy cloud, and the great hill’s mood seemed massive and sinister. Mr. Temperley sat and watched it standing like some pyramid recording, not the death of a king, but the doom of a whole city.

“What a strange hill.”

The words were Rachel’s.

“Is it really as black as that, or is it my glasses?”

Luce was more concerned with the road than with the Wrekin.

“It has always looked in a bad temper when I have passed by.”

Said Mr. Temperley, “Perhaps hills suffer from inherited memories, Luce, and you remind it of one of the big blond beasts.”

“Thank you. But when the White City went up in flames, the Welsh were the raiders.”

“Is that the latest theory?”

“I believe so.”

“Well, Mr. Francis Jackson will have something to say about it. I’ll hire a car and call on him this afternoon.”

Luce drove over the English bridge and up the steep hill into the centre of the city. Traffic was almost absent, and Luce, knowing his Shrewsbury, pulled up about a hundred yards short of the Raven Hotel.

“Do you mind if I stop here? I shall be able to take that right-hand turning, and circulate. I’ll carry your baggage along.”

Mr. Temperley got out of the car.

“Good-bye, my dear; happy days.”

Rachel leaned over and kissed him.

“We shall owe them to you.”

“I hope so.”

With Mr. Temperley’s hold-all under his right arm, and the suitcase pendent from the other hand, Luce walked with Mr. Temperley to the Raven Hotel.

“It is rather like arriving with the milk, Luce. What a strong fellow you are.”

“It just happened so. Meanwhile, there is nothing that I can say to you that is adequate.”

“Compassion is about the only thing that matters, my dear man.”

“If the last adventure should go astray, I shall have to lie hard to keep you out of it.”

“That does not trouble me, Luce. Well, I expect they have a room here.”

“I’ll come in and see.”

“No, don’t bother, Luce. Leave my stuff here. And may the gods be as we are. Good-bye.”

Luce looked steadfastly for a moment into those kind, jocund little eyes, and then faced about and walked back slowly to the car. He could not help remembering certain things that Mr. Temperley had said to him in a Shropshire orchard, that a man in the forties should make the most of the force of his years, for, at seventy his passion to preserve his prejudices or his property may become a little thin and colourless like his hair.

XXI

THEY were camped somewhere in Wales in a grass field close to a high wood. A deep lane running between stone walls joined the main road at the foot of the slope. It was a sweet and solitary place with a bracken-covered hill going up to a sharp edge over which the clouds drifted, and with the sea palely blue on the northern horizon. Van, tent, and car were parked in a little hollow that concealed them from the lane. The farm folk lived in a severe, stone house on the other side of the wood, pleasant people with singing voices, much less severe than their house, and whose world was a world of sheep. The man was a wiry, black and white little Welshman; the wife, big, copper-headed, both brawny and benign. They had two small daughters who stared at Luce with huge hazel eyes whichever he appeared to purchase milk and eggs. Also, there was a sheepdog of much sagacity, known in brief as David, and at length as Lloyd George. A village strung itself along the main road about a mile to the west, like grey beads on a black thread.

Luce had gone down to the farm about three o'clock for milk and eggs. He had silver for his purchases, and pennies for the children. In camp it had been washing-day, and the tub, Luce's green canvas bath, filled with spring water heated over a camp-fire. He had a feeling as he followed the field path round the wood, that life had become secure and tranquil in this Welsh hillside, and that they had been sharing one of those periods when two personalities merge in a more profound understanding of each other. Rachel seemed to have climbed out of her valley of fear to a place where the sun shone, and all hurried and breathless moments had ceased. He would not have described it as resignation, but as a regrouping of the crystals of the psyche into a more subtle pattern. The weather had been infinitely kind to them, and there was more sunlight in Rachel's skin, and perhaps more tender abandonment in her so-called sinning. She could say to herself in secret, "If I should have a child by him, no one can take that away from me." But the child idea was in the dark womb of things. She was not sure that she would ever ask for a child if the knees of her god were merciful.

Rachel had hung up her washing on an improvised line stretched between two young ash trees close to the stone wall, perhaps because she had decided that shirts and etceteras did not ornament a camp site, but this domestic bunting was visible from the lane. She had got tea ready, and was sitting on a

cushion in the hollow, watching the kettle, when the head appeared. It was a very hairy head, apostolic under a blackguardly hat, and seeming to rest at first on the green swell of the turf. Its owner, a tramp, scouting up the lane and seeing the washing on the line, had been moved to explore possible opportunities.

The shoulders followed the head as the man approached the hollow in the field. He was a biggish fellow in the early forties, with a particularly unpleasant face, red patched over the nose and cheekbones, the little angry eyes very near together. He had a revolting mouth, the loose red lower lip projecting almost like some fungous growth. His beard was the appendage of a sloven who had not shaved for many days. Over his left shoulder he carried a sack, and in his right hand an ash stick cut from a hedge.

Rachel, sitting very still, looked up at him with quick alarm. He came to the edge of the hollow. He stood there and leered.

“Got any grub, lady?”

Her impulse was to propitiate the fellow, and so get rid of him.

“Are you hungry?”

“Sure.”

There was a cake on a dish, and she bent over, drew the dish towards her and cut a slice, while the man appraised the car, caravan and tent with quick, restless little eyes. No man about, obviously. Here was a chance for some rough coercion, and the bullying of a little spare cash from a young woman who was looking frightened. Rachel got on her feet, with the cake dish, only to realize that the man was coming down into the hollow. His face had a kind of smeary insolence. He looked at the cake dish, and then at her. The chance seemed too good to be wasted.

“Got any boots, lady?”

“Boots?”

“Yep, gent’s boots. Mine are a bit tired. I could do with a pair.”

He sat down on the grass, relieved himself of his stick and sack, and leered at her.

“Yep, I could do with a pair of boots.”

Holding the cake dish in front of her she said, “You had better wait until my husband comes back.”

His brutal lip stuck out.

“You get that pair of boots, my dear, and I’ll try ’em on.”

She put down the cake dish and entered the caravan. She was so scared that it did not occur to her to shut the door of the van and lock it. Her one thought was to get rid of the blackguard. She found a pair of brown boots under Luce’s bunk, and emerged with them. The tramp had possessed himself of the slice of cake and was eating it.

“I think we can spare these.”

“You can try ’em on for me, lady, while I eat your cake.”

Did the wretch expect her to unlace those filthy boots of his? And suddenly, she remembered that she had legs and could make a dash for the lane while he was sitting there munching. The man was watching her. He seemed to divine her impulse towards flight.

“No you don’t, my dear. Get down to the job.”

She hesitated. No, she could not possibly touch his foul feet. She bent down to place Luce’s spare pair of boots within his reach, and suddenly a long arm shot out, and his fingers fastened on her wrist.

“Come on. No bloody tricks. If your toff turns up, I’ll see to it he ain’t giving me lip.”

He was a strong brute, and he dragged her down on her knees. His sensual face terrified her. She wanted to scream, and was afraid of making things worse.

“Please let me go.”

“Get on with it. You can begin by taking my boots off.”

And then she saw that other head appear above the slope of the field. She struggled to free herself.

“John.”

The tramp let go of her wrist and got up with clumsy precipitation. He had left his stick and sack on the grass, and he grabbed them. His lower lip stuck out as he looked at Luce. For the moment he could see nothing but the head and face of the gentleman.

“Afternoon, guv’nor; the lady ’as given me a pair of boots.”

Luce’s eyes were full of a blue glare. He came on towards the hollow, and gradually the bulk of him was revealed to the blackguard below.

“I’ll take the boots with me, guv’nor, in my sack.”

“O, will you!”

Luce deposited the milk-jug and bag of eggs on the grass, and with an air of concentrated grimness loomed down upon the invader. The man raised his stick.

“You keep y’ands off me.”

“Drop that stick, damn you.”

The fellow aimed a half-hearted blow at Luce which Luce’s big arm smothered. He caught the man by the arm, his fingers grinding into the muscles, and for a second or two they stood looking into each other’s eyes.

And suddenly the fellow cringed.

“All right, guv’nor, that’s enough.”

With his other hand Luce twisted the stick out of the man’s fingers, and giving the arm a final crunch, flung him off.

“Clear out, or I’ll take you down to the village and hand you over to the police.”

There was no vacillation in the manner of his going. He clumbered with ragged alacrity up the grass slope, and Luce followed him as far as the field-gate. Nothing would have pleased Luce better than to have dusted the blackguard’s back with his own ash stick, but even in the chastening of such beasts discretion had to be exercised.

With the tramp disappearing down the lane, Luce walked back to the hollow, to find Rachel holding his pair of boots. He would have said that she looked both scared and contrite.

“John, I’m so sorry. I thought I might get rid of him if I——.”

He went and took the boots from her, and tossing them into the caravan, put an arm across her shoulders.

“The damned scallywag! I should like to have pitched him over the gate. Next time we want things, we’ll go and get them in company.”

“You couldn’t have done more to him.”

“No, it wouldn’t have been tactful!”

“Do you think he will go and complain?”

And suddenly Luce laughed.

“Hardly. He’ll be walking fast and furiously for the next county in his own blackguardly boots. But, my dear, you mustn’t tremble so.”

“It seems to have brought all the bad things back, John.”

“Has it? Well, I must make up for that. I won’t leave you alone again. Sit down. I’ll make the tea.”

2

But this incident seemed to cast them back into the mouth of the perilous pit out of which they had climbed. As they sat in the grassy hollow after the evening meal Luce divined in her a frightened restlessness. Ponderous clouds were coming over the hill, and the night seemed to promise rain. The distant sea looked oiled and black.

Her face was as overcast as the sky. The shadow of the wood spread across their green hollow, and Luce, absorbing her sadness, felt that this hazardous holiday had become once more a flight from sinister realities. Little gusts of wind tumbled over the stone wall and into the hollow, and made the green tent breathe in and out.

He could not shrug the feeling off, and it gave him to think in terms of reality. If there was to be exile for both of them, let it be accepted, and the ultimate hazard met without sentimental procrastination.

He put it to her gently as they sat there in the draughty dusk.

"What about turning back, and facing the final act?"

She looked at him almost with relief.

"Yes, John, let's get it over. It's come back, like a pain."

"I understand. We'll start on the last stage to-morrow."

He spoke quietly and calmly of the adventure in an effort to reassure her. They would leave the caravan parked at some quiet farm, and pretending that they had been called home for a few days, take an early train to London. There was nothing to prevent them travelling on the same day by one of the boat trains. He would have to call at his bank, but that could be done *en route*. He had decided on the Dover-Ostend crossing. At Bruges he would see her settled at some quiet hotel, and return to deal with the car and caravan, and arrange for his final flitting.

"Old T. can help us tremendously in that way. I should be away from you perhaps for a fortnight."

He was relieved to find that she welcomed this curtailing of her season of suspense.

“I shall be glad to get it over, John.”

“Have you any French?”

“A little.”

“Mine is a little rusty, but we can alter that. Bruges is a lovely old place. We can go on from there to Basle. We shall have to explore Switzerland for the kind of little place we want.”

The one thing that still worried her was his future, the life of an exile.

“It’s so terribly final, dear.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, for you.”

“Try and look at it in this way, as a beginning all over again. Before all this happened I had come to one of those phases when a man feels rather finished with life. I don’t feel like that now.”

“But, John, how are you going to explain your giving up the tower?”

“O, that can be managed between Mr. Temperley and myself. Let us say that I found it rather too lonely.”

3

Three days later they were camped in the orchard of a Buckinghamshire farm, tucked away in a valley between high beech woods. Two miles away lay the village of Candover, and beyond Candover, Aylesbury and a main line. Luce had chosen Candover on the map. He had found Fox Farm after exploring up a lane, and both the farm and its old people had been kind to them. Very friendly relations had been established over milk and eggs, and Mr. Bristow's dippings into Luce's tobacco-pouch.

On the second day Luce took the car out, drove thirty miles, and posted a letter to Mr. Temperley. Its delivery, with "Urgent" upon the envelope, and its fabricated and emotional message made the asking of a favour both natural and inevitable. Mr. Temperley's response was prompt and adequate.

Luce found the old people at tea, Mr. Bristow in his shirt-sleeves, for the weather was hot.

"We've just had some rather bad news. My wife's mother is dangerously ill, not expected to live."

"Poor dear," said the old lady.

"We shall have to leave here early to-morrow. It means breaking up the holiday,—but there is a chance of our being able to finish it. I'm wondering whether you would let us leave the car and caravan here."

Fox Farm had no objection.

"You see, it would be much easier for us to take the train to London. I suppose I could get a car from Candover to drive us to Aylesbury?"

"Sure," said the old man.

Luce walked into Candover and at a local garage he arranged for a car to pick them up at eight o'clock next morning. The garage had been able to supply him with a time-table. They could catch a train at Aylesbury that would land them in London soon after half-past nine. Luce happened to know that two boat trains left Victoria, one at 10.30, the second at eleven. The eleven o'clock train would allow them fifteen minutes in which to show their passports at the barrier and get aboard the boat. Luce decided on the second train.

They packed their suitcases overnight. Luce had bought a packet of labels in Candover, and it was he who addressed them, Luce, Grand Hotel—Bruges. He had stayed many years ago at the Grand Hotel et du Commerce in the Rue St. Jacques, an old white place with a courtyard and garden.

He put those labels in his pocket for attachment later. Also, his cheque-book.

"To-morrow—we shall be in Bruges."

For, already the inevitable suspense of the next few hours had begun to show itself in her drawn face and little restless movements. Almost, she could not believe that the thing was possible. She had moments of secret panic when she foresaw the closing of the net. But she talked of trivial things. Luce was leaving some of his personal belongings in the caravan, and she found herself asking him whether he had packed a sufficiency of socks.

That night he slept with her in the caravan. The day had been close and thundery, and about two in the morning Luce woke to hear heavy rain drumming on the roof of the van. The storm itself was over the hills, and an occasional glare of summer lightning lit up the windows and doorway of the van. On just such a night as this she had come to him at the tower. He raised himself on one elbow. A sudden glare revealed her to him, lying quite still, eyes wide open.

"Hallo, awake?"

That most obvious of remarks seemed to hide its foolish face in the darkness. Yes, she had been awake for more than an hour, listening to the distant rumblings that were like the voices of outraged and remorseless gods. Was life just a bundle of coincidences? The stress of this storm revived stark memories, and made her more terrified of to-morrow.

"It might be an omen, John."

"Nonsense."

He felt that she had to be reassured like a frightened child, and sitting up and slipping out of his bunk he went to the door.

"Just rain and summer lightning. The people over the hill are getting the real thing. And to-morrow night you'll sleep in Bruges."

He turned in the narrow space.

"Like the door closed, dear?"

"No, I would rather have it open."

He bent down and kissed her, but her face was almost cold and unconsenting.

“If things should go wrong, John.”

“They won’t.”

“I wouldn’t mind for myself. I’ve been—happy. But you?”

He kissed her again; this time on the forehead.

“Things are not going wrong.”

He was never to forget the beauty of that summer morning with its freshness and its rain-washed sky, the glittering orchard, the hurried breakfast in the farmhouse kitchen. If Rachel’s face was somewhat the face of tragedy, that was understandable to the two old people. Luce was handing over the keys of the caravan and a pound note to Mr. Bristow when they heard the car in the lane.

The woman kissed Rachel.

“I do hope you’ll find your mother better, my dear.”

Rachel was mute, but she returned that kindly kiss.

Luce picked up the suitcases, and they went down through the wet garden to the waiting car. A light breeze was ruffling the beech trees. And with the car running down the lane, Luce became conscious of a movement beside him. He found her putting on those smoked glasses. He smiled and nodded. She felt for his hand and held it.

“Not much wind, and a good crossing. All’s well with the world.”

She answered him with a little pressure of the fingers.

The journey to town was third class and without incident. At the terminus Luce gave the taxi-driver the address of his bank. They had to wait five minutes for the bank doors to be opened, and leaving her in the taxi, Luce went in and wrote and cashed a cheque. London was just London, multitudinous and complex, and somehow reassuring to these two fugitives. Luce’s only prayer was that he would not be confronted that morning with any familiar face.

At Victoria he handed over the suitcases to a porter, and leaving Rachel in a corner of the booking-office, went to take their tickets. The eleven o’clock train was waiting. They followed the porter through the barrier.

“British passports, sir?”

“Yes.”

Had they Pullman seats? No. But there were some ordinary coaches on the train, and the porter put them into a first-class smoker. When the man had gone Luce took the labels from his pocket and attached them to the suitcases. They had the compartment to themselves for the time being. Luce looked out of the near window at the people strolling or standing on the platform. No one whom he knew. He got out, closing the door after him, and walking down the platform to the paper stall bought a *Times* and a *Telegraph*. Returning, he passed Rachel the copy of the *Daily Telegraph*; she was in the far corner, facing the engine. He sat down, and opening *The Times*, looked at her meaningly over the top of the paper, and then submerged himself behind it. She understood; she raised her screen.

Someone got in, and Luce, glancing quickly over the top of *The Times* saw a man in a soft black hat, with a black beard, a continental person. Excellent! Luce glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to eleven. Mr. Blackbeard was rummaging in an attaché case. He brought out a cigar, looked at Luce and the veiled lady.

"Will madame object?"

"No, sir. Please smoke."

Mr. Blackbeard was to be their only travelling companion, and he showed no interest in a quiet little woman who wore spectacles. Nor did he object to Rachel's window being half-way down.

She sat and looked at the country. It was just England in the summer, nor could she feel sentimental about it with reality sitting close to her like a too candid friend. She was very near to the edge of panic. She sat and confronted her crisis like a woman before her mirror on a day when she is feeling faded and afraid of her years. "I can't go on, John." Her presentiments were all for disaster. She was in a mood to presume that Dover would be packed with secret sleuths watching the faces of those who travelled. She would be recognized, or some official would detect that faked passport.

Folkestone, acres of tiles and slates and chimneys, and a flat and distant sea. Hills upholstered in green plush, chalk cliffs, a thin blue sky. She was aware of Luce looking at her and making a gesture. She was to remove those spectacles. She put them away in her bag. She was trembling. She had a feeling that her very knees would betray her.

Luce observed the sea through a gap in the chalk scenery.

"Good crossing. We'll have lunch on the boat."

Lunch! Was he pretending, or did he feel as confident and as consoling as

he looked? How was she to know that the inner man was quaking like a jelly? The train was running into the harbour station. Mr. Blackbeard had put some papers away in an attaché case, and was getting into an overcoat! Luce stood up and removed the suitcases from the luggage rack. She was aware of being comforted by his broad and beneficent back.

She could not flinch now. A porter was taking their suitcases.

"Ostend boat."

"Right, sir. No. 73, sir."

He handed Luce a metal number plate.

"Any chance of a cabin?"

"Certain to be, sir. I'll see the officer on board."

She could not say how or why, but courage came to her. She had felt faint in the carriage, tremulous and cold. He slipped a hand under her arm, and she was aware of him looking down at her with the eyes of a lover.

"Tails up, my dear!"

That was the sort of humorous touch she needed. They went down the platform arm in arm, like the conventional and happy holiday couple, towards the passport officials at the barrier. Before reaching the queues Luce paused and looked amused. What an absent-minded beggar!

"Passports! Of course."

While feeling in his breast pocket for the documents, he studied the officials at the barrier. Yes, even officials and their temperaments might be assigned a vital significance in a crisis such as this. After making sure that his own passport was uppermost, he selected a large and middle-aged supervisor who was dealing with the queue on the extreme left. Gently pushing Rachel in front of him, he proffered the two passports, and smiled in the face of authority. The official opened the first passport, glanced first at the photo, and then at Luce's face. He did not trouble to open the second passport, but having glanced at the name on the white label, he handed both passports back to Luce.

They were through.

Luce, stuffing the little blue books back into his pocket, took Rachel's arm. They did not speak, or look at each other. The Ostend boat was berthed a little way up the quay, and the sunlight was playing on her white upper-works. Luce was smiling. He followed Rachel up the gangway, to find his porter and a Belgian officer waiting for them.

“Cabin No. 10, sir.”

“Splendid.”

They walked along the deck to No. 10. The porter put their luggage inside, was tipped, and departed. And suddenly Rachel felt faint. She sat down on one of the bunks, with her head swimming. Luce was outside the cabin, speaking to a white-coated steward.

“Could we have some lunch brought up to the cabin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, and the wine list—too, please.”

By way of creating a friendly feeling Luce tipped the steward in English money.

“I suppose you can get an English note changed for me?”

“Yes, when I bring you the bill, sir.”

Luce re-entered the cabin, closed the door, and with a glance at Rachel’s face, sat down on the bunk beside her.

“Feeling a little—overwhelmed?”

With closed eyes she let her head rest against his shoulder.

“O, my dear, I didn’t think it could happen.”

“But it has happened.”

4

Luce ordered champagne. If it was a pagan gesture, he could number himself among the physicians, for his companion had suffered from too much emotion, and too little sleep. The sea was a quiet sea, and the boat was not too crowded, but when two fussy people, who nibbled at each other like rabbits, showed a desire to establish themselves in deck-chairs outside cabin No. 10, very politely Luce interposed.

"Please excuse me, but I am having two chairs put outside our cabin for my wife and myself."

The man was disposed to argue the case. He nibbled. He was ironic and myopic. Had Luce reserved that portion of the deck as well as the cabin? But here the steward intervened; Luce had tipped him early and generously; the other fellow had not, and the steward assured Mr. Coney that the gentleman must be allowed his chairs and piece of deck outside his cabin. He would provide Mr. Coney with two chairs outside an unoccupied cabin. And Luce, who was feeling mischievous, wanted to say "And throw in a lettuce, steward."

Lunch had been cleared away.

"I feel so sleepy, John. It must be the champagne."

"Good medicine, cherie."

He made her lie down, and tucked her up, and drawing the curtain and closing the cabin door, he left her to sleep. One of the deck chairs served him, and he sat and smoked his pipe, and looked at the sea, and thought strange thoughts. Did he regret anything? Nothing. He could swear that life promised to be good, even in exile, for the only exile that is lethal is the loneliness of growing old alone. Let his love forget and sleep, for they were not yet out of the cage. There were the Belgian officials to be faced at Ostend, though a British passport was a British passport, and its facial credit as solid as John Bull's countenance.

People walked up and down. Mr. and Mrs. Coney nibbled at each other. A Belgian girl, hatless and with her hair blowing, leaned over the rail in front of him and watched for the first glimpse of the Belgian coast. Her father joined her, a grizzled, lean old man in a beret, with binoculars slung about his neck. The little steward appeared with Luce's bill. Would monsieur and madame like

tea? Tea seemed superfluous after so good a lunch, and madame was asleep. Luce passed the steward two pound notes, and asked him to procure some Belgian small change. The sea was grey and dimpled flatness, and Luce, hearing an exclamation from the girl at the rail, stood up and gazed. He could detect a faint yellowish, hazy streak on the horizon. Yes, probably that yellow streak was the Dunes.

War memories came back to him. During 1917 he had spent several weeks in that Dune country about Nieuport, either in the trenches, or in a rabbit-warren under the houses on the sea-front of Nieuport Bains. Crowded in semi-basements or cellars you had been able to explore the abandoned houses above you had you cared to risk a chance shell. Some gunners had sandbagged a balcony and sat out on it in scrounged chairs. One house had contained a billiard table, a piece of furniture that had been too bulky to move. But the main street and the sea-front of Nieuport Bains had been damnably unhealthy and in going up to the trenches by the Yser you had followed a tunnel passage that had been knocked through the basements of the houses. Luce remembered how he had often felt a strange desire to promenade upon that deserted parade where nothing but whizzbangs played, but the desire had been too unwholesome to be satisfied. Now, peace was there, children, and people who bathed.

He could distinguish the dim grey outlines of the Dune pleasure towns rising out of the swelling sea. The dunes themselves were pale and ghostly. Yes, it had been devil's country, with shell-bursts blowing sand into men's bodies. And was that not Nieuport Bains over there, very far and faint? He thought that he could recognize the queer, cliff-like cube of a high building crowned by a sort of cupola at the Yser end of the parade. He felt like borrowing the Belgian's glasses, and he did go and stand by the rail and enter into conversation with him. Why not begin repolishing his rather rusty French?

Was that Nieuport Bains over yonder? It was, and Luce went on to explain that he had known the Dune country during the war. The Belgian offered him his glasses, and Luce was able to make out the pier at the mouth of the Yser and that grim sea-front. It still looked somewhat derelict and deserted.

He returned the glasses, and the Belgian pointed out Westende, and Middelkerke, German territory during the War. The Belgian had spent four years under the terror. He had no illusions about Prussia, and a very lively dread of another war.

When Luce went back to the cabin and gently opened the door, he found Rachel still sleeping. Her face was like the face of a child, strangely soft and innocent, and he decided not to wake her until they were close to Ostend

harbour. She would open her eyes upon that last crisis with hardly time to realize that there was yet another barrier to be passed.

“After all,” thought Luce, “I might have been blown to blazes over there. This is almost like going on leave, with the chance of being stopped. And so much more than that.”

With the pretentious front of Ostend welcoming them he went in and woke her.

“Landing in a quarter of an hour.”

She sat up, looking startled and poignant.

“O, my dear!”

“Yes, you’ve been very much asleep. I didn’t order tea. We can have tea in Bruges.”

When the boat was berthed the steward got them one of the first porters to come aboard, and Luce and Rachel were absorbed in the crowd. Most of the travellers were taking the Brussels express. The passport examination proved to be no sort of ordeal, being far more perfunctory than the customs examination, and in ten minutes they were following their porter along a sunny and quiet platform to the Bruges train. They appeared to be the only people travelling on that particular train, and Luce had his jest.

“You see, they ordered a special for us!”

The porter had gone, and as though to celebrate the blessed event, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

5

She sat and looked upon very peaceful country, poplars all arow, rich crops in the fulness of their beauty, wheat, barley, rye, the glistening green of beet. Deep dykes rimmed some of these fields with silver. And, under the immense sky the little white homesteads with their black plinths and tiled roofs floated like water-fowl amid green pastures.

And suddenly she was weeping. But how absurd! She was aware of him looking at her with a troubled and compassionate perplexity that changed to understanding. Why should she not weep? Why should not her eyes brim over with an emotion that was both profound and simple? Why did birds sing? Why was the heart of man glad? Was not the trembling of beauty near to tears? He too sat and looked at these peaceful fields, and sensing the mystery of seed-sowing and harvest, said never a word.

But, half-way to Bruges he came and sat beside her, and in silence they held hands, feeling that it was their marriage hour, and that in this empty railway carriage they were becoming one spirit and one flesh.

At last she spoke. “I wonder if one is forgiven, John.”

“God and the soil forgive man every year, my dear. I think there is more to be forgiven you than you have to forgive.”

She gave him a little wet and upward smile.

“Outcasts, both of us, and I’m the guilty one. But if ever you want your freedom, dear.”

“This—is freedom. Give me your handkerchief. We’re near the end of the day.”

And like some big father-creature he dried her wet eyes.

Bruges. Two porters in blue blouses quarrelled over their luggage, for they appeared to be the only prize on the train, and Luce, suddenly laughing, tipped both men, and Mammon was appeased. They were put with politeness into a taxi. Narrow streets, high gabled houses, crowded footpaths, a bell tolling, a dog harnessed by some weird contraption to a cripple’s wheeled chair and helping to propel it. The taxi bumped its way over the grey pavé. A very small policeman in a white helmet on point duty waved them into the Rue St.

Jacques. A left turn through a gateway and they found themselves in the tiled courtyard of the Grand Hotel. The church of St. Jacques rose up steeply with the sunlight shining through gold-green windows. Luce bade her stay in the taxi while he went to make sure that the hotel could take them in.

The Grand Hotel was not too grand, and had retained its individual and old-world soul. Madame herself met Luce in the bureau. It was like being received by a gentlewoman instead of being confronted by some casual and anonymous clerk.

Yes, the hotel was enchanted to welcome them, and would monsieur like rooms overlooking the garden. Monsieur would. A porter was rung for, and Luce went out to bring in his wife, for that was how he both spoke and thought of her. Madame led them up a queer, circular staircase with white swans supporting the iron balustrade. A broad passage turned to the left and the sunlight. Here were two communicating rooms, their windows opening upon the little garden with its Continental iron arbour and weeping ash.

Madame, having assured herself that they were satisfied, left them there, and Luce, after inspecting both rooms, assigned the more decorative chamber to his wife. It possessed a wonderful flowery wallpaper, gala curtains and a rose-coloured quilt on the bed.

“Yours—I think.”

The porter brought in their luggage, and Luce was unlocking the suitcases when he became aware of Rachel removing various small articles from her handbag and placing them upon the dressing-table, and among them he noticed the cheap red case containing the tinted glasses purchased at Cirencester.

“You won’t need those again.”

“Never, John?”

“As a disguise to beauty—never.”

XXII

At the end of a week Luce left her, to return to England, but during that week the Grand Hotel had become a friend's home, for Edgar Van den Berghe and his wife were kindly people. The hotel had been in the family for more than a century, and Monsieur Van den Berghe was very much a person, a hotelier who had manners, a merry blue eye and some knowledge of the great world. Madame was a gentle, shy willow of a woman who regretted that she was childless, and adored her dog. So far as the English were concerned the season was a quiet one, and though monsieur deplored it, he cherished his hotel's panache. In his grandfather's day it had housed Longfellow, that obvious and flowery fellow twanging a Yankee lyre, and Monsieur Van den Berghe had himself entertained royalty. Luce did not regret the absence of the English, and he had no serious qualms about leaving Rachel in that old white house. He opened an account for her at the Bank of Bruges, and incited her to enlarge her wardrobe and to take French lessons.

She drove with him to the station and standing on the platform, watched the Ostend train come in. If she was sad, it was not with the sadness of misgiving. Luce had bought for her in Bruges a new gold ring, and she had dropped the old ring at dusk from a bridge into one of the canals. Intimate things had happened between them during that week, but not as they happen to people, enjoying a surreptitious and sensational week-end.

He had kissed her and entered a second-class carriage.

"I shouldn't wait, dear."

She had discovered how sensitive he could be on her account. She had experienced it during those intimate moments. He was afraid of hurting her either in the spirit or the flesh.

"But I'd like to wait."

She looked up at him as he stood at the window.

"How long do you think you will be?"

"Not longer than I can help. But the business must be made to look natural. It won't be safe for me to write from Brandon."

She seemed to confront his absence and those weeks of silence.

“Yes, you mustn’t write, unless you could post a letter in London.”

“I might do that.”

When the train began to move she gave him a little smile, and turning quickly walked away. That she would have need of her courage was certain. For the first time she would be alone like some obscure little person sitting in a picture gallery and looking at strange pictures. His big, deliberate sanity had sustained her. She passed out of the station, but she did not return at once to the hotel, but made her way to the old ramparts and so to the Minnewater. She sat on a seat and listened to the wind in the trees, and watched the play of light and shadow upon the water.

She had complete faith in her man. She did not think of him, as many more sophisticated women would have thought of him, as an opportunist who had satisfied desire and was making a cad’s exit. If she mistrusted anything it was the inconsiderate coincidences and cruelties of life. Her faith in the beneficence of human institutions had been so shaken. Society did not forgive you for being found out. Her secret fear was that some untoward thing might happen to Luce, some devastating and violent intervention of circumstances. She was to tremble inwardly at the thought of accidents by road or rail. She was so utterly alone while waiting for him to return to her.

Before going back to the hotel she passed over the bridge and through the gate of the Beguinage. There was a soothing and gentle austerity in the little white houses with their sage green doors, and in the grass and the trees. She entered the church, and kneeling, put up a very simple prayer.

“O God, if I have sinned, do not visit my sin on him. Let him come back to me. I will try to make life good for him.”

She went daily to this church and offered up the same simple prayer.

2

Mr. Temperley had kept records of the doings and sayings of the Brandon rooks, and when the community of the elms became unduly agitated and conversational, he found himself infected by the tumult in the tree tops. He did not envisage a mere change in the weather, but somehow expected unusual human happenings, and was prepared for them. Only yesterday he had received a letter from Bruges, and had been careful to burn it, while realizing that even at the age of seventy-three man was not proof against boyish emotion. As for the elucidation of the Beech Farm mystery, the problem had progressed towards a solution that was partial and hypothetical, and Mr. Temperley had made it his business to remain in touch with the official mind.

"No luck at all, sir. The dogs took us down to the river, and there we lost things."

"Isn't that rather significant, Inspector?"

"Yes, sir, but we haven't been able to find the body."

"Held down by water weeds or tree roots, perhaps?"

"That's my view, sir. We are having the river patrolled to watch for anything coming to the surface."

"What about the dog, Ford?"

"She may have taken him with her, sir. A woman in that state may do strange things."

This particular day brought no surprises until the evening. Mr. Temperley was in his bath when the bell rang, for Mr. Temperley liked a deliberate and meditative bath before dinner. Martha, going up to announce the visitor, knew that her master did not welcome intrusion at this hour.

"A lady wishing to see you, sir."

"A what?"

"A lady, sir. She says she is staying at the Chequers."

"Well, I can't see her here, Martha."

"She's in the drawing-room, sir."

“What name?”

“A Miss Reubens, sir.”

Mr. Temperley sat up in the bath. He had heard from Luce of Miss Reubens, and how Luce had used her on a critical occasion to act as an unconscious super on the stage, but discretion suggested that Miss Reubens was one of those pushful people who need confronting with cushions. Mr. Temperley, looking very pink and clean, and wearing his black velvet coat and a bow tie, found Miss Reubens spread on the sofa and smoking a cigarette. Mr. Temperley apologized in courtly fashion for keeping her waiting, and sitting down with his back to the light, inquired how he could oblige the lady.

“I believe you can tell me when Jack Luce is expected back.”

Mr. Temperley smiled upon her. Miss Reubens was wearing no stockings, and her attack was completely frontal.

“Miss Reubens, the novelist, I believe?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m afraid I have no definite information. Dreamy people like my friend Luce——.”

Miss Reubens was sitting with her legs well spread.

“They told me at the pub that you were his stable companion in his caravan.”

Mr. Temperley put his fingers together, and looked almost coyly at the lady’s legs.

“I plead guilty. But I left Mr. Luce in Wales. I found caravaning a little too primitive for my years.”

“Yes, all flies and washing up,” said Carlotta. “But perhaps you can give me a hint as to whether he is fed up yet with that Georgian ruin.”

“You mean the Signal Tower?”

“Yep.”

“I really can’t speak for Mr. Luce in the matter.”

“Well, what I want to say is that if he is tired of the place, I would take on the tenancy.”

“Indeed!”

“I write books.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I haven’t the pleasure——.”

“They’d give your reverend soul some shocks.”

“Is that possible?”

She waggled her lips at him.

“Fact is I have a particular book to write, and I want a particular place to write it in. I like particular places for particular books. Besides, it’s ruddy good publicity. I spent two months on a canal barge before I wrote ‘Shirts in the Wind’.”

“Is that so?” said Mr. Temperley.

Mr. Temperley, much more so than Luce, was in a position to be amused by Miss Reubens, but he was seventy-three and not likely to be the victim of Miss Reubens’ sudden passion for the male.

“Am I to understand that if Mr. Luce should contemplate a change of domicile——?”

“Say, I ought to put you and your language in a book. Yes, it’s a firm offer.”

“I am afraid it is a question that cannot be settled immediately. I don’t know what my friend Luce’s plans are.”

“From what I hear he has the wander lust. Quite useful in a man. Not too much bricks and mortar and domestic sentiment.”

“Restless as an old Viking?”

“Another nice illusion. When I was in Norway I didn’t spot a single tow-headed giant. An undersized, weedy lot.”

“Generalizations, Miss Reubens, are——.”

“A bit infantile, but so stimulating. Well, I shall be at the local pub for a week. You will keep the offer in mind?”

“Most certainly I shall, Miss Reubens.”

When she had swaggered out Mr. Temperley took a stroll in the garden, and asked himself just how serious she was, and what lay behind her sudden passion to possess the tower. A tumultuous and devastating person, Miss Reubens. Had she called on him in order to try and find out when Luce might be expected back? And if she was serious about this tenancy? Mr. Temperley walked up and down the lawn until the dinner-bell rang. He was quite sure that he did not want to let the Signal Tower to Miss Reubens. She might prove a

tempestuous tenant in more ways than one. Moreover, what if the tower might still contain, in spite of Luce's precautions, trivial but damning secrets that the eyes of a woman like Miss Reubens might discover? No, Mr. Temperley was being impelled by compassion and prejudice towards other beneficent wickednesses in his attitude towards this rather embarrassing architectural relic.

He had dined, and was preparing to sit down at the french window of the library with a book and a pipe when he heard the ringing of the front-door bell. Had that lady of letters returned? Mr. Temperley sat listening, and nursing an unlit pipe. He heard a man's voice. Luce's? No, it was not the voice of John Luce, but more hearty and pragmatical.

Martha came to the library door.

"Inspector Ford, sir, wishing to see you."

"Show him in, Martha."

Mr. Temperley was far more capable of coping with Inspector Ford than he had been with Miss Reubens. The inspector was equally substantial and actual, but more essentially good-natured, if a little slow and simple in his Saxon reactions. Moreover, to the policeman Mr. Temperley was a profoundly social person, and not a little old red-faced Punchinello.

"Come in, Inspector. Martha, bring in the whisky and a syphon."

The big man was in mufti, and looking self-conscious and a little heated.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir."

"Sit down, Inspector. Other people's troubles are my business. Have a cigar?"

Mr. Temperley went to a bureau and took a box of Coronas from a drawer.

"Try one of these."

"It's very good of you, sir."

"They were made to be smoked."

Ford put his hat on the floor, and his large fingers fumbled in the cigar-box.

"I have come to ask you a favour, sir, and I seem to be getting all the favours."

"Where's the grievance, Inspector?"

“Not here, sir.”

Mr. Temperley lit his pipe and passed Ford the match-box.

“Well, what is the trouble?”

The big man’s blue eyes seemed to come out on stalks.

“That damned woman, sir. Excuse me.”

“Not poor Mrs. Ballard?”

“O, not her, sir. I’m thinking she had all the trouble in that house, poor thing. It’s the sister. She’s a——.”

“Quite,” said Mr. Temperley, sitting down; “I think I understand.”

“That female’s been worrying my life out. Spiteful as sin. I tell you, sir, I’m fed up with her. She won’t believe that the poor creature is in the river.”

“Suspicious?”

“She’s like a dog digging for a lost bone. Excuse me, sir, I oughtn’t to be talking like this, but you’re a gentleman.”

“I hope so, Inspector. Say what you like.”

Martha appeared with the whisky, and Mr. Temperley, having helped his visitor to a good one, sat down again and waited for the crisis to develop.

“Well, what is Miss Ballard’s particular obsession?”

“It’s the old Signal Tower, sir.”

“The tower? But, really, Inspector!”

“I know, sir. She says it is the only place that has not been searched.”

“But, my dear man, does she expect you to find a concealed corpse or something in my friend Mr. Luce’s cellar?”

“I know it is ridiculous, sir, but she seems to have got a bee in her bonnet about the tower. Just cussedness, I should call it.”

“Mr. Luce is still away.”

“I know, sir, but if you could let me look over the place.”

“Just to satisfy the lady?”

“Quite so, sir.”

Mir. Temperley looked amused.

“I have a spare key. I’ll take you over myself. I think that is due to Mr. Luce. A man’s private affairs are his own, Inspector. It’s neither my business nor yours if a gentleman has visitors, or a particular visitor. Do you take me?”

“Quite, sir.”

“A particular lady who is a friend of Mr. Luce’s, happens to be staying at the Chequers. As a man of the world, Inspector, you’ll treat this as confidential.”

“Of course, sir.”

“What about three o’clock to-morrow afternoon?”

“It’s very good of you, sir. Your time is mine.”

“Very well. Three o’clock to-morrow. I shall have to explain the business to Mr. Luce when he comes back, and try to persuade him to look at it tolerantly. You have no legal right, Inspector.”

The policeman emptied his glass.

“It’s only a formality, sir. The woman’s like a damned wasp buzzing round our heads. She has tried to get me into trouble. I never thought much of Ballard, but his sister is a caution to snakes.”

“I know the breed. I hope poor Mrs. Ballard will never be at her mercy.”

“I’m pretty sure the poor thing is dead, sir; but if I saw her alive, I tell you I should feel inclined to turn my back and look the other way. Yes, just to spite that——.”

“Something beginning with B, Inspector.”

“Just so, sir. I know I shouldn’t be talking like this.”

“Nor I. But there are some people, Ford, who travel about with a sponge full of vinegar.”

“You’re right, sir, and unfortunately they’re not the sort of people we get a chance of shoving in gaol.”

3

Mr. Temperley made no inward apology to Miss Reubens for having used her as romantic and colourful decoration. He did not think Miss Reubens would object to having her name coupled with that of John Luce, any more than she might object—— But that was crass scandal! Also, if the good Ford was something of a gossip, and probably he was, the rumour might reach Miss Ballard. In fact, authority might use it as a plaster to be applied to the virago's mouth.

Mr. Temperley did take other precautions, and an early morning walk which ended in the Brandon woods. He let himself into the tower, and with meticulous care examined it for any little clue that might catch the eye, and which could not be referred to the presence of the literary lady. He could find nothing, but it did occur to him that if any expert in finger prints were to come and take impressions he might discover too many traces of feminine occupation. Mr. Temperley was of the opinion that the Signal Tower had become an incubus to the estate, and that it would be economical to treat it as an interesting ruin.

The afternoon inspection was a perfunctory affair. Inspector Ford was punctual. Mr. Temperley, who was strolling round the derelict garden and observing Luce's sowing of hardy annuals contending with a crop of even more hardy weeds, saw the big man wheeling his bicycle up the path. Mr. Temperley met him at the gate.

"Punctual, Inspector."

"I hope so, sir."

"I might have suggested your bringing Miss Ballard with you."

Ford gave Mr. Temperley a blue and unsubtle stare, and pushed his bicycle into the shed by the gate.

"Quite superfluous, sir."

Together they explored the tower, and Mr. Temperley could remark to his companion upon the pleasant eccentricities of a peripatetic philosopher who lived simply and wrote abstrusely. He was wondering what Ford thought of Luce's camp bed, and of the hypothetical visits of Venus. Two in a tower, but

most certainly not two in that bed. He even drew the inspector's attention to it.

"Very celibate, that."

Inspector Ford was wondering where the lady, if there was a lady on occasions, spread her limbs. Perhaps she brought her own bed with her, one of those mattresses that could be inflated?

Mr. Temperley took his companion up to the leads, and with whimsical humour described how Mr. Luce took his bath here.

"His bath, sir?"

"Yes, Inspector, al fresco. And it is so easy to empty the water."

They returned to the living-room, and here a most happy coincidence provided Mr. Temperley with further adventures into romance. He was standing by the window when a feminine figure appeared close to the bank of laurels. Mr. Temperley drew back.

"We're caught, Inspector."

"Someone there, sir?"

"The lady from the Chequers. Did I lock that outer door?"

"I think not, sir."

"I'll remedy that omission."

He went to lock the green door, and in his absence Inspector Ford had a look at the lady.

Said Mr. Temperley, returning, "We are trespassing in more ways than one, Inspector. I think we must exercise tact."

"Quite so, sir."

"Other people's private affairs. We had better sit down and wait till the lady has gone."

"Yes, sir. It might be as well. I hope she won't have spotted my bike."

"Probably not. If they heard of this piece of trespassing neither she nor Mr. Luce would be pleased."

XXIII

THE Grand Hotel was kind to Rachel. That it was only spasmodically and incidentally English was a relief to her. People came for a night or two and passed on, nor save for the set meals, did she spend much time in the public rooms. She was served by a pleasant, soft-voiced little *femme de chambre* in a coquettish white cap, and a nice boy-waiter. She went daily to an old lady who lived near the Ostend Gate and who gave her French lessons. Luce had left her well supplied with money, but she was chary of spending it, just because it was his. Even a five-franc entrance fee to a gallery or museum was treated with respect. She liked to sit and read a French book in the hotel garden, and to talk childish French to madame. Monsieur was *très* paternal. The small, freckled chasseur always ran to open the door for her.

Luce's first letter came to her on her breakfast tray.

"Mrs. John Luce."

He had posted the letter in London, and in realizing that it was the first letter she had ever received from him, she opened it with a sense of strangeness. It was a very simple letter, robustly tender, and completely satisfying to her because it told her that he was well and safe. She understood its guarded sentences. She took his letter to the church in the Beguinage, and gave thanks for it to the man in God.

In this Belgian town she had discarded her tinted spectacles, but a few days after Luce had left her she became conscious of being stared at by someone in the salle-à-manger. She had a table overlooking the courtyard, and the visitor who appeared interested in her occupied a table by a window giving on the street. He was one of those incorrigibly young old men with a head like a smiling fœtus, a fringe of sandy hair, and a brilliant set of artificial teeth. His interest alarmed her. She began to search the past for forgotten faces, and to try and assure herself that his fat and florid interest in her was a mere recent impertinence. She avoided the lounge because she had a feeling that he was an old fool who would hover, even though she might give him to understand by her deliberately abstracted air that she did not want to be spoken to.

But the sex complacency of some old men is beyond understanding, and this peripatetic and bald-headed Juan shadowed her into the hotel garden. He suffered the light of his dental smile to shine upon her.

“Excuse me, but haven’t we met before?”

She was terrified. She had had no great experience of elderly Hot Dogs, and if this succulent person claimed that her face was vaguely familiar, could she accuse him of lying? She thought it best to behave like a simpleton.

“I don’t think so.”

He took her shyness to be artifice.

“In London, somewhere?”

“I’m afraid it can’t have been in London.”

He proceeded to sit down beside her on the green seat. He produced a cigarette case.

“Well, does it matter? Here we are both solus. Won’t you smoke?”

“I don’t.”

“How refreshing. Charming city, Bruges. But one gets a little lonely abroad. May I smoke?”

“Please do.”

She was wondering how she could shed him without being rude. And then it occurred to her that he might be a harmless old person, and if a complete stranger, mildly innocuous.

“On holiday here?”

“Yes. My husband was called back to England on business, and I am waiting for him.”

“Grass widow, what?”

“I suppose so.”

She remembered her French lesson, and was able to escape on this occasion, but she soon was made to realize that he was an unpleasantly persistent old rascal. He found out her name from madame; he began to wait for her on a seat in the courtyard. He attached himself to her.

“Going shopping?”

No, she was paying a second visit to the Hospital of St. John to look at the Memlings. He had never heard of Memling, but he insisted on accompanying her, and sat himself down on a chair beside her to contemplate the Virgin and Child.

“Any children?”

“You mean me?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“You should have. What’s your husband doing? A woman like you, made to have lovely children.”

She found him pawing her arm. Three elderly English women were twittering about the chasse of St. Ursula, and she rose and joined them. How was she to rebuff this unpleasantly familiar old person? He had followed her to the chasse; she was aware of him becoming crudely facetious upon the subject of the saintliness of St. Ursula. What a waste of good virgins! One of the English women was eyeing him indignantly. She remembered the church of the Beguinage, and her fastidious self imagined that it could take refuge there.

She said, “Good morning. I have a service to attend.”

She walked out of the hospital with an air of frigid aloofness, and he followed her, and confronting his persistence, while flying from it, she changed her mind. She walked straight back to the hotel with him trailing beside her; he was becoming still more facetiously offensive, and ironically paternal. Horrid old idiot! She maintained a voiceless austerity, and on reaching the hotel she took refuge in the office with madame.

She appealed to madame. Could nothing be done to prevent an unpleasant old gentleman following her about? It was so *ennuyant*, so *bête*. Madame was a woman who, in her hotel, could honour the conventions. It was unpardonable. She would speak to monsieur on the subject.

Apparently she did so, and monsieur was a man who, having entertained royalty and endured the Teuton, had a firm front and a trenchant eye. What he said to Mr. Hot Dog in a corner of the empty lounge is not recorded in the hotel’s history, but Rachel’s persecutor packed his luggage and took the train to Ostend.

That evening there was peace and a vacant table and no fœtus head to trouble her. Meeting madame on the stairs she gave her an upward glance of gratitude.

“Do I thank you, madame, for that empty table?”

“No, my dear, but monsieur will not mention it.”

He did not, but probably Monsieur Van den Berghe chuckled over the

squelching of an insulted patron, and showed to Rachel a paternal politeness that did not so much as wink an eye.

Peace and no insinuating and senile persecutor! She wandered out and sat by the Minnewater and watched the water, and the sunlight shining on the trees.

2

Summer rain. Luce, sitting on a bunk in the caravan with a writing-pad on his knees, heard the multitudinous tapping of the rain's fingers on the roof, and the dripping of the leaves. He had spent a day in London arranging certain affairs, and had travelled on to Candover with half a pound of tobacco for Mr. Bristow, some chocolates for the old lady, and for both host and hostess a packet of innocuous lies. Yes, Mrs. Luce was still nursing her mother, and he had come to collect the car and caravan. A spoilt holiday? O, well, one had to be philosophic about such things. Mrs. Bristow had offered to give him supper, and on such a wet evening, and with no stores in hand, Luce had welcomed the invitation.

He was writing to Rachel, but even while his pen was covering the paper, his mind was playing with the pieces of the final problem. He could thank God for Mr. Temperley, and for the fact that his sudden change of plans would need no explaining to the person who was most concerned. But would it seem credible to Brandon that he could tire so quickly of the tower, and did Brandon matter? Had he still to respect the suspicious soul of society as it was represented by people like P.C. Pook and Miss Ballard? His feeling about it was that every detail mattered, and for the last few days he had been trying to envisage some situation that would give to his exit from the stage a dramatic inevitableness.

There was a break in the sky when he went in to supper, and sitting between the two old people in the farmhouse kitchen he saw the sun come through and throw a band of light across the table. Was it an omen? Nor could he know that to an old gentleman less than forty miles away, some rain and a clearing sky had offered other justifications. Mr. Temperley could say to Martha as she helped him to gooseberry tart "It is going to clear, Martha. I'll take my walk after dinner." All Brandon and Martha knew that Mr. Temperley was an inveterate walker, and that somehow he would manage to cover his six miles a day.

Said Martha, "You'd better take your mackintosh, sir."

Mr. Temperley could be as petulant as Lob.

"I don't like walking in a mackintosh, Martha."

“Can’t you carry it, sir? We don’t want you in bed again with lumbago.”

Martha was a literal person, and Mr. Temperley took his mackintosh and a pocketful of mischief.

If Mr. Temperley desired solitude and an escape from social salutations it was easy for him to elude them. There was a door in the garden wall on the north side of the vegetable garden which opened into a public footpath, and from this path Mr. Temperley could make his way into the park. The open grassland with its splendid trees, oaks, beeches, cedars, chestnuts, Scotch firs and sequoias, spread its green undulations to lap like the sea against the dark cliffs of the Brandon woods. Mr. Temperley met no one. With the sun breaking through, its horizontal light made grass and trees exquisitely brilliant. A little, circular, classic temple poised on a knoll between two groups of dark firs, raised its white pillars and leaded dome against a mass of cloud.

A wire fence separated the parkland from the woods, but there was an oak gate in the fence fastened by a chain and padlock. Mr. Temperley had the key. The heavy green of summer was in the woods. The tree tops spread and merged, and the bracken had become a jungle-growth. A path padded with dead leaves brought Mr. Temperley to Brandon Heath, and turning to the right and up the hill he saw the grey face and the white window-frames of the tower. Half of it was in the sunlight, half in shadow. Deliberately, and pausing now and again to look about him and to listen, he walked up through the fern and heather to the tower. Avoiding the path, and pushing his way through bracken and brambles he came to the fence where the upper rail of one bay had rotted away from the post. Pushing the rail inwards it was easy for him to slip through into the garden.

Following the strip of rough grass that skirted the fence he passed round the tower on its blind side until he came to the brick ramp supporting the steps. He could see the gate and the tumbledown shed. The silence was complete; even the trees had ceased to drip. He felt in his mackintosh pocket for the key of the green door, went quickly up the steps and let himself in.

There was dust on the stair-rail. An enterprising spider had slung one of its gossamer stays across the stairs. Mr. Temperley had closed and locked the green door, and he did a thing that might have seemed mere childishness, or the impulse of a compulsion neurosis; he stroked the handrail with the tips of his fingers, and turning the hand palm upwards contemplated the grey film on the pads of his fingers. “Dust to dust!” The recess under the stairs enclosed a cupboard, and opening the door he found that Luce had bundled all his old newspapers and firewood into it. Most excellent! Mr. Temperley snapped his thumb and middle finger, and in the profound silence the sound travelled

upwards like a bubble rising in a well.

Ascending the stairs, he looked into every room and left each door open. It was a pity that the windows could not be treated in the same way, but an open window might have provoked suspicion. And the trap-door in the roof? He climbed the ladder, pushed up the trap and let in an oblong strip of sky. More draught to swell the burning note of this great organ pipe. For half an hour he sat in one of Luce's chairs by the sitting-room window, watching the sun founder among the trees. It was fortunate that Luce had removed any books that were of value. The woods filled with the dusk.

Mr. Temperley rose and pushed the furniture into the centre of the room. With both the sitting-room and the front door closed no one could see the kindling of a light, and as he knelt down by the cupboard he was conscious of feeling as exultant as some mischievous boy, though the mischief he was perpetrating was beneficent. He had brought a candle and matches with him. He lit the candle, and arranging all that inflammable stuff under the wooden staircase, he put a match to the paper. He could hope and suppose that the Signal Tower would send out its last message like a flaming cresset.

He returned by the way he had come. No one saw an old gentleman meticulously cleaning his boots by the park gates, and using for the task a silk handkerchief. Nor did Martha and Mary suspect him of washing that handkerchief in the bathroom basin. The bathroom window looked out over the park to the Brandon woods, and Mr. Temperley was able to distinguish among the distant trees a patch of light that was not unlike the rising of a full moon.

Some other person, going to a bedroom window to pull down a blind, also observed a patch of light in the sky. Miss Ballard, with the blind cord nipped between a spatulate thumb and a lean finger, put her face closer to the glass in which was reflected the ghostly flame of a candle. She was alone in this sinister house, and determined to remain in it until the river or the woods, or the heathland had given up their secret. Moreover, the furniture, stock and farm gear were to be sold, and she was her dead brother's legatee. Miss Ballard did not suffer from too sensitive an imagination; she would have sat by the guillotine in the French Terror and knitted, while bloody heads fell into the sawdust. But what was that queer light? She opened the lower sash of the window, and leaning out, screwed up her eyes. Yes, most definitely that light in the sky suggested a conflagration. And where was it? Brandon way, someone's house or rick alight. Well, that did not concern her. She closed the window, pulled down the blind, undressed and went to bed.

XXIV

BRANDON station was half a mile from the village, and Luce, arriving about three o'clock in the afternoon, found that Brandon did not provide one with taxis, but since he had so contrived it that his luggage was limited to one suitcase, he set off with it up the shadeless road towards the clouding tree tops that was Brandon. The day was hot and close, with the tarmac becoming squdgy, and the cattle switching their tails in the shade, sleepy weather when a quiet English village should not be expected to cherish sensationalism. Luce's goal was Mr. Temperley's, and though he was not aware of it, his progress complete with suitcase up Brandon's street was evidential matter. Someone sitting in his shirt-sleeves at an official table, and happening to look out of the window, saw Mr. John Luce and his luggage go by.

Luce put his suitcase down on Mr. Temperley's doorstep, and rang the bell. Mr. Temperley's door was painted white, and its lion-headed brass knocker and letter-flap were superlatively and professionally clean. Luce was contemplating the church spire and the high elms across the way when the white door opened.

Was Mr. Temperley in? No, Mr. Temperley was at his office, and Luce got the impression that the decorous Martha somehow regarded him as an unexpected Odysseus. Could he leave his suitcase in the hall? Most certainly he could; so, Luce, having remarked upon the heat of the day, walked on to the austere white cottage under the elm shade where Mr. Temperley exercised his professional functions.

Luce was met by a junior clerk. The office staff had received very definite instructions from an old gentleman who was justified in appearing a little irritable and worried. A tenant touring England in a caravan and who left no address, could not be the recipient of urgent telegrams.

"Will you come in, sir?"

Luce, shown into that white panelled room with its frieze of black deed boxes and sombre portrait over the mantelpiece, saw Mr. Temperley at his desk, and the round shoulders and bald head of his senior clerk. Mr. Temperley turned quickly in his chair as the clerk in an undertone uttered Luce's name.

"My dear Luce! The very man we have been praying for."

Being a man of discretion, the senior clerk gathered up some papers and disappeared.

“Sit down, Luce. We have been worrying our wits as to how to get into touch with you.”

Luce sat down with his back to the window, puzzled and perturbed by this display of professional agitation.

“Anything the matter, sir?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“I have just walked up from Brandon station.”

Mr. Temperley did not wink at him. There were clerks in the next room, and the interview was to be conducted with complete and convincing formality. But he did scribble five words on a writing-pad, pass the pad to Luce, and when Luce returned it to him, he tore off the sheet, crumpled it up, and put it in his pocket.

“I’m sorry to say the Signal Tower was burnt out last night.”

“Burnt?”

“Yes, gutted from roof to basement. A most extraordinary thing. Quite unexplainable.”

Luce sat and stared at him.

“You said gutted, sir?”

“Absolutely. It’s a mere shell. The roof and all the floors and stairs fell in. A complete holocaust.”

“Any explanation?”

“None. We are wondering whether a tramp broke in, lit a fire, and left it to fall out on the floor. But about your furniture? Was it insured?”

“No.”

“My dear Luce, how very unfortunate! Anything of value?”

“No. It was more or less rubbish.”

“Well, that’s a relief to me. I got the news early this morning. A labourer came in with it to the police. I went over at once.”

Luce gave a shrug of the shoulders.

“Then, it seems, I’m perchless.”

“Most unfortunate, Luce.”

“I shall have to put up somewhere for the night. I can go to the Chequers.”

Mr. Temperley made a face at him.

“Most certainly not. I’ll put you up for a night or two. Supposing we go across and have tea. We can walk over to the place after tea. I quite realize that this upsets all your plans.”

“Completely. But, adaptation——.”

“Is the secret of true philosophy. Any alternatives?”

“I had thought of going abroad for a week or two in September. Meanwhile, I have a sister in Canonbury who could put me up.”

“I’m exceedingly sorry you weren’t insured.”

“That doesn’t worry me. But, the tower?”

Mr. Temperley’s eyes were mischievous.

“My dear man, we shall have to refund you a portion of your rent, but as to the building we had it insured for a few hundreds. I think we have paid our insurance company thousands of pounds in premiums on estate property during the last thirty years, and we have never had to put in a claim. Yes, I remember we had one many years ago, and the insurance people tried to wriggle. The beggars can pay up on this occasion.”

“I’m rather sorry for the old tower, sir.”

“And not for the insurance company?”

“Not in the least. But if they pay up you will be bound to rebuild.”

“It may not be worth while, Luce, and we may never claim, or perhaps we may offer the relic to the National Trust!”

Mr. Temperley kept a little handbell on his desk, and he rang for his chief clerk.

“O, Mr. Hames, Mr. Luce and I are going over to look at the tower. Anything you want me to sign?”

“Not at the moment, sir.”

“Very well, carry on. Don’t forget the codicil to the Henshaw will.”

“I have it in hand, sir.”

2

The memories of this evening were to be associated in Luce's mind with the smell of the box hedges in Mr. Temperley's garden. Luce had enjoyed a bath, and the mature reticence of an old savant who, during tea had consumed cucumber sandwiches with much relish, and talked of nothing but Viriconium and the Welsh border castles, and King Charles' flight after the battle of Worcester. Luce had filled a pipe, and waited upon Mr. Temperley's whimsies. And, after all, walls and doors might have ears, and Martha and Mary be children of Eve.

They approached a blue door in a red brick wall, and both paint and brickwork had lost the rawness of youth, and if Luce was enjoying his pipe and an atmosphere of pleasant suspense, Mr. Temperley was savouring the scent of a burnt offering and an unbloody sacrifice. He would have memories to chuckle over before the winter fire, nor did he or Luce foresee that this winter would be his last.

"I think we will go by the park, Luce."

Between the park hedge and an oak fence they met an old fellow with a scythe over his shoulder, and he and Mr. Temperley swapped salutations. "Evening, Tom. Where's your hour-glass?" "Evenin', sir. What sort of glass be that?" Mr. Temperley paused to feel the edge of the scythe, and to remark that to the young life had other edges. They passed on to leave Old Mossy Face to a moistening of the mouth as he reflected upon other glasses. At the field-gate Mr. Temperley stood a moment, looking at this English scene.

"It's so soft, Luce."

He was prodding the turf with his stick, and the adjective applied both to the turf and the landscape.

"Notice any footprints, Luce? It is still rather soft after the rain."

"Footprints, sir?"

"I took a stroll this way last night. No sign of the cloven hoof, is there?"

"Nothing that I can see."

He looked intently at Mr. Temperley, and his companion smiled.

“No, not yet, my dear man. In the middle of this parkland there will be no one to listen, save, perhaps, a few Jersey cows.”

When they were some two hundred yards from the gate, and climbing up one of the great green billows of grass, Mr. Temperley took off his hat and let his white head sun itself.

“Well, Luce, you are remarkably reticent.”

“I, sir?”

“Yes, you, sir. How did the holiday end, and were the passport officials completely casual?”

“Completely so. She is waiting for me at Bruges.”

“No sensational happenings?”

“It was all supremely simple. I hope that sensational adventures have ceased for her.”

“So do I, Luce, with all my heart. She is made for gentle things.”

“So it should be, for a woman, sir.”

They were passing a big beech tree upon whose trunk someone had cut letters and a date, but the bark had grown and rounded off the knife scars, and date and initials were becoming blurred. Mr. Temperley, diverging, pointed with his stick.

“What is it, Luce, man’s eternal passion to express himself, to swagger a little? So very young. The lad who cut those letters was killed in the war; blown to bits; all they found was a hand with a signet ring. But I’m talking like a gravedigger in *Hamlet*.”

“Won’t those marks last as long as the tree?”

“But they will grow very faint, like the scars life leaves on us. At my age one knows that nothing matters very seriously, save keeping one’s finger-nails moderately clean and remembering to laugh a little.”

“Then, why in our case did you vex yourself?”

“Old men grow mischievous, Luce. O, by the way, I haven’t told you that I have had an offer from someone who would like to take over your tenancy.”

“Superfluous, now.”

“Not if we were to rebuild and people did not change their fancies. But don’t you suffer from curiosity?”

“I am consumed by every sort of curiosity.”

“Splendid. The prospective tenant is staying at the Chequers. That is why I did not send you there. A literary lady.”

“Miss Reubens?”

“Well guessed.”

They were half-way across the park, and Luce was looking towards the stone temple on its knoll.

“I don’t sacrifice to Venus. Thank you for the reprieve. But it is another matter that piques me. How that fire started.”

“Why not Miss Reubens, Luce?”

“No, even though it would be splendid publicity.”

“Have you any idea?”

“I’m groping.”

“Well, let’s confess that I was the culprit.”

“You?”

Luce stood still for a moment, his pipe in one big fist, his eyes very large and blue.

“You are joking?”

“No, my dear man, Punchinello did it. The thing seemed so final and satisfying, no clues, no finger-prints, no anything. It closes your chapter here quite convincingly. I don’t suppose that it would occur to the most imaginative of officials that a highly respectable citizen could behave like Puck.”

Said Luce: “Upon my soul, I take off my hat to you.”

“Thank you, my lad. So, now you can conclude that I am even more deeply involved in the contumaciousness that society condemns. I have perpetrated an unsocial act. They could bring down my white hairs in sorrow at the Assizes. But you will respect my confession.”

Luce laid a big hand on the little man’s shoulder.

“Thank God for people who do not always conform. I was worrying my wits as to how I could best make a convincing and rational exit.”

Mr. Temperley chuckled.

“Yes, I rather think that I have served you with a notice to quit.”

So, walking together through the summer woods they came to the tower. The tall shell was still emitting a little spume of smoke which drifted away among the tree tops. Some of the stucco had fallen, leaving smudges of blackened brick. The windows were empty eyes, and Luce, remembering that morning when Rachel had stood at one of those windows, was moved to secret emotion. Could a murdered building reproach one? And judging by its past its language should have been that of hard-swearing seamen!

The silence was complete and somehow unexpected, and humanity absent. Mr. Temperley walked to the foot of the stone steps. The green door, charred and black, hung awry, and down the steps some of the lead from the roof had trickled and set. Mr. Temperley poked at it with his stick.

“A sad business, Luce, an incomprehensible business.”

Luce climbed the steps, and peering in, saw nothing but a black chasm filled with a jumble of charred beams.

“Yes, completely incomprehensible, sir.”

3

Luce and Miss Reubens did not meet, for, at a very early hour, Mr. Temperley's gardener-chauffeur drove Luce and his suitcase and Mr. Temperley to Brandon station. Luce and Mr. Temperley walked up and down the platform, becoming mutually self-conscious and inarticulate as their last moments together assumed emotional restraint. Moreover, there were other Brandon people travelling on the 8.53, and since gossip had been busy, Mr. Temperley and Luce were under interested observation.

"You will let me know how things go, sir."

"Of course, Luce. You will hear from us officially. I expect the representatives of the insurance company down to-day. I wish your furniture had been covered."

"That's a small matter."

Luce walked Mr. Temperley to the far end of the platform where no one was within earshot. His words came abruptly.

"It's a strange thing, sir, but when one wants to say much, one can say nothing."

"I understand you, my dear man. The more talk there is, the less meaning there seems to be in the chatter. You are not one of the frothy people."

"We shall never forget."

"Nor I. I once had a wife, Luce, and when she was dying I could do nothing but sit by the bed and hold her hand. Nothing to be said that was adequate. She left me feeling always alone in the world."

"The secret sources of one's compassion, sir."

"O, possibly. Yet, even the things that one has felt most fiercely leave behind them at my age just a little vague perfume. But here's your train."

They walked back to where Luce had left his suitcase.

"I will let you have a letter now and again. It may come from Rome, or Honolulu or Santa Fé, or Cochin China. And my addresses may be impermanent."

“Wherever you are may the knees of the gods be merciful.”

The train drew in, and Luce, entering a third-class smoker, and putting his suitcase in the rack, leaned out of the window. There were two other men and a girl in the compartment.

“By the way, sir, if you should see Miss Reubens, tell her I shall be staying with my sister.”

“And the address?”

“O, Lavender Cottage, Mousehole, Cornwall.”

Mr. Temperley crinkled up his eyes.

“I’ll remember it. Good-bye, my dear Luce.”

“Good-bye, sir.”

Luce took off his hat to Mr. Temperley, sat down in his corner, and felt in his pocket for his pipe.

Soon after eleven o’clock he got off a bus at Highbury Corner, and carrying his suitcase, walked to Canonbury Square. He found sister Mary at home, immersed in household matters, and for the moment minus a maid. She was large and fair and placid, and as accustomed to her brother’s vagaries as she was to the domestic shocks of post-war England. Either Natalie had measles, or the kitchen boiler had declared a lightning strike, or Edward was deploring the public’s taste in books. Edward was a junior partner in a minor publishing house, more refined than prosperous. Yet nothing surprised Mary or upset her temper, and when she found her very large brother on her doorstep she accepted him with a kiss and a smile.

“Hallo, John. Yes, it’s an apron day. No wench.”

“Then I’m not going to worry you.”

“Don’t be silly. Can you stay?”

“A night or two. But, look here, my dear——”

“Don’t be silly, John. I see you about once in a century. I can’t do you proud, but there is the spare room.”

She stood back to let him in.

“Tom and Joyce are at school, and Natalie at grandma’s for a few days. I was having a house-clean.”

“Rig me up with an apron, and I’ll help. How’s Edward?”

“O, quite fit. Books a little depressed.”

“Sorry. Not serious?”

“They have not had a spring book that has sold more than two thousand. But Edward & Co. are rather pixsome. And where have you sprung from?”

“Surrey. Went caravaning, and came back to find my funny old place burnt out. So I am going abroad in a day or two.”

“For a big thing you do move, John.”

“Well, there’s nothing to keep me anchored, my dear. Shall I get rid of this suitcase?”

“Yes, I’ll show you the room.”

Mary Garden, unlike the lady in the old rhyme, had absorbed a sweet savour from the very contrariness of things. She had much of her brother’s serene solidity, and a mind that had reacted to the rubs of fortune without being either dulled or roughened by them. She could say, “My dear, we shall always be short of money, and I shall never be able to afford the particular fur coat that I see in the window, but I have three healthy children and a husband who does not give me shocks. I don’t like shocks. I’m really a complete Tabby.” Though, to her brother, the simile of a very large sunflower of the annual variety might have seemed more appropriate.

Luce, having unpacked his suitcase, went below in search of Mary, but his sister had disappeared. “Hallo, Mary. What’s become of you?” Her voice answered him from the kitchen. He found her exploring the larder.

“I was going to have a cheese and apple lunch, John. Yes, this steak is for Edward’s dinner, but we’ll put forward the programme.”

“You will do nothing of the sort, my dear. Take off that apron and the Martha complex, and we’ll go down and lunch in Soho. I have some shopping to do.”

“I’d love to, John.”

“Good girl. Edward shall not be deprived of his steak.”

For Luce the day had a pleasant sadness, something autumnal and retrospective. Mary might ask questions, but her curiosity was warmed by affection, and Luce had a tale to spin, and the future to paint in vagrant colours. Yes, he was going abroad, and rather indefinitely so. Not that he had the genius and the brilliant and tragic temperament of D. H. Lawrence, who, when he was in Italy, hungered for New Mexico, and when he was in Mexico

wished himself in the Bavarian Alps. Luce confessed to his sister that he had the wander lust, and that perpetual motion or the Stylite's idea might be equally futile. It all depended upon whether you were interested or bored. But in talking to his sister across a Soho table and contemplating her serene face, she seemed to symbolize the England he was leaving, and to cause him gentle qualms. Compassion was drinking wine with him and reminding him that if the adventure was somewhat final for the man it would be so much more final for the woman.

With seeming irrelevancy he was heard to say, "Women shouldn't make us feel combative. There is enough of Mars in most men without shield-clashings by Martian women."

His sister was peeling a peach.

"Why don't you marry again, John?"

"Encores can be so unexpectedly crushing to the vanity of the performer."

Luce bought a lobster and a bottle of Burgundy, and took them back to Canonbury to supplement the steak. He and Mary could digest lobster, but poor Edward was more delicately membraned, and his digestion was as eclectic as his taste in books. He seemed unable to select or to digest the good red flesh of a best seller. He had a taste for things winsome or for the faintly macabre. A pale man, with thin lips and hair, gently cynical save where Mary was concerned, he refused the lobster, but was obediently masticating the steak. Mary believed, and she was right, that Edward's metabolism should be set to deal with good tough English. She did not say to him, "If you literary people would only discover for yourselves an Edgar Wallace, or even a Warwick Deeping, things might be so much more comfortable. I should like to make a lap at life." But knowing her Edward and his refined limitations she refrained. Edward was a delicate creature, and his digestion, mental and otherwise, had to be cherished.

Luce could never find much to say to his sister's husband. Moreover, as they sat at the open window of this very English house in the very English square, Luce felt himself to be more and more like a man with his loins girded for some strange journey. Let Edward smoke his one cigarette, and prattle, while wondering whether the Burgundy and the steak would enter into an argument and keep him awake. Mary was washing up, and had refused male help.

"Stay and talk to Teddie."

Edward's prattle was like the cigarette smoke, delicate and inconclusive,

and Luce's pipe seemed a gross object, but Edward Garden did say one significant thing.

"I think if I had my time over again, John, I should grow tomatoes."

"Why tomatoes?"

"Something red and obvious. You give the public just tomatoes. So inevitable."

"Rather acid things, Ted."

"Yes, they tell me that I have always suffered from an insufficiency of hydrochloric acid. Even one's work seems limited by one's secretions."

Luce, with his blond head sinking into the shadow, supposed that it might be so, and that poor Edward's anæmia and lack of gastric juice might be the inspiration of those who produce belles-lettres.

4

A summer gale, grey scuds of rain over a grey and tumbled sea, water coming aboard, an almost universal nausea prevailing. Luce, like many big men with large heads, did not suffer from qualms. He could smoke a pipe and watch the waves, and feel like a sea-rover sailing to new, strange lands.

Yes, the strangeness of life, the bitter-sweet tang of it, salt on the lips, the sharp flavour of fruit before too cloying a ripeness. Assuredly, most of the world's manipulators would call him a fool, but in some supreme folly, life, like the earth, renews itself. Could he not imagine some preposterous pessimist dismissing the spring as the earth's supreme piece of silliness?

"All this old sentimental flowery stuff served up again like light opera, and the damned public swallowing it?"

The day itself had been strange in its minor incidents. He was very new both as to luggage and clothes. He had bought second-class tickets, the beginnings of a disinterested thriftiness. If anything were to happen to him she would not have a penny. On the platform at Victoria he had been accosted by a man whom he had known somewhat intimately in the old days.

"Hallo, John! You look all dressed up."

"Hallo, Peter my lad. Where are you for?"

"Salzburg."

"Musical as ever."

At Dover the official person had examined his passport with particular care. As though it mattered now! Authority was always a little late in clapping the cover on the forbidden dish. Had not Adam and Eve pinched the apple before God had intervened? Also, he was spared the friendly questions of Peter Laverack, who was travelling Pullman, and who, on the boat, remained inconsolably sick in the gentlemen's saloon.

There were breaks in the sky above the dune country, and the great sandhills were pale gold. He discovered a strangeness even in those distant and sophisticated sea-fronts with their slate-coloured, precipitous terraces. On just such a day as this he could remember watching a British destroyer bucking along the Belgian coast. And such haunted, windy weather had made shells

tear the air with a more menacing message.

Ostend Plage looked deserted, though errant sunlight ran along the little tents, touching them like notes of coloured sound. He was one of the first off the boat, and again there was a strangeness in his being served by the same porter, though the fellow did not remember him.

“Bruges, second class.”

“Bien, monsieur.”

More sunlight and less wind. He saw the wind in the poplars and the willows, dulling the silver of the dykes, or racing across crops that had not yet been harvested. The little white farmsteads seemed to flutter their aprons at him. But why should he think of them as feminine? He remembered that he had sent her no warning, and as he sat there watching the green country slide by he was conscious of a rich and sensuous compassion. He felt that he would see her always as he had seen her on that drenched spring evening, breathless and blind-eyed, like some bird blown against a window. That was the supreme morality, a love that did not wound.

At Bruges he took a taxi. It trundled him through the bustle of those ever-mysterious streets, and unloaded him and his luggage in the quiet courtyard of the Grand Hotel. The little, smiling page-boy scuttled out, his freckles as friendly as his smile. Bienvenu to monsieur, and madame was in the garden.

Luce left his luggage and a five-franc piece with Master Freckles and passed round the high white flank of the hotel into the garden. He had an immediate glimpse of her sitting in that queer little iron arbour, with a French book in her lap, and a dictionary on the table. She was in the act of looking up a word in the dictionary, and he was able to stand and possess her. She looked so serious and douce and cherishable.

“Hard at work!”

She rose with one swift movement, and the book slid from her lap. Both of them forgot that the hotel had windows.

“O, my dear, my dear.”

“You mustn’t tremble so, little one.”

“I can’t help it, John.”

“Hold on to me; I’m solid.”

Neither of them saw Monsieur Van den Berghe in the doorway, and being both human and a man of the world, Monsieur smiled upon them and went to

tell his wife.

5

She would always remember that hour spent after dinner on the Grand Place. They had come to sit outside one of the cafés opposite the Belfry. A regimental band was playing, and the place was full of people listening to the music, or strolling together over the grey stones. The wind had died away, and the Belfry sunned itself in the afterglow. Luce had ordered coffee and a packet of cigarettes. The cigarettes were for her, but she chose to be old-fashioned and did not smoke.

He said to her, almost irrelevantly, “It is a plain race, this, but genius is generally ugly.”

The tables near them were vacant, and she was aware of him looking at her with a tender, teasing kindness. Most certainly she was not a plain person, and if he found in her all manner of secret loveliness, he could laugh gently at an infatuation that joined June and September. To-night she had the face of an exquisite and rather shy child. Her mood was mated to his solidity. His eyes looked at her with a steady, half-humorous kindness. He was not one of those men who devoured. She felt that she could shelter under his strength and she was one of those who asked for shelter.

Security, tranquil days, nights of unhaunted sleep, things done for him, her hands and head busy, the sound of his wise, deliberate voice. Yet, in a social sense, how insecure they were, she more than he was, for she was but the masquerading ghost of another woman. Always she would be at his mercy.

She sat and watched the Belfry growing grey. Was it true that even in an emancipated world the sensitives were ever at the mercy of a robust and bustling egotism? Emancipation! The world must always have its word, some topical tag. In spite of her tragedy, or perhaps because of it, she had retained some of the exquisite wild clarity of the child’s outlook upon life. Intuition had not been smudged by sex. She wanted to go on loving and having faith in someone.

“Ten thousand pounds, Rachel.”

He saw her sensitive lashes quiver.

“It is not for sale, John.”

Would it be? Was he a mere material fool? He was going to make a new sort of book of life. A waiter in a white coat fluttered down on them. Did monsieur require anything else? Luce tipped the man.

“We have everything that we want, thank you.”

But was that a valid statement? To proclaim satiety? And then he realized that there was something in her face that brought back that most tragic night. A frightened, dark-eyed spirit trembling on the edge of the unknown. Was life for her so sharp and poignant and unsure? Was he so unknown?

Faces were growing dim, and then the lamps began to open their eyes. He saw one of her hands resting on the table, and with a gentle and deliberate stealth he put out a large hand and covered hers. Nothing was said. He felt her hand turn over and the fingers clasp his, and in that silent holding of hands there was peace.

XXV

THE spring.

There was just room for her to stand between his writing-desk and the window. It was a very spacious window for so small a house, and on their first day she had said to him,—"Your desk must be here." From the window she could see a little sloping meadow, very green and pied with flowers, cherry trees in bloom, and far below the steep grey-shingled roofs of a cluster of cottages. But that was not all. There were the mountains, the woods, the lake. She had come to know them all so well, and yet their strangeness remained, for their moods were many. Through much of the winter this world of theirs had been smothered in snow, snow on the mountains, on the meadows, in the woods. Their garden had become a bird sanctuary. She had fed finches, blackbirds, tits. Even two splendid woodpeckers had visited them occasionally, and as for the bullfinches, they had grown almost as bold as sparrows.

She could remember days when the lake had been invisible. The sun had shone on a sheet of silver mist. Luce had taught her to use skis, and they had luged together all the way down to Cerisy to shop.

Winter nights with the stove aglow, the silence of the snow everywhere, the stars brilliant and multitudinous, the air like white and sparkling wine. They had had their wireless and their books, and the feeling of being together.

The door opened.

"I have finished, madame."

She turned to smile at the girl who came up from the village twice a week to help her in the chalet.

"Thank you, Marie. What a beautiful day!"

"Very beautiful, madame."

When the girl had gone she turned again to the window. Need she ask herself if she was happy? She could say that she was happy on the edge of a precipitous fear, her dread of his ceasing to care, or of the past resurrecting and involving them both in some final tragedy. For, sometimes her very happiness suggested impermanence. Her world in England had been narrow and confined, but what if some fortuitous figure out of the past should rise from it

like some accusing ghost? She did not divulge this secret fear, but kept it concealed from him behind the tranquillity of restful eyes.

He had gone down to Cerisy for tobacco.

Flowers. The hillside was a world of flowers. The painted carpet had begun to lay itself in March, with crocuses, primroses, violets, squills. She could remember him bringing her that first bunch of primroses. Strange that a man should love flowers as he did, and be so happy with them! But was it strange? They worked together in their garden. They had an orchard to care for and, on the mountainside high above, a little summer hut under the edge of the pines. They were going to camp there when the sun came to its full force. And his writing-desk? She faced about and moving round the desk, sat down in his chair. She sat there for a few minutes each day and read what he had written in that spacious, steady hand of his. Beautiful words. If this book of his was the book of a dreamer, the dreams were serene and splendid, and like this immense landscape. He wrote like a man whose soul was at peace. She could read in this book that which was him, yet trembling a little as though she feared to find the edge of some shadow stealing across the page. She asked of life, “No more violence.”

As she read what he had written that morning she may have wondered whether it was possible for a man to be content with this solitary and reflective life, high on the hillside, with a few peasants and a woman? His words were to reassure her:

> “Let it become ridiculous to us that men should desire the open country, and yet be unable to dwell in it; that people should be hungry when food is piled behind windows; that people should be sick and not have the wherewithal to be healed. Money! Why money at all? The incentive there must be, the passionate urge to accomplish, but why should not the physician heal and the ploughman plough, and the builder build just for life and living? Could we not labour for all and each other without the passing of a penny piece? Yes, if we were other than we are.”

She paused, chin on hand, reflecting upon these thoughts. Assuredly she had experienced the bitterness of turning muck and meat into money. She read on:

> “I sit here at my window, a man to whom life has given many good and beautiful things, love and understanding, this splendid scene, peace, dear eyes that look at me without guile. Shall I suffer

my soul to fret over the insoluble problem of free will? I will, I think —therefore I live. Nor is there any crave in me to slay, to make the earth and sky hideous with speed, to turn knowledge to brutal butchery, or to pile up plunder. I have my head high above the smoke of cities. So should it be for us all."

She left his chair and stood again at the open window. She could remember questioning him about this life of theirs, this exile. Might it not cease to satisfy him? And he had stuffed a big hand into a pocket and produced a new pipe and an unopened tin of English tobacco.

"I can buy this in Cerisy. I have smoked the same brand for twenty years. What a confession to make in the face of this restless world. I don't get bored with my tobacco. Apparently I am made that way. So, there is a nice piece of symbolism for you!"

What a mate and what a world were hers! Her life was made of doing simple and gentle things, and in them she did not find the poison of monotony. She stood at his window. The upland meadows were full of flowers; narcissus time was here. To-day the mountains were splendidly serene, the lake a great blue mirror.

2

In Cerisy Luce bought tobacco in a shop in the Rue Montparnasse whose windows looked between lime trees across the grey quay to the lake. Cerisy was preparing to be *en fête*. The tourist season was in flower, and outside the Hôtel Leman two blue charabancs and a little crowd of visitors were waiting.

To round-headed and bland Monsieur Müller, who sold him tobacco, Luce said cheerfully, “Wonderful weather. And the season begins.”

But Monsieur Müller was not in a cheerful mood. He, like the rest of the world, was suffering from financial pangs and stresses. Cerisy’s season was no longer a bouquet of flowers. And had not hundreds of residents fled from Switzerland when Great Britain had abandoned the gold standard?

“Cheap people, monsieur.”

“Is that so?”

Monsieur Müller had been standing in his doorway, observing the charabanc and the little crowd outside the Hôtel Leman. Before the war the Hôtel Leman had prided itself upon its patrons and its cuisine, but now in these desperate days it had become a caravanserai catering for “Tavistock Tours,” obscure people who travelled second-class with one suitcase apiece and no spare cash. It was a coupon crowd. It did not smoke cigars, and being largely elderly and feminine it did not enter Monsieur Müller’s shop.

“Tavistock Tours, monsieur. Picture postcards. No, I have not yet descended to picture postcards.”

Luce, returning to the sunlit pavement, stood to observe the little crowd outside the Hôtel Leman. As an exile with a secret to cherish he was interested in the vagrant English, though the people waiting to fill the blue charabancs were not of his world. Elderly women of all shapes and sizes predominated, completely obscure and respectable, and obviously sterile so far as poor Monsieur Müller was concerned. None of them would so much as glance at the almost Pompeian emblem hanging from a bracket, a semi-erect and monstrous cigar. One young couple, honeymooners, added a dash of self-conscious youth. There was the inevitable social clown, fat, jocund and facetious, who handed out wit and badinage rather like a butcher slapping down pounds of sausages on a marble slab. Luce strolled along the pavement, filling his pipe as he went,

and throwing an artist's glances at the grey quay, the green lime trees and the lapis of the lake. A white steamer floated in the near distance like some large white bird beyond the pendent foliage of weeping willows.

He became aware of the fat fellow declaiming:

"Now then, ladies, what about a little snap before you go charring? Family group, what! Hotel steps. Come on, Mr. and Mrs. Coovey. Bride and bridegroom in the centre."

Luce paused on the pavement to watch. A tall woman in black was standing with her back to him, and a little apart from the group as though her angular and uncompromising figure refused to mingle. Possibly she was in no mood to be photographed, or to submit to jocund, male clowning.

"Now then, Miss Ballard; join the beauty show."

"Thank you," said she; "I have some postcards to buy."

She turned, and instantly Luce was confronted by a face out of the past, a peculiarly unpleasant and ominous face with its hard, tense skin and narrow enigmatic eyes. They were like slits emitting gleams of unwelcome recognition. Miss Ballard remembered him, and apparently the recognition aroused in her memories that were like little, sinister, leaping flames.

Luce gave her one stare, and then, with the air of a man to whom the incident was of no significance, became absorbed in lighting the tobacco in his pipe. His eyes watched the match flame and the smoke. He bit hard on the stem of his pipe. He was conscious of those ominous eyes continuing to observe him. Was the woman going to speak? And if she did, would it matter? He gave deliberate attention to his pipe, and made himself appear unaware of her most disturbing presence. Miss Ballard had diverged to the edge of the path, and he was conscious of her black shape passing by. She moved out of his field of vision, and he remained the meticulous male, intent upon getting his pipe alight, for the business was a ritual.

Meanwhile, the tourists had grouped themselves on the steps of the Hôtel Leman, and the facetious fellow was holding his camera against his stomach and taking aim. Luce walked on and, passing between the camera and the group upon the steps, turned across the roadway to the quay. Was that damned woman watching him? He forbade himself the impulse that tempted him to turn his head and look. He paused by the railings, and pushing his hat back, stood like a man largely at leisure and enjoying the scene.

Good God, if Rachel had been with him!

There was a seat by the jetty towards which the white steamer was gliding, and from the seat you could look from under the hollow shadow of a lime tree at the blue blicker of the lake. Luce sat down there. He was realizing that Rachel must be forbidden the town during the season when the casual English traversed it. Also, a retreat to the mountains would be more than a mere climbing of Olympus.

He was feeling hot and inwardly ravaged, like a man who had just escaped a shell in the war. Also, he was smoking his pipe as he had smoked it on such an occasion. Was that infernal woman staying at the Hôtel Leman? He had an idea, and rolling himself lazily on the seat, looked carefully over his right shoulder. Damnation, but Miss Ballard was crossing the road towards the quay. She carried a buff-coloured envelope containing her postcards, and the toes of her large black shoes caught the sunlight. He noticed that she had thick ankles.

Luce left the seat and strolled to the jetty with its green and white kiosk where steamer tickets were purchased. He could pretend that he was waiting for the steamer. The Tavistock Tour party was packing itself into the charabancs under the direction of the company's courier. Luce watched them, while remaining aware of the approaching figure of Miss Ballard. He had a feeling that the woman was going to speak to him.

She did.

"Excuse me, Mr. Luce, I think?"

His assumption of surprise was admirable. He stared, smiled, raised a hat.

"Yes, my name is Luce."

"You don't remember me?"

"I'm afraid that I cannot say I do."

"My name is Ballard."

"Ballard? I'm afraid I am still at a loss."

"We met at Brandon."

Judging by her manner she might have been picking his memory with sinister intent, and again Luce smiled at her.

"Brandon. O, yes. It comes back to me. You are the lady I once saw at my gate."

Her narrow eyes observed him. Was her interference the result of mere casual curiosity, or did she suspect anything? Happening to glance in the

direction of the Hôtel Leman he saw that the charabancs were full, and that a man was standing up in one of them, and counting the occupants. Someone was missing.

"It's a strangely small world, Miss Ballard."

"It is."

"And this is a very lovely part of it. Yes, I'm just catching the steamer. I came across from the other side. Just wandering about. I go on to Italy next week."

Her grim face still confronted him.

"I have never been to Italy. Very dear and dirty there, I understand."

"O, not universally so. But excuse me, Miss Ballard, are you, by any chance, travelling with that party over there?"

"I am."

"Well, I think they have lost somebody."

She withdrew her eyes from his face, and glanced in the direction of the charabancs. The courier in charge had identified the missing traveller. Also, he had spotted Miss Ballard standing on the quay and talking to a man. He waved to her.

"Miss Ballard, we are due to start."

Again Luce smiled at her, and prepared to light a pipe that had gone out.

"Ships that pass in the night. Bon voyage, Miss Ballard. I suppose you are going on to Guyon?"

"To-morrow."

"Exquisite place, Guyon. Don't miss the castle. Well, bon voyage. My steamer's in."

He watched her cross the road to meet the ironical glances of certain of her fellow travellers. Now, what exactly had moved her to speak to him? He could postulate no adequate reason, unless——. But were human impulses always adequate and reasonable? Possibly, his apparent failure to recognize her had piqued the woman, and she had insisted upon recognition. Some people are like that.

He watched the two charabancs move away. So, she was staying at the Hôtel Leman, and to-morrow she would be going on to Guyon, a withered and spiteful woman blown about the world just when this mountain country was in

bloom. Had he any reason to doubt the casualness of the coincidence? Miss Ballard had come to see the narcissi! She could not and did not know his secret, for if she had suspected it last year some interfering hand would have groped for them in exile. Should he tell Rachel? He smiled, and stood to watch the steamer discharging its passengers. No, he would keep this most unwelcome incident from Rachel.

His serenity was assumed, and perhaps he did not expect it wholly to deceive her. She was too subtly part of him, and he of her, for such masks to fool quick eyes.

“You’re rather late, John.”

He laughed.

“Little school-m’arm! But Cerisy is becoming seasonable. I think we will climb the heights to-morrow. Two camp beds and mountain kit. Everything ready?”

“Yes, dear.”

She was going to ask him a question. He saw it gathering in her eyes.

“Did you meet anybody?”

“Yes, a man I used to know. Just passing through. But I am taking no chances. We don’t want society’s monkey mind picking at our affairs.”

3

But the god of Things Trivial had not yet lobbed his last jest at them. Luce woke with a headache. Unusual it might be and ascribable neither to eye nor brain strain, but the back of his head felt sodden with pain, and sitting up caused him nausea.

Aspirin. O, yes, she had her bottle of aspirin, and there were just seven tablets left in it, a Biblical number.

"A silly business, Rachel. I never have these things."

"We can put off going to the hut."

"No need for that. I shall be all right."

She felt his forehead.

"You haven't a temperature, John?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

But she had her thermometer out and took his temperature, to find it consolingly normal. She had never known him ill, and the thought of it frightened her.

"Do you think you ought to see someone?"

"No need. I shall be all right in an hour or two."

She gave him two aspirin tablets and some coffee, and in half an hour he had fallen asleep. She had left the curtains drawn, and his quiet breathing reassured her. Always she had found qualities of consolation in his sleep, for it was so profound and innocent, and if she could love him for everything, she could love him for the way he slept, so cleanly and quietly, with no stertorous noises or pendulous mouth. She bent down and kissed the hair above his forehead, and with sudden gaiety went out to prepare for the ascent to Olympus.

Then it was that in checking her stores she found the tea canister nearly empty. How fatuous of her! And no tea that was fit for him could be had

without going to Cerisy. Also, her tablets of aspirin had been reduced to five. Why should she not go down to Cerisy while he was asleep? Why not indeed? She could be back in an hour, and he would not even know that she had left him.

She put on her hat, collected a basket, and listened for a moment outside the bedroom door.

4

Luce woke about twenty minutes after she had left the chalet. The ridiculous ache in his head had vanished. He sat up, yawned, and stared at the drawn curtains.

"Rachel."

The silence of the place and its lack of immediate response did not worry him for the moment. He got out of bed, drew the curtains, and after considering the beauty of the day, confronted the business of shaving.

"Rachel."

His calling of her had become so much like the appeal of a child that it was almost a reflex. She was not with him, so he called to her. He was getting into his trousers, and visualizing hot water and soap lather when the silence of the place became as arrestive as a stick thrust into a spinning wheel. Where was she? In the garden? And then an inspired fear seized him. Holding his trousers in place with a large hand, he hurried out into the little hall.

"Rachel."

It took him just thirty seconds to convince himself that she was in neither chalet nor garden. Her hat had gone, the little black hat that sat on her head rather like a French soldier's helmet. He found himself pulling open the doors of a cupboard. The shopping basket? Yes, it had disappeared. He was suddenly stricken by the significance of her absence. Unshaven chin was forgotten. He jerked himself into his clothes. He was conscious of emitting inward groans as he stooped to lace his shoes.

Idiot! Why hadn't he warned her!

Luce did not cherish an Englishman's dignity. He ran down the mountain road and through the familiar hamlet where children who were his friends stared to see Monsieur Luce exercising such haste. A yellow dog rushed out of a doorway and followed snarling at his heels. He ignored the beast who was obeying a natural impulse to pursue anything that fled. Luce could and did bless the fact that the hillside was in his favour. Each time the road opened up one of its loops he hoped to see her figure ahead of him between the flowering fields.

But it was not to be. The upwards and outlying houses of Cerisy came to meet him, and moved to sudden discretion and a sense of dignity he ceased from running. Where would he be most likely to find her? In the *épicerie* she favoured? But, good god, that too was in the Rue de Parnasse, and within a hundred yards of the Hôtel Leman! Leaving the road, he took to a path and a series of steps which brought him through vineyards and gardens and across the railway line to the main road beside the lake. In a little while this road became the Rue de Parnasse, and he would be able to approach the *épicerie* without passing the Hôtel Leman. He remembered that he would find a taxi rank under the poplars by the Café de Paris.

The Rue de Parnasse ran straight before him with its trees and its coloured awnings and its tram lines shimmering in the grey pavé. A blue tram came clanging towards him. Women who had been to the market on the Grand Quai passed him with baskets full of vegetables and fruit. A red object in the distance attracted his attention, the back of a motor-coach waiting outside the Hôtel Leman. He could see luggage being carried out. The Ballard party was preparing to pass on to Guyon.

Luce blessed God for allowing two taxis to be found on the rank. He crossed the road and hailed the first of them.

“Suchard’s épicerie. I shall want you to wait there.”

“Bien, monsieur.”

The man observed Luce’s unshaven chin. The gentleman appeared hot and in a hurry.

When the taxi drew up outside the shop, Luce looking through the glass partition saw Tavistock Tours assembling upon the steps of the Hôtel Leman. The risk would have to be taken. He opened the door and bolted across the pavement into Suchard’s, and there by the *caisse*, paying for her kilo of tea, stood Rachel.

Her face had the innocence of ignorance.

“John, I thought you were in bed.”

Luce said never a word, but putting an arm round her, and keeping his large person between her and the steps of the Hôtel Leman, he hurried her across the pavement and into the taxi.

“Chalet Paradis. Yes, above St. Pierre.”

Most ungallantly Luce pulled Rachel’s little chapeau over her eyes, and enveloped her in his corner in a concealing embrace.

“Lie still.”

“John, dear!”

“Lie still.”

The taxi drew out, and Luce realized that the driver would have to pass the motor-coach, and the crowd on the hotel steps. Well, it could not be helped, and if anyone stared they would see a man embracing a woman.

He did not see Miss Ballard on the steps, grimly gripping the handle of a suitcase and refusing to surrender it to a porter. Why should the fellow carry her suitcase to the coach and expect a tip? Nor, in that economical moment, did she notice the passing taxi. It drew away and began to ascend the hill beyond the market, and as it turned to the left by the grey stone church Luce’s embrace became less smothering. He readjusted Rachel’s hat for her.

“My dear, that was a desperate business.”

She was very pale. She had been made to realize during those tense moments that he and she were somehow on the edge of shipwreck.

“Your headache, John?”

“Headache? Had I a headache? And no more aspirin and unadvertised adventures. Do you know who was staying at the Hôtel Leman, and was waiting to leave by that motor-coach?”

“No, John.”

“Well, I shan’t tell you. Sufficient unto the day is the mercy thereof. But what on earth were you buying in Cerisy?”

“Tea, John, and some more aspirin. It was silly of me, but we were nearly out of tea.”

“Nearly out of tea! Did you get the aspirin?”

“No, dear.”

Luce laughed and kissed her.

“Well, that’s a blessing! A packet of tea and a bottle of aspirin nearly let the serpent into paradise!”

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 *The Woman at the Door* by Warwick Deeping]